

INTERCULTURALISM – OR THE RAPE OF THE OTHER: SOME PROBLEMS OF REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH THEATRE*

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After the fall of the communist regimes in East European countries a new trend has arisen among literary and theatrical circles of the West of a strong curiosity for and fascination with the opening up “dark mysteries” of East European politics and cultures. How do western eyes visualize and translate such intra-European cultural differences? In what ways does western theatre represent these close but only recently fully disclosed “other” European cultures and for what ends? By analyzing the case of four major British plays which deal with the sweeping sociopolitical changes in ex-Eastern Block countries and which were produced on the London stage in 1990 and 1991, I want to argue that in the process of this intra-European cultural transference an analogous cultural slippage occurs (implying various degrees of intentionality and complicity) as in the much more discussed intercultural practices between First and Third World that have been systematically brought to our attention though the recent bloom of postcolonial theory.



I will start with Derrida’s parabolic description of the hymen “that desire dreams of piercing, of bursting in an act of violence that is (at the same time or somewhere between) love and murder” (Derrida, 1981: 212-13). Transferred to a situation of flirtation between cultures, the metaphor of the hymen makes a lot of sense: it can imply a loving relationship between cultures as much as a potential rape of one culture by another. Is this image of the hymen an anachronistic one to evoke today, when the whole corpus of cultural studies has optimistically turned to positive concepts of cultural transaction, when theorists speak with certainty about cultural mobility, permeability and interpenetration, about hybridity of culture, interculturalism and transculturation – in a phenomenal bloom of terminological proliferation? The answer is no. Contemplating the field of contemporary cultural theory one does not fail to realize that western cultural historians and theorists are the most vociferous apologists for transculturation while Third World intellectuals remain much more sceptical about the reciprocity of this intercultural practice, especially about the effectiveness of the Third World postcolonial subject’s articulation. Indeed, observing the actual discursive practices of postcolonial writers and the corresponding artistic representations one is struck by the imbalance in prevalence and accessibility that still exists in favour of the metropolitan cultures.¹

My intention in this article is, by using as a springboard the paradigm of postcolonial criticism where notions of cultural dominance and marginality are quite clearly defined, to shift my attention to a more ambiguous terrain of intercultural inquiry, where a surface geographical and historical proximity of culture blurs the notions of difference and facilitates the reception of cross-cultural representations as transparent and natural practices. More specifically I intend to examine how the seminal political changes of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the ensuing socioeconomic, ideological and cultural crises were theatrically translated for British audiences. In autumn 1990 all three main subsidized theatres of the London stage, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Court and the National Theatre, mounted plays related to the then recent dramatic developments in East European politics. These three plays were, in chronological order of appearance, Tariq Ali's and Howard Brenton's *Moscow Gold*, Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*² and David Edgar's *The Shape of the Table*. This notable "coincidence" was the symptom of a broader, suddenly growing British interest in the changing face of East European countries, a concern that also affected the activities of less prestigious London theatres and playwrights and inspired similar projects in the mass media during the same year.³ One more notable stage play partly drawing on the post-revolution Romanian situation, entitled *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* and written by Timberlake Wertenbaker, another leading new name of the London theatre, was staged at the Royal Court one year later, in September 1991.

The simultaneous production of three (and more) plays on the same subject of Eastern European politics and history on the English stage comes to confirm Patrice Pavis's remark in his book *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (1992) that "never before has the western stage contemplated and manipulated the various cultures of the world to such a degree, but never before has it been at such a loss as to what to make of their inexhaustible babble ... " (1). The British example of "contemplation" and "manipulation" of neighbouring European cultures and the critical controversy it gave rise to extends the application of Pavis's initial observation, intended mainly for distant Third World cultures, to more familiar ones, where the terms Western-Eastern mark an internal division of Europe (falsely but strategically perceived as one cultural unit in postcolonial studies) and where, therefore, the notion of otherness is marked by much feebler boundaries. The domain of West-East European cultural relationships is an area that has received almost no attention from contemporary (inter)cultural theory. This exploration has now become a must as a new trend has lately arisen of a strong Western curiosity about and fascination with the opening of secrets of East European politics and a desire to penetrate these "other," so far obscure and mystified – dystopian one might say – European cultures and societies. How do West European countries visualize ex-Eastern-block countries? How do British playwrights mediate between these cultures and their British audiences? I want to argue that, in West European representations of former East European cultures similar problems of cultural translation exist as in other cultural

transpositions of greater historical and geographical distance that have received closer attention in recent theatrical and other cultural studies (such as studies of classical antiquity, accounts of the New World, encounters with the Third World etc.). I believe that the same cultural slippage, intentional or unintentional, occurs in intra-European cultural transferences though perhaps on a different scale from cultural translations of the Third World.

