

David Greig's Holed Theatre

Verónica Rodríguez

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Globalization, Ethics and the Spectator

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In loving memory of Mariano Rodríguez

FOREWORD

With so many great artists—writers, painters, musicians, film-makers, actors—the pleasure of an individual work is enriched by our sense of it within the work as a whole. In the paintings of Manet or the films of Robert Bresson or the theatre productions of Katie Mitchell, there is a movement or flow in each separate work that leads to another, the edges of each text porously letting in the neighbouring texts. The works layer on each other. This is not to suggest that they amount, ultimately, to a single master-work containing all the individuals, because their movement overflows, cascading beyond the maker's individual mark. Manet's paintings mark and are marked by the paintings around it, by the culture itself, whose edges are thereby compromised and opened up. Great artworks remind me of the Situationist binding their books in sandpaper so that, as you drag them on and off the bookshelf, they slowly destroy the other books around them. When I see productions by Katie Mitchell, they always spoil other theatre for a while, because her unflinching precision and seriousness and daring makes almost everything else feel cheap, shallow, compromised. Great art breaks down the clear edges and hard borders between things.

One of the joys of this book is the way Verónica Rodríguez is able to capture and conjure such a broad range of David Greig's plays. Over two and a half decades now, Greig has been writing with prolific energy a continually evolving and transforming body of work. Each new play adjusts our sense of the previous plays, but also intervenes in the culture in a way that helps us see the world afresh. The boundaries of and

between the plays are porous and permeable. Greig's plays are invitations for the reader and the audience not to stop at the border but to be welcomed in.

Rodríguez draws particular attention to the gaps, lacunae, breaks and tears (in both senses) of these works. These various "holes" are, she argues persuasively, dramaturgical means by which not only the audience is let in, but gaps through which we can begin to see things differently, where we can imagine a different and better world. Greig's work is continually in a tensile state, torn between realism and imagination, the way things are and the way things might be. Going beyond physical reality suggests something metaphysical, and indeed, Rodríguez makes a strong case for the spiritual yearnings of Greig's practice. I was reminded of a show that David and I collaborated on several years ago. The show was *Futurology*, a Suspect Culture commission by the National Theatre of Scotland. It was both real and not-real; set at an international climate change conference, it both drew on the realities of political timidity and banal compromise and yet, in its fantasized imagination of climate disaster, tried to keep things open, to find a utopian space of hope in and beyond the very act of representation. On the first night, David's present to me was a copy of Leonard Cohen's album *The Future*. On its most famous track, "Anthem", are the lines "There's a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in".

There are holes and cracks in all of these plays. In some ways, I suspect this is a product of Greig's battle with his own considerable intellect. He has spoken before of the way he continually has to change his writing method to evade his conscious mind. He prefers to write in a state of intuitive unknowing, to access those parts of his mind that don't understand what he's doing. But as soon as his conscious mind figures out what's going on, he has to find some new way of getting there without rationality getting in the way, hence his continual evolution as a writer. Hence, too, his deep misgivings about reading critical analysis of his own work: he fears understanding his own writing. (Which is also why I can write what I like about his work here, knowing that he'll never read it.)

Some of his plays seem to have been written almost like dreams; just as some of our dreams seem to be haphazardly built with the events of the preceding day, so his play *Cosmonaut* is constructed around all the places Greig had been in the year before writing; *San Diego* seems to have been fashioned out of anything David had to hand during one

aeroplane journey when flying in to see *Cosmonaut* at La Jolla Playhouse (a guide to the city, the pilot's name, an article in the in-flight magazine). It's why so many of the geographically titled plays—*San Diego*, *Damascus*, *Kyoto*, *Being Norwegian*—seem unsure whether these places are real or imagined. It's like the visions of America that appear in Greig's plays as diverse as *The Speculator*, *The American Pilot* and *Damascus*, a shimmering fantasy: vividly real, and always out of reach.

This should not be exaggerated; Greig's plays are fiercely intelligent, of course, and do seem to construct elaborate and intricate responses to the real world. But their oneiric character should not be ignored either. While many have written about Greig's serious dramaturgical engagement with Scotland, with politics, with the Middle East, we shouldn't forget the deep wells of emotion in these plays: the final act of *Timeless*, which is overwhelmed with feeling that tears the play apart; the boundless joyfulness of *Midsummer*; the end of *The Events* which, on the night I saw it, reduced its entire audience to magnificent tears.

What brings the two together—a precise political realism and a wild dreamlike imagination—is the nature of the contemporary world. As Rodríguez reminds us, Greig's interest in Theodor Adorno dates back to the very beginning of his playwriting. Adorno's sense in the 1950s and 1960s was that capitalism had extended itself so far into our lives as to form a totality, in which everything was transformed into a commodity, and thus, the dialectic between what is and what might be had ground to a halt. Everything was just its economic value. And if he thought that in the 1960s, what might he have thought now, in an age of turbo-capitalism and globalization?

In Greig's particular take on Adorno, art has a unique role in breaking open the smooth surfaces of capitalist reality. The difficulty of art, its demandingly complex relation to the every day, the splintered shards of modernist fragmentation, these are the sharp edges that will cut through seamless totality (or the spectacle, or the simulacrum). Art can put holes in the whole. Rodríguez shows brilliantly how Greig's plays mimic global capitalism's play of both horizontal and vertical movement, while also creating slippages that undermine the fixity of the globalized world. When I watched *The Events*, I was watching the Young Vic overlaid on an imagined London church hall, overlaid on Scotland, overlaid on Norway. When we all sobbed at the choir singing "we're all in here", what makes that ending so moving (in both senses) is that, at that point, we understand "here" as both here and everywhere.

