Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi
Journal of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy

İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi 36, (2023): 117-129
DOI: 10.26650/jtcd.2023.00002

Interview / *Söyleşi*

The Last Public Space: Understanding the Tension Between Politics and Drama in Contemporary British Theatre

Hakan Gultekin[1], Steve Waters[2]

[1]Dr., Artvin Çoruh University, Department of Western Languages, Artvin, Türkiye
[2]Prof. Steve Waters, University of East Anglia, School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, Norwich, United Kingdom

ORCID: H.G. 0000-0001-7802-7009;
S.W. 0000-0001-9265-8122

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:
Dr. Hakan Gültekin,
Artvin Çoruh University, Department of Western Languages, Artvin, Türkiye
E-mail/E-posta:
hagultekin@artvin.edu.tr

Submitted/Başvuru: 10.04.2022
Accepted/Kabul: 09.05.2023

Citation/Atıf: Gultekin, Hakan, Waters, Steve. "The Last Public Space: Understanding the Tension Between Politics and Drama in Contemporary British Theatre." *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi* 36, (2023): 127-129.
https://doi.org/10.26650/jtcd.2023.00002

ABSTRACT
In the following interview, which took place on 26 November 2022 in Norwich, Hakan Gültekin talks to playwright Steve Waters about his theatrical universe and the current state of British Theatre. In the interview, the place of hope and truth on earth suffering from climate crisis is discussed through Waters' double bill play, *the Contingency Plan* alongside mentions of other major contemporary plays and playwrights. The impetus behind this argument is to place contemporary political playwriting in its historical context. Steve Waters' understanding of theatre as the last public space in the contemporary arts is also discussed. Steve Waters is a playwright working for the stage, radio and screen. Waters is also the author of *Secret Life of Plays* (Nick Hern Books, 2010) and *A Life in 16 Films: How Cinema Made a Playwright* (Methuen/Bloomsbury, 2021). His more recent works include *Limehouse* (Nick Hern Books, 2017), *Temple* (Nick Hern Books, 2015), *Ignorance/Jahiliyyah* (Nick Hern Books, 2012). Hakan Gültekin is an assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Artvin Coruh University in Turkey. He is the author of *The Critique of Neoliberalism in David Hare's Plays* (Çizgi, 2021). He is currently a visiting postdoctoral scholar at the University of East Anglia in the UK.
Keywords: Contemporary British Drama, Political Playwriting, the Contingency Plan, Climate Crisis, Steve Waters

Hakan Gültekin Could you briefly evaluate the current state of British Theatre?

Steve Waters I would say it is not as healthy as it should be, and obviously the pandemic is part of that. It had a profound impact. If you then add in the cost of living crisis, the energy crisis…the theatre is very vulnerable at the moment. A lot of financial pressures at the top of theatre. And then, we are in a climate of government, which is in many respects, a very destructive presence in this discussion, who are putting pressure on the arts, if it is going to receive public funding to deliver their political agenda. We have seen that in in the absolutely atrocious way that the Arts Council has given grants to people over the last two weeks. I do not mean that *they* behaved atrociously, but I think they have had a kind of pressure upon them to use arts policy as a way of delivering government. And agendas such as levelling up and so on, I am not against those in absolute terms, but I do not think arts policies should be driven by the government of the day. There is a whole notion is that those things are separate. So there is a lot going on.

Hakan Gültekin What generation does Steve Waters belong to when you consider the contemporary British theatre? Does Steve Waters represent a tradition as a playwright?

Steve Waters I was not that engaged with the theatre until I did my MA in playwriting at Birmingham. My route into theatre was almost through education because I was a teacher and I would often teach things like drama and English in schools to kids from 11 to 18. So, I was finding myself teaching Brecht, Stanislavski, Artaud and so on, and also writing plays for them, and that led me into almost accidentally becoming a playwright. I wrote a play at university for a competition that was received very well, so I became part of the British theatre scene in the late 1990s. It was a very rich time. Obviously we associate that time with 'in your face theatre,' as Alex Sierz has described it. I was personal friends with some of those people like Sarah Kane. I studied with her at Birmingham University, where I did my MA, which was also run by David Edgar. That was a very new thing in Britain, at that point, a playwriting course, of course dedicated to playwriting, and we had a much more powerful culture. It was represented in all those new writing theatres in London: The Royal Court, the Bush Theatre, Hampstead Theatre, which was where I started my career in North London, and to some extent the National Theatre. We are all very interested in new writing. In a very direct way, in fact, you could argue that it was post-political. Let's take a playwright like Mark Ravenhill, with a play like *Shopping and F*cking*. The play was obviously interested in sexuality and consumerism, as he was quite wilfully. There is a speech in the play about there being no big narratives, no big stories anymore, and I think that is a very mid-1990s sentiment about the end of history, all those kinds of questions were circulating at the time. Sarah Kane I would exempt from that because her work, *Blasted* particularly, was very alert to male violence. War and the collapse of former Yugoslavia, Rwanda: all sorts of terrible events were happening in the mid-1990s. But, a lot of the culture of the time, the first plays by Jez Butterworth, Patrick Marber, David

Eldridge: quite often plays about groups of men, quite often written in extreme language, quite violent in focus, masculinity in crisis et cetera. That never really interested me. So I have often found myself thinking that my inspirations come from the previous generation of writers, such as David Hare, Caryll Churchill, and Howard Brenton, who are more in the 1970s and 80s, or Howard Barker and David Edgar, who had a much more epic sense of theatre. Brecht has always been a very important touchstone for me, whereas he was very unfashionable in the 1990s. Probably the most weirdly influential playwright in the 1990s was Harold Pinter actually. I have written elsewhere about that writer that I really admire, but particularly his early work was a reference point and a touchstone for a lot of British playwrights at the time, so that world seems a long time ago. In that world there was quite a lot of money to support new plays. Theatres had literary managers and dramaturgs. If I wanted to send my play, I knew I had many places I could send it and there was a lot of coherent critical culture around that, so I did not know it at the time, but in retrospect it was a really great time to start writing for the theatre. Whereas now is a much more difficult time to write for theatre. So, if you go down to the bottom of British theatre, there is a lot of exciting work, but there is less funding around. I think that question is really difficult at the moment.

Hakan Gültekin You are regarded as a political playwright. What is your reaction to this?

Steve Waters I am happy to be described as such. I am inevitably distant from any term that is applied to the writing…you feel resistance because one feels more complicated than that. And it is fair to say that in the past, "political playwright" might have suggested very particular political affiliations and views, and I think that would not be the case for me. I mean, I have my politics; I vote for my parties and that is a matter of record. But I would say that my work, my writing, whilst it has got political sensibility and I do not think it does not come away from the plays…I mean, there was always a crude description of political theatre anyway, and there was some work like that. People who like to practice that kind of work come to one of my plays and feel a bit disappointed because it does not seem to leave you in a simple place at the end of it. A good example would be something like my play, *Limehouse*, which a lot of people took to be an attack on Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, and some people, even left of the Labour Party, having seen that show, I did not feel clear cut about that. I was actually using it as a model to think about the different traditions within the Labour Party, which is a party that I feel I am very connected to through my life, but on the other hand I have great frustrations with. The gang of four of Labour at that point were thinking of leaving the party, but I was not using that as a suggestion that anybody should do that in the present. And actually it was funny. A couple of years after the show, Corbyn had been running the party for two years, and in fact, shortly after my play seemed to do rather well in a snap election that Theresa May called. And so a lot of people said, "oh, well, it is irrelevant." And then of course in 2019 the Labour Party was annihilated by the Conservative Party, and suddenly, like Corbyn, was

unfashionable. In that year, I think it was in 2019, there was a group called the Independent Group that wanted to leave the Labour Party again because they were so angry at Jeremy Corbyn pushing it to the left. A lot of people got in touch with me and said, "Oh *Limehouse*, that is so relevant." But, the independent group were really never going to go anywhere that it was clearly a gesture rather than substantial politics. The short answer to your question is if it is politics with a "small p," I am very, very happy with that. But I think that it is more that I am drawn to ideas and morality and ethics, and but I am also so interested in character that I think that cuts across some of what people would think of as being a political play, because I am interested in strong parts for good actors and investigating psychology, and that is less political in a straightforward sense. So, it is more complex than that phrase suggests. The only thing I am resistant to is a very simplistic idea of what "political playwright" might sound like. It might sound like an earnest person with no sense of humour and no sense of theatrical pleasure. I am not that person. Theatre should be a rich, enjoyable, sensuous experience.

Hakan Gültekin So, can we say, depending on your comment, that there has been a kind of new generational political playwriting?

Steve Waters I would say I entered the theatre when political theatre was extremely unfashionable in the late 1990s. And my first professional play, which has never even been published, *English Journeys*, which was at the Hampstead Theatre, in no respects could be seen as a sort of political play. It was about relationships, but it was a state of the nation play which has often been associated with political theatre, but from a much more personal lens. But after 9/11, I would argue that political theatre came back in quite a big way. There was that feeling of suddenly life being extremely polarised. The Blair government had become increasingly seen as having authoritarian elements to it and then their support, obviously, of American foreign policy with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The kind of period of consensus around New Labour in the late 90s was starting to fracture and the world was becoming more violent and conflictual as Islamism was on the rise. Then, people like David Hare were kind of coming back. They were much more visible than they had been 10 years previously.

Is there a new generation? Well, there is a wave of writers who come to the fore in the early 2000s and 2010s. Mike Bartlett, Ella Hickson, Lucy Kirkwood, James Graham, Jack Thorne to some extent. Firstly, they are all very good writers, and secondly, they have a slightly more political sensibility, and they are particularly alert to environmental questions, which we will obviously get on to later, which is kind of new politics. Their feminism was a resurgence as well, obviously #MeToo, and then Ella Hickson is writing about that. Lucy Kirkwood has built it into her work both in things like *Maryland*, which she wrote quite recently, and in *The Welkin*. So, it is funny how they would probably none of them describe themselves as political playwrights, but just by the sheer fact that they bring this energy to these questions, they are changing the forms of theatre. In someone like James Graham's work, they are reaching for

longer historical stories about why we are the country that we are. They occupy that position, I think, that political playwrights want to occupy. So, somebody at the time, maybe it was Mark Lawson, a critic, said that generation of writers was the strongest since the generation of Stoppard and Pinter. I fall between the two stools because I am in a way not in the 'in your face group' who were not very political, nor am I in this new wave of writers who are at least 10 years younger than me. I have a connexion to many of them, but I am not their contemporary. The next wave is more a return to these questions of identity, so obviously, people of colour as playwrights, trans writers. You have got a new generation that is emerging to really speak. So that is the next wave. It is kind of breaking as we speak, and it is linked to a completely new, more granular politics of identity, sexuality and so on.

Hakan Gültekin I would like to ask you what is your purpose as a playwright and who do you write for?

Steve Waters That is a really big question. I think probably from *The Contingency Plan* onwards, obviously, climate change and environmental questions are my questions. They were 20-30 years ago, that is what I was thinking about in the 1990s, which of course very few people were thinking about at that time, but I have always been a writer concerned with the state of the land of the body of the country as a whole, not just London, so I have been consciously defining myself against metropolitan theatre. Even though my characters often present as quite middle class, I am interested in examining and breaking down some of those barriers and trying to enlarge our imagination of where we live and open up the scope of playwriting a bit. I am very drawn to late 19th-century naturalism. It is a very important theatre for me. Writers like Chekhov and writers like Ibsen are my constant inspiration, and what I like, particularly in those writers, is that they fuse, particularly in Chekhov's case, the comic sensibility about people with a very epic sense of landscape.

What is my purpose? I think it is to write about things that really matter to me, and also to go behind the scenes a bit. I have always been interested in a phrase which is actually from Walter Benjamin when he was talking about Brecht and Brecht's work: uncovering conditions. I like the notion of theatre having the power to go deeper than many other cultural forms. That is one of the reasons I stay with it. It is more ideas-driven. It goes deeper into character. It goes deeper into the settings it sets and has the capacity to try and find the poetry of that and find the truth of the experiences I want to write about, which I want the audience to experience very intensely. That is another purpose, I suppose that I have. So it might be about changing people's minds, but there is a degree to which it is about enlarging all our horizons, which would be another way of looking at it. Including my own, given that so much of my work increasingly has a slightly research-driven dimension to it, that I am trying to think with. I think what theatre does is go much deeper into the audience than any other art form, any other dramatic art form. And so that keeps me where I am, and it keeps me thinking about what

theatre can do, collaborating with people, and enjoying rehearsal because I love working with actors as well. And what I love about that is their creativity and their care for detail. The actors are like brilliant musicians.

Hakan Gültekin You have been talking about political theatre, but, if you make a simple definition, not a simple but a plain definition, of political theatre, what would it be?

Steve Waters The interesting about this is that you should not necessarily need the adjective 'political.' I think theatre is inherently political theatre. Anything that is public speaks of issues beyond the individual and theatre, just the act of putting theatre on, I would argue, is political. The act of going to the theatre is political in the sense that you are participating in a public event. I think the audience is political and that does not mean that their politics are left-wing or right-wing. But I think that it is an act, particularly in a world where the theatre is becoming increasingly niche and specialist, I think those choices become even more powerful.

But obviously in the past Greek Tragedy comes to mind or the Renaissance, it was a gathering of the whole community quite often. What holds big audiences together? Are audiences asking larger questions than private questions? So in a way, the political nature of theatre is sort of baked in, and also, for instance, the topical nature of theatre. So I do not think that I seek to be topical, or "this is something in the news I must write about it," but I want to use the way in which theatre is uniquely placed to speak about what is on people's minds when they go into the theatre. And obviously, with a play like *Resilience* as part of *The Contingency Plan*, playing that game of trying to keep up, with changing politicians and changing prime ministers, that creates a natural pleasure in the audience, a sort of sense of "wow, this play is so in sync with the time that I am in," and that is an unusual power that theatre has to kind of feel really powerfully relevant to the moment. I do not see that in any other medium. For television, if we are not talking about news reportage, television drama takes too long to get out there. With film or radio you can do it to some extent too but, even then, there is a production process.

I think that my vision of theatre is of a public institution that asks bigger questions beyond the individual's life: questions about their place in society, questions about their place in the universe, and those things mean that it is going to be potentially controversial, potentially topical. It is our duty to say things that are not being said elsewhere. Not even in the newspapers. There are things that theatre can say and explore, critical ways of thinking about the world, which it is I would say in a way our duty to do, because, why else should we exist? We can all watch television, that is fine. So kind of theatre's there to hit us in the soul and the mind and the body all at the same time, and to be critical, to be political and to be emotional. And that is a very difficult task.

Hakan Gültekin In your article "Political Playwriting: The Art of Thinking in Public,"

you call theatre "the last public space." Could you please explain your definition a little more in the light of recent political developments such as Brexit, the age of austerity and the cost of living crisis?

Steve Waters The last public space. It is a good question and obviously, I wrote that 12 years ago, so things have moved on since then, but I think clearly some people would say "Oh well, Twitter is a public space," or "the Internet is a public space" and social media and so on. And, of course, formally, that is true. I am not a great participant in those media, so I cannot speak with any authority, and of course I recognize the case that they are very democratizing. A lot of voices can be heard, but it seems to me fundamental that those people are not in the same place, at the same time, they are not bodily present to each other, so it is not the political space that it is deemed to be. It is a very atomized space where a lot of people shout into the vacuum. And one of the reasons it gets so aggressive and polarised is that there is no way of ending that process. A lot of people shout at people they do not even know. There is no eye-to-eye contact. There is no shared moment. And it creates a very crude mode of expression and actually is the opposite of politics because politics is about coming together, debating, and thinking together. There is of course going to be conflict. But theatre brings us into the same room and so it is our last public space now, bearing in mind that we only had, until electronic media, actual, physical, public spaces: churches, mosques, courtrooms, and marketplaces. That is where public life occurred. And obviously, not everybody was involved, and hierarchy got in the way.

Class got in the way, but people lived more public lives and the drift, particularly in Western societies, and particularly in the UK and the US, is towards increasingly fragmentary lives. Even the way we work now is not public. Universities are another public space. That is why they are so important. Schools are actually the only place where everybody is forced to be together at a certain point in their lives, and obviously their children. There is a degree to which they do not want to be there That is why they have to be there. There are public spaces like being on public transport. But there is no obligation, and indeed it is irritation if I speak to somebody on a train and they do not want to be spoken to, so we actually go into those spaces and try and avoid each other. Cinema is technically similar, but I go to the cinema not being aware of the people around me. I get very irritated, but I can hear them eating, hear them talking. I just do not want to think about them. I am looking at the screen but on the screen is something that has already happened. Movies do not ask me to do anything except watch them.

Theatre is not like that. It returns to that previous question about political theatre. There is a degree to which simply still doing that very old-fashioned thing of coming together is working a muscle, I think, of a social being that is disappearing. And theatre is more important now than it has ever been, which is why it was so disastrous that it went silent during the pandemic. And it is so upsetting that it is in such trouble now and to be honest, right-wing

political forces do not want theatre. They do not like it and they have always tried to stop it. I have been interested in censorship in the theatre. I wrote about Henry Fielding and Robert Walpole many years ago and the first acts of major theatre censorship in this country. The Stage Licencing Act of 1737 was provoked by a play by Henry Fielding and that piece of legislation forced him to become a novelist.

The problem with the theatre is obviously it is small groups of people, even when it is some of the biggest theatres in Britain. You are only talking about a thousand people at a time, but that feels like a lot of people. So, in television, or radio, for which I work, the average audience for a radio play is about a million people, but they are not in any respect conscious of each other. There is nothing public about that really, except for the fact it is on a public platform. You do not feel connected to anybody else when you listen to a radio play, whereas if you sit in front of a play, and there are only 30 people in the audience, the audience is bigger than the individuals. It is more intelligent than the individuals. It is contagious the way emotions spread through it. And I am fascinated with the audience and creating forms to create different sorts of audiences. Well, so I know there are some very boring events where people talk in questions and answers sessions, and talkbacks, and that can be very badly done. But I actually think when it is well done, it is another great asset in the theatre like, for instance, the event you witnessed in the summer: *Dodo, Phoenix, Butterfly*. That is exactly the sort of form I would like to do.

Hakan Gültekin It was a form of political theatre, wasn't it?

Steve Waters Absolutely, but a very precise intervention. These intense short plays are staged in front of a very interesting group of experts and a very engaged audience. It depicts a diverse society that is responded to by people who are living in the world and trying to use it to facilitate a much deeper conversation than you could anywhere else and to create reflections. That is a good example of how you can turn theatre towards wholly new forms of public activity. And everyone comes out of those plays like 'wow, why don't we do this more often?' and they meet people and they network.

Hakan Gültekin In the same article, you stated of Sir David Hare, for whom you declared your deep respect, that his depiction of the road to war in his play about the Iraq War, *Stuff Happens*, was a kind of tautology, as you put it in your article. So, how should a play dealing with political issues be composed? What should be done in order to prevent it from being tautological?

Steve Waters Really, I need to go back to that play. But it was an effect of the verbatim movement. I mean David Hare's