It is one of the contradictions of our postmodern condition that, as Linda Hutcheon has also observed, although the “postmodern thought refuses to turn the Other into the Same ... there is also a very real sense in which the postmodernist notions of difference and a positively valorized marginality often reveal the same familiar totalizing strategies of domination, though usually masked by the liberating rhetoric of the First World critics who appropriate Third World cultures for their own ends” (38). *Moscow Gold*, *Mad Forest* and *The Shape of the Table* (and *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* one year later) are an interesting assortment of plays because they map out the whole spectrum of strategies of cultural transposability, ranging from benevolent representation and genuine humanist interest to self-absorbed political contemplation, from controlled satirical scepticism to vulgarized consumerist spectacularization of foreign politics and culture for the sake of “domestic benefit” (Derrida, 1976: 80). As the appropriate discourse for this type of analysis is still a missing tool, I feel obliged to resort to loans and analogies from the postcolonial discourse at places where I need to consolidate my argument or illustrate a point.

In *Marvelous Possessions*, one of the many studies that have lately appeared in reassessment of Western colonial writings, Stephen Greenblatt insists on “the crucial connection between mimesis and capitalism” (6), an ethnocentric profit of one sort or another that results from transcultural representations, but he also suggests that the “wonder [of otherness] remains available for decency as well as domination” (25), thus leaving room for nobler intercultural practices. The examination of the above-mentioned British plays and their differences in handling cultures of the “other” will illuminate Greenblatt’s fine distinctions. Nevertheless, I need to stress again that, unlike Greenblatt and as the instances of interculturalism I am analyzing fall within the geographical and cultural boundaries of Europe, the basic assumption (and task) of my critique will be a deconstruction of all unified notions of European culture and “Eurocentrism” that lie at the heart of many recent intercultural studies (for their own strategic purposes).

Among the four plays, *Moscow Gold*, a collaboration between Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali,⁴ is the most striking example of transforming a huge amount of recent East European (mostly Soviet) politics and culture into an ambitious, grand but – as it turned out – cheaply glamorous spectacle, which trivialized political life to generate easy laughter and sentimentalized personal life to ensure a touch of pseudo-humane interest.⁵

Edward Said’s words concerning recent transcultural manipulations fit perfectly the intercultural mechanisms at work in *Moscow Gold* and, to some

degree, in some of the other works at hand:

The fetishization and relentless celebration of 'difference' and 'otherness' can therefore be seen as an ominous trend. It suggests not only [...] 'the spectacularization of anthropology' whereby the 'textualization' and 'culturization' of societies occur regardless of politics and history, but also the heedless appropriation and translation of the world by a process that for all its protestations of relativism, its displays of epistemological care and technical expertise, cannot easily be distinguished from the process of empire. (213-14)

Adopting a similar view to that of Said's, Patrice Pavis castigates the cultural deformations he noticed in *L'Indiade*, a play written by Hélène Cixous and staged by Ariane Mnouchkine in Paris at the Théâtre du Soleil in 1987. In his insightful critique Pavis observes:

What we have to determine is how the audience, in whole or in part, appropriates in a hegemonic or ideological way an element of the source culture for its own 'selfish' ends. For example, we might observe that part of the so-called progressive audience of the *Indiade* takes pleasure in its rejection of a Marxist conception of history and the pseudo-humanist confusion that results. A 'cultivated' subgroup of this Cartoucherie audience uses the spectacle of India in the play as a means of confirming its own cultural supremacy and knowledge (however superficial) of India or Gandhi's non-violence. (206-7)

In an analogous fashion to Cixous's endeavour with a chunk of Indian history, the authors of *Moscow Gold* have found good material for theatrical representation in recent Soviet history from 1982 to the present (also including flashbacks to the revolution of 1917 and cross-flashes to adjacent countries' political upheavals like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the execution of the Ceausescus). Political life, as Pavis points out, has a high theatrical potential, suitable for further theatricalization (201). In the case of *Moscow Gold* political personalities of consequence like Lenin, Brezhnev, Gorbachev and others are turned to cartoon figures to be offered to an audience habituated to and spoilt by media strategies, especially those of television. Reviewers of *Moscow Gold* have been quick in catching this dubious feature of the play. Several reviews compared it to a media news presentation, the newspapers and especially television. Critical opinions varied from "fortunately for the RSC there are still audiences who want their instant history served up as sketchy cartoons or dramatized captions and this is for them" (Shulman 1304) to "most of the dialogue sounds like a newspaper editorial" (Osborne 1308), or "the original television and newspaper versions were better" (Nathan 1308) and "[I] prefer to watch the real life Gorbachev on television" (Paton 1309). This constellation of critical voices echoes the spreading scepticism about the damaging influence of television on theatre – a view which runs counter to the other, current

postmodern attitude that favours and makes artistic use of such new modes of visual multi-media representation.⁶

Pavis, as a defender of theatre's purity and resistance, deplors television's negative influence and quotes Baudrillard's "Requiem for the Media" to prove the monologic process of the information it imparts and the high rate of the social control it exercises on spectators. He then goes on to denounce television for a "deformation of audience taste" (120-1). The television virus seems to have hit *Moscow Gold* in very ambivalent ways: The play has been structured so as to appeal to the new taste of a television-habituated audience and it has followed the monologic television communicative and representational strategies. Instead of stressing the multiplicity or relativity of subject position, it elevates the two authors to a God-like position by assuming a mixture of crudely satiric, sentimental and romantic attitudes that create the air of an all-knowing, unquestioned authority. The vulgarization of such a portentous issue as the historical changes of the "glasnost" and the "perestroika" years in the Soviet Union goes as far as to direct the scopophilic gaze of the spectators into the privacy of the Gorbachevs' bedroom, where an obliging Raisa merrily and devotedly massages all political worries off Mikhail's cramped body, which is softly clad in a pair of expensive silk pyjamas! Raisa's eager service to the Head of the Soviet State is accompanied by her non-stop chatter on trendy American films and the current jokes on the Thatchers' sexual life. The play has been called "an impertinence" (Hurren 1308) quite deservedly. Even the last minute effort of the two writers to correct the monologic structure of the script and turn it into a multivocal play fails to work. The device of a double ending – a pessimistic one where Gorbachev falls victim to his enemies and an optimistic one where, ageing gracefully in his Chekhovian garden, he discusses with Raisa the possibility of sending aid to a famished U.S. – does not bring the desired effect of correcting the monosemic interpretation encouraged by the rest of the play. On the contrary, it rather tightens the text's linearity. After the pessimistic version of Gorbachev's violent death there is an awkward narrative intervention announcing that "At this stage, the two authors decide it could not end like this. It must end like this." (Ali 84) and it is immediately followed by the enactment of the alternative, quasi-paradisial scene. By reasserting their authoritative presence so nakedly (though self-mockingly) Brenton and Ali simply destroy any hope for establishing a dialectic relationship with their audience: they arrogantly and impertinently condemn the spectators to a passive reception of a fixed spectacle as if they were watching a carefully monitored documentary television show. Questions were also raised by critics concerning some indications of racist attitudes toward ethnics in the play. The reviewer of the *Jewish Chronicle* was particularly hard on Tariq Ali who, as a Pakistani immigrant in England, was expected to show more respect to the representation of marginalized ethnics (Nathan 1308).

The production of *Moscow Gold* on the London stage interestingly coincided with an important though sad event in London's theatrical history: the

decision of the RSC to close down the Barbican theatre for three months in protest against the government's drastic reductions of subsidies for the Arts. An expensive and "splashy" production like that of *Moscow Gold* right before the darkening of the Barbican does not look like a random choice. It is hard to make out at exactly what point the complicity of the RSC management meets that of the two writers in concocting a large-scale popular phantasmagoria to prove the RSC's ability for consumable grand spectacle, which mobilized all the high-technology equipment available at the Barbican. Once again the critics did not fail to see the connection between theatre economics and the quality of the spectacle, making a series of biting remarks such as "the RSC's last production before it closes its Barbican House in November ... certainly makes a splashy exit" (Nightingale 1307) or "by throwing a media barbecue they have at last assured maximum publicity for the poor old Barbican" (Williams 1309). *Moscow Gold* is an anti-humanist play which provides a cartoon version of a foreign history and culture as palatable food of doubtful quality to a British audience of equally ambivalent taste, to the triumph of a theatre of populism and commodification.

Although postmodernism invites an abandonment of all value categorizations and has been greeted in many respects as a liberating term embracing all contradictions of contemporary art and culture, in other respects, where for instance issues of cultural hegemony are raised, its accommodating nature should be treated with some suspicion for easing away significant antagonisms for domination. It is in such contexts that recalcitrant attitudes towards aesthetic or ethical evaluations of a pre-postmodernist vocabulary do make sense and need to caution us against a heedless use of postmodernist definitions. In this light Gershon Shaked makes a very strong point about anti-humanist plays and their effect on audiences: "Anti-humanist plays are those which reinforce the stereotypes we bring to the theatre ... Pseudo-art and life create stereotypes and the audience expects them in order to reapply them in life and reinforce their warped values" (Shaked 16). These are precisely the premises on which *Moscow Gold* moves and functions. It is not a question of inadequate research into the subject on the part of the writers. In fact the published text is fully documented with prefaces, notes, extracts from diaries and interviews. It is exactly the opposite: The play has been unable to take up "the task of the theatre" and go beyond the "raw documentary spectacle" (Shaked 9) that we are exposed to on television. Art, as Shaked notes, "takes over where documentary can no longer assist us" (10).

From this point of view Caryl Churchill's play *Mad Forest*, which deals with the Romanian revolution of 1989 and how it affected the lives of the people of Romania, is a much more sensitive play.⁷ One particularly discerning review praises the production for its subtle treatment of an alien culture and politics:

... [P]recision is matched by the uncluttered direction, restrained use of effects, and above all by the tact and humility with which the actors approach the essential task, of doing justice to the courage of the

Romanian people. The benefits of the research/workshop process are everywhere apparent: in the convincing authenticity which both realises and illuminates those closed Eastern-block faces for us; and in the actors' commitment to their material – an obvious respect which neither sentimentalises nor pretends to judge, and which results in a production of great humanity and understanding. (Hudson 1374)

This review encapsulates all the virtues which exist in Churchill's strategic approach and which, conversely, are missing from the endeavour of Brenton and Ali in *Moscow Gold*.

First of all *Mad Forest* avoids being informative as is the familiar practice of the media. It leaves out high politics and thus avoids the risks of their stage representation as those were traced in *Moscow Gold*. Churchill prefers to present common life in Romania, scenes from the lives of two families before and after the Revolution, and she uses the clever device of a short interlude where a number of anonymous citizens give criss-cross accounts of the days of the Revolution. Thus Churchill wisely skips the obstacle of a monologic documentary representation of this momentous event. Her preference for a polysemic presentation of history is equally noticeable in her treatment of the Ceausescu's trial and death. Churchill suddenly has two of her fictional characters take up the roles of Nicolai and Elena Ceausescu and mimic, in a double game of mimesis, the famous videotaped scene of their execution. Through this clever method of *gestus* Churchill makes a metatheatrical game of history rather than give a redundant theatrical representation which would be an exact copy of the documented reality, as Brenton and Ali have done in their own play. Indeed *Moscow Gold* reproduces faithfully the television images of the execution, repeating already stale media information.

Churchill's mistrust of television tactics and effects is clearly voiced in her text. A young female character, Lucia, expatriated to the US and now returning to her country after the revolution, talks about how American public opinion is formed by the deceitful staging techniques of television news presentation:

All the way over on the plane I was terrified of what I was going to see. But you look beautiful. In America everyone's thrilled. I told my friends, 'My brother was there, he was wounded, he's a hero.' I watched TV but they never showed enough, I kept playing it and stopping when there was a crowd, I thought I must know somebody, I was crying all the time, I was so ashamed not to be here. (Churchill 55)

In this highly ironic speech the tremendous power of television as a social monitor, a misinformer and mythmaker, becomes a target of clear attack. Once again one can mark the contrast between on the one hand the critical resistance of Churchill's theatre to a mass media culture and on the other hand the susceptibility of Brenton and Ali to this same culture of populism and consumerism.

But what mostly draws the line between *Mad Forest* and *Moscow Gold* is the sensitivity of the former to the problems of representation of a foreign culture. Whereas *Moscow Gold* tends to holistic or oversimplified views of a culture (where, for instance, Russian caps for men and head scarves for women are almost the only markers of cultural difference),⁸ *Mad Forest* resorts to a number of strategies that stress cultural heterogeneity: characters speak English with a foreign accent, or occasionally revert to Romanian language, there are metaphysical figures that link to Romanian folklore history, racist feelings among ethnic groups are stressed – all in an attempt to create a sense of otherness which can also implicate the audience in a productive way. Greenblatt believes that “representations are not only products but producers, capable of decisively altering the very forces that brought them into being” (6). *Mad Forest* manages to establish creative cultural bonds between the world of the stage and that of the audience: it initiates an intercultural dialogue which is missing in *Moscow Gold*.

Mad Forest may not be totally innocent of the suspicion of the exploitation of the “exotic” (as, for instance, the obvious “Dracula” associations of a somehow too often reappearing vampire might suggest) nor can its author disentangle herself from her own cultural specificity and hence from her ethnocentric complicity of a British adapter of foreign culture and politics for a British audience. However, as Pavis notes, “the adapters necessarily have an ethnocentric position but, conscious of this distorting perspective, they can relativize the discrepancy and make one aware of differences” (17). Churchill meets both these demands. The English production of *Mad Forest* was preceded by a monthly workshop in Bucharest, during which the playwright, the director and the British actors worked closely with their Romanian counterparts. Thus the very history of the production of Churchill’s play reveals a close exchange of cultural experience in the early stages of its making.

Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* is another interesting case for study in its attempt to look at the present British situation from a multicultural perspective and so cross the arrogant totalizing hegemonic British gaze with a stern, multiple gaze of other, negotiating, cultures of varied influential power or marginality. Wertenbaker’s play can make no claim to tackling East European politics directly like *Moscow Gold*, *Mad Forest* and Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table* (which will be discussed later) but it shows an “awareness of differences” equal to Churchill’s *Mad Forest* and a similar tendency to “relativize” the cultural experience.

Three Birds celebrates cultural heterogeneity by presenting a mosaic of characters of different ethnic origin and also by satirizing the corrosive Americanization of culture. At the same time it makes an attack on British myopic insularity, its sense of cultural superiority and its intolerance of other cultures. But there is also a parallel attack on immigrant ethnics who desperately try to penetrate the British hegemonic culture until they come to a final regret for their cultural misapprehensions. There is the example of the assimilated

Indian girl who ends up in a cultural vacuum, a state of non-culture, and who confesses that "My father wanted to be an English gentleman, too. He wanted to be an English man so badly he ended up an empty shell ... And I have no heritage, I'm nothing. In India I'm a foreigner and in England, I'm an exotic." (Wertenbaker 15 and 16). There is also the figure of a rich Greek estate developer who, at the end of a long, comically presented struggle to conquer English high society, wearily admits that "I miss Greece ... I'll take you there, would you like that? I'm not sure England is what I thought it was, and I have made fussy buildings ... a lie." (68). The paradigm of cultural misfits is completed with the figure of a post-revolution Romanian man, another cultural anomaly in the context of a revived British nationalist spirit. He first appears as a ridiculous nonentity, disrupting the British sense of cultural linearity and continuity, but then, suddenly, he emerges as an angry assertive defender of otherness. His initial, comically helpless "Hello, I am Romanian ... You don't understand" (36) changes into an aggressive:

Yes, I understand. I – we disappoint you. We are not doing things right, we are not pure. The trouble for us is we have to carry your dreams, your ideals, always. You were on the left in your country, no? You believed in socialism, even communism, no? That's what I thought. You are the worse ... You preach communism in your country, but you let us make the experiment for you. (64)

Constantin, the Romanian, turns the tables on the British – in fact on all Western Europeans – by snatching usurped ideology and cultural critique from the hegemonic West and firing it back against it.

A pattern of misunderstanding and non-communication in this terrain of endless cultural transactions is gradually built up and strongly felt throughout the play. Questions and negations of understanding are frequent remarks made by the characters: "Do you understand?" "You don't understand ... No, you don't understand." Thus the play establishes a strong dialectic among cultures, giving the same sense of cultural heterogeneity as *Mad Forest*, though using different techniques. Here lies its principle value as a postmodern play – a feature that characterizes all Wertenbaker's previous dramatic work. It has a main weakness, however: its satiric mood exposes it to the risks of a glib and witty play that can slip from seriousness to facile jokes like *Moscow Gold*, unable to preserve a balance. In fact the play cannot decide whether it ultimately "massages" the British audience's self-complacency and delusion (even though these have been ferociously attacked by the angry Romanian) or whether it honestly seeks to disrupt the British cultural monopoly. As the play moves on, a great portion of its mirth springs from blunders of ethnic behaviour by foreigners in the context of British "correctness" of social etiquette. Apart from the constant strong satirization of Americans, who pose the biggest cultural threat, all the obvious jokes are made at the expense of the Greek, the Turk, the Romanian, the Russian, the Japanese, reinforcing rather than destroying

stereotyped notions of cultural otherness. At the same time there is an ambiguous rise of sympathy for British characters like Bidy (the boring English girl of the “right” bourgeois education) and Stephen (the minor artist of English landscape), who are initially presented as next-to social scum. As the two mediocrities of postmodern British culture come together, in a sudden revival of the romantic sublime, there is not enough context to decide whether the British have not finally managed once again to supersede other cultures or whether their final seeming triumph is only a satiric reversal of their cultural disintegration.

Although the postmodern merger of cultures and the capitalist mechanisms that regulate artistic production and reception are the main issues in Wertebaker’s play, contemporary politics are not totally neglected. In this play which was written some two years after the momentous events of 1989, one still feels the repercussions of that political cosmogony. The post-revolution Romanian visitor gives Wertebaker the opportunity to express a political view, though not so much on the political changes in Eastern Europe *per se* as on their reception by Western Europeans. In that respect, her critique also reverts (especially through the Romanian’s long tirade) against her fellow British playwrights who, about a year before, had mounted a series of plays on these topical issues on the English stage and against British audiences who encouraged such – often irreverent – productions through their scopophilic cultural avidity.

Topicality is very exciting as subject matter for a new play but it is very difficult to handle with honesty and decency. At the event of the production of the third of these earlier plays on East European politics, David Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table*, one of the London reviewers severely remarked on this sweeping fashion among British playwrights: “Recently, the dramatists of the left have been galvanized by the upheavals in Eastern Europe. Sensational events abroad have proved more appetizing than the frenzied confusion at home. But the British theatre cannot go on avoiding a mighty question: just what has been happening in this country over the past ten years?” (Hiley 1508). The review challenges British theatre for the lack of the same kind of self-inspection and self-criticism concerning British society as Wertebaker suggests in her play one year later. *Three Birds* may be a flawed play but it carries, like *Mad Forest* (and despite its satirical mood), a serious problematization and a tendency to see otherness as a reflection of domestic “strangeness” and mishaps and a way to know better our own selves. In this sense translation of a culture is not a selfish appropriation for the consolidation of domestic vices but a means for social correction at home, according to Greenblatt’s (and other cultural historians’) positive view of the potentials of transculturation.

In Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table*, the approach to East Europe is totally different. There is an undisguised appropriation of foreign culture and no attempt whatever at a cultural understanding and representation of the other. In line with Edgar’s self-absorption in Marxist thought, which permeates the

majority of his work (*Maydays* is a good example to fall back on), this play, too, sacrifices all other concerns and ingredients of drama to politics and ideology. The play consists of a dramatization of the “velvet revolution” that brought democracy to Czechoslovakia, though the name of the country can be detected only through the historical precision and the exact documentation of the meetings of the delegates during the negotiations. The characters are mere stereotypes with neither personal development nor any sign of cultural specificity. Costume signification has been rather neutralized and it is only in the way western commodities (such as tangerines and a portable cassette-player playing American music) are received that one can vaguely locate the cultural identity of the play. Tangerines and the cassette-player become gross and naive signifiers of cultural difference, exhibiting the same unsubtlety and indifference to otherness as the similar flashy treatment of alien culture in *Moscow Gold*. On the contrary, there is an obvious attempt at cultural assimilation in the meticulous, polished British-sounding dialogue. One of the critics succinctly notes: “Some classic British stereotypes make inevitable appearances ... and you have a play in which Eastern Europe is simply another version of England. ... surely no communist bruiser would begin speeches with ‘Glory be!’ ” (Dunn 1506). Obviously Edgar is battling with his own ideology, seeing “Eastern Europe as a peg on which to hang” (Dunn 1506) his self-debates about the future of Marxist thinking in the world – i.e. in the Western World. That the play serves its author’s ideological wish-fulfilment becomes most evident in its ending, where the former communist head of state takes the wronged hero’s noble position of detainment, previously occupied by the present premier, who is easily identified as Vaclav Havel. Thus history is recycled to give hope for the rescue of socialism, since such deserving politicians on the beaten side still exist. Edgar’s aspirations for the resurrection of socialism reflect Brenton’s and Ali’s similar wishful thinking in the second ending of *Moscow Gold* which dreams of a rosy aftermath to Gorbachev’s socialist revisionism. But at least the latter two writers try to relativize their western aspirations by making this version of future Eastern history a joking gest. Edgar, on the contrary, makes his own a serious, undisguised intervention of the solipsistic western intellectual in the shaping of a history that does not belong to him.

Beyond this ideological usurpation, *The Shape of the Table* does not offer any new insight to historical “reality” as already rendered available by the media. The play was received by the critics with mixed feelings. One called it a “redundant” play (Wardle 1508); another expressed the usual complaint that “what I was watching was [not] anything other than characters embodying distilled aspects of the many problems confronting Eastern Europe that I’ve already read about in the newspapers” (Christopher 1506). Considering the careful structure of *The Shape of the Table* and the immaculate production at the Cottesloe theatre, it may be that the critics have been unduly hard on Edgar. It should be recalled, however, that Edgar had the misfortune of appearing third in the row, after Brenton and Ali’s *Moscow Gold* and Churchill’s *Mad Forest* (and

other relevant but less illustrious productions) had made their appearance on the London stage. Edgar's play opened at a time when everybody was already becoming conscious of the new vogue among British playwrights of peeping behind the Iron Curtain, now that this obstructing "hymen" had been torn down by consent. Thus, another reviewer made a strong remark by praising as authentic the work of former East European dissident writers like Vaclav Havel about the plights of the East and, by contrast, denigrating a similar "rise, rather less valuabl[e], [of] plays by British playwrights keen to offer, from the comfortable democratic sidelines, their own views on the collapse of totalitarian socialism" (Osborne 1507). The critic severely criticizes the Western intellectual's unethical position in interpreting foreign affairs from the privileged position of non-involvement, and in a way foreshadows the on-stage castigation of West European imperialism as voiced by the Romanian character in Wertebaker's play one year later. This particular review is a telling critique which also reflects the ethos and expectations of a television-struck British audience, sitting back comfortably to extract maximum pleasure from an aestheticized but at the same time often unaestheticized political spectacle. This is the audience which all the above discussed plays have been written for and on whose expectations depend many of the decisions of the *mise en scène*.

Pavis deplores our "heading toward a two-tiered culture and interculturalism," of which, unfortunately, "consumable culture" is prevailing (212). However, as proved by the history of the production and reception of the above four plays, ideological exigency as much as socio-economic necessity will always tinge intercultural transpositions with self-directed interests and turn them into ethnocentric appropriations to some degree, from benevolent and humanistic renditions of alien culture to selfish, vulgar and insensitive superimpositions of the home culture. Within the value confusion of our postmodern era, as depicted in all four plays, it is only an aspiring purism to head for "an élite culture that is radical and irreducible, that abandons spectacular performance to work at the microscopic level, almost in secret, and whose results are never immediate and often obscure" – as Pavis visualizes and aspires at the end of his book (212). Cultures are not in an idyllic love embrace either in historical reality or in the commodified world of the theatre. The desire of rape hovers in the space between transacting cultures, always directed from the stronger to the weaker partner.

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NOTES

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1. In the domain of theatre studies that concerns me here it is characteristic, for instance, that Rustom Bharucha's *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (1993), the first major critique of interculturalism in theatre written from a non-western point of view, was first published in India in 1990 but it was when its publication was taken over by a big western publishing house (Routledge) that it was made available to the dominant western market.
2. *Mad Forest* was commissioned by the Central School of Speech and Drama for its final year students' production (25 June 1990). The subsequent Royal Court production was a transfer with the same cast of Central School graduates.
3. Harris W. Freedman's play *Moscow Shadows* appeared at the New End theatre in London earlier that year (1 March-8 April 1990). We should also note parallel activities on British Television: a project about Romania for the BBC by Peter Flannery and David Edgar's television play *The End of the Story*, also about Romania, for Channel 4. The world of fiction also responded, perhaps with some delay, to this intellectual summons. Julian Barnes's *The Porcupine* (1992) is an obvious example.
4. This is the second collaboration of these two writers for the stage. They first collaborated on *Indian Nights*, a short play inspired by the Salman Rushdie affair and presented at the Royal Court from 20-29 April 1989. If I seem to give more emphasis to Howard Brenton this is only done because he is a long-established name in contemporary British theatre and has an international repute whereas Tariq Ali's association with the theatre world is very new and hardly known at all outside Britain.
5. In his recent article "*Moscow Gold* and Reassessing History" (1993) Carl Caulfield makes a stern critique of Brenton's failure to reassess Soviet history in his play.
6. Nick Kaye attempts an exploration of the complex and uneasy relationships between performance arts and notions of postmodernism in *Postmodernism and Performance* (1994).
7. In his article "Carol Churchill's *Mad Forest* : Polyphonic Representations of Southern Eastern Europe" (1993) Tony Mitchell makes an interesting brief comparison of Churchill's play to both Howard Brenton's *Moscow Gold* and David Edgar's *The Shape of the Table* (500).
8. In the concluding chapter to *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre Own and Foreign*, an interesting study on interculturalism and theatre, Erika Fischer-Lichte remarks: "In an intercultural performance ... the communication of the foreign does not occupy foreground interest. The goal is not that the audience be brought closer to, or made familiar with the foreign tradition, but rather that the foreign tradition is, to a greater or lesser extent, transformed according to the different conditions of specific fields of reception. It is far more the principle question of the particular problem that has evolved in the own culture, in the own theatre" (283).

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Μετά την πτώση των κομμουνιστικών καθεστώτων στις χώρες της Ανατολικής Ευρώπης μια καινούργια τάση παρουσιάστηκε, μια ισχυρή περιέργεια και μαγνητική έλξη προς τα μόλις αποκαλυπτόμενα σκοτεινά μυστήρια της ανατολικοευρωπαϊκής πολιτικής και κουλτούρας. Πώς βλέπουν οι Δυτικοί και πώς μεταφράζουν τέτοιες ενδοευρωπαϊκές πολιτισμικές διαφορές; Με ποιούς τρόπους το δυτικό θέατρο αναπαριστά αυτές τις γειτονικές αλλά μόνο τώρα πλήρως προσπελάσιμες κουλτούρες και με ποιούς σκοπούς; Αναλύοντας την περίπτωση τεσσάρων σημαντικών Αγγλικών θεατρικών έργων που ασχολούνται με τις πρόσφατες κοινωνικοπολιτικές αλλαγές στις χώρες του τέως Ανατολικού Μπλοκ και τα οποία παρουσιάστηκαν στη σκηνή του Λονδίνου το 1990 και 1991, θέλω να αποδείξω ότι στη διαδικασία αυτής της ενδοευρωπαϊκής πολιτισμικής μεταφοράς συμβαίνουν ανάλογα πολιτισμικά ολισθήματα (που υπονοούν ποικίλους βαθμούς σκοπιμότητας και συνοχής), όπως στις πολύ εμφανέστερες διαπολιτισμικές πρακτικές μεταξύ Πρώτου και Τρίτου Κόσμου, στις οποίες έχουμε συστηματικά μνηθεί από την ιδιαίτερος ακμάζουσα σήμερα μεταποικιακή θεωρία.