Greig has, I think, seen in playwriting a particularly radical potential for capturing something beyond the “identity-thinking” (Adorno) of capitalism where things are meant to remain stable so as to have economic value—and only economic value—squarely assigned to them. Greig’s playwriting does not have the fixity of a previous generation who saw plays as needing to be, in Howard Brenton’s phrase, “messages first”, that is unambiguously expressing a particular textual message. But nor do these plays allow themselves to be exhausted by performance. A play, as Greig knows so well, is *both* a complete thing in itself *and* something waiting to be completed in performance. That means that it can never be identical with itself, because its very character is to be non-identical. Plays create characters that are both very particular (Paul in *Damascus* is a proper character, with a backstory, and lots of personal details) and yet very non-particular (Paul could be played by thousands of actors and seem quite different each time, without departing from the text). Plays long to be completed, but are never completed. Plays often specify space, but leave gaps and holes in the specificity. Language (in which most plays are presented, of course) works like the human imagination, which can create general entities (“dog”, “ship”, “human”) that you could never ever *see*. You can only ever see a particular human; you can imagine and capture in language humans as such. Greig’s plays are non-identically somewhere between the specific and the general, the local and the global. And it that gap, in that oscillation, that’s how the light gets in.

David Greig’s plays are full of gaps. Sometimes this is very literal: in his text for *Suspect Culture*, *Lament*, there are missing sections in the dialogue that suggest some viral atrophy of language. Often his stage directions are very sparse holding space and the spaceless together. In *San Diego*, he seems to relinquish authorial control by having the author murdered before the first act is over and have the characters start to rename each other, the names in the script obediently changing as the wretched of the earth seize control of the text. And through all of these holes, Rodríguez suggests, Greig finds something holy. Although the holes themselves—the plays’ modesty, their deliberately fraying edges, their incompleteness—prevent them being holier-than-thou.

And through these gaps we see a different vision of ourselves, one where the boundaries of self and of place begin to evaporate. The theatre is a place where we perhaps allow some freedom of movement across the edges of our personal identity. When we go to the theatre, we let the

experience of others penetrate us. Actors inhabit other characters, sometimes multiple other characters: in *Mainstream*, four performers play two characters, the true nature of the two figures deferred and displaced, their sharp edges torn as the four actors pass through them. In *Fragile*, one character is played by a whole audience, perhaps hundreds of people at once. In *The Events* and *The Suppliant Women*, particular groups of people are performed by different performers on different nights of the tour—and we know this, giving the particular instantiations of humanity on stage, a perilous, precarious, fragile and provisional quality. This is what Rodríguez calls “transcorporeality”, a theatre that places and displaces the people, the bodies on stage giving us an intense awareness of their here-ness and the possibility of their being other. Some of these characters walk the play like ghosts.

As such, the plays evoke and transcend the complex flows of a globalized world. Global capitalism likes to present itself as the only game in town, but work like this says another world is possible. It is one where the boundaries of the sovereign liberal individual are burst and exceeded by a flow of common responsibility for our cosmopolitan humanity. Towards the end of the book, Rodríguez cites Derrida talking of a state of affairs where “a violation of rights in *one* part of the world is felt *everywhere*”. At the time, I’m writing—and I hope you, whoever you are, reading this are doing so at a time when this time has definitively passed—where the political fashion has moved towards building walls and throwing up barriers and strengthening the borders, it seems impossible to imagine a world where such genuinely transnational care and responsibility could be imagined. But even in this textual moment, there is a vision of exchange and slippage and continuity across borders; Derrida is in fact not speaking for himself but quoting Immanuel Kant’s famous cosmopolitan essay “Toward Perpetual Peace”. So as I cite Rodríguez, citing Derrida, citing Kant, we pass from Britain to Spain to France to Germany in a moment of continuity and affirmation of another way we could be.

This book is a very welcome addition to the growing literature on the work of David Greig. It has perhaps taken some critics time to understand the particular force and direction of Greig’s work; as Rodríguez notes here, he was not easily located in the “In Yer Face” generation and so, for a while, remained a slightly shadowy figure. But let’s also note that many of those “In Yer Face” playwrights seem, now, much closer to Greig’s own direction. Ravenhill’s vision of urban anomie seems closer

now to the glass and chrome worlds of *Timeless* or *Cosmonaut* than they once did. (His wonderful play *Over There* is a riddling exploration of nationhood, difference, desire and separation that struck me as the best play David Greig never wrote.) Sarah Kane's gradual abstraction from character and her grasping for a beyond seem now more important than the violent eruptions of the early plays. There is a spirit of constant formal disruption in the work of all of these playwrights that has turned out to be much more definitive of twenty-first century British playwriting than visceral shock effects. It should encourage us to ask if David Greig has been at the heart of things all along.

The Greig that emerges from these fascinating pages is that of a shamanic seeker after meaning, a figure immersed in the politics of our world, but in search of not just the real, but the *really real*, something beyond. Greig's evasion of his own formidable rational intellect has created—and continues to create—a body of work that offers a secular spirituality that reaches for an absent divine in which we can glimpse the perfectibility of feeling and understanding, mark the edges of the known and let them go. This is theatre that lets the light in.

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This book has been made possible by colleagues, by loved ones and by strangers, only a few of whom I can acknowledge here. Let me start by dedicating this to the holes in our lives, to the absences, to the absent and, indeed, the absentees in these words of thanks.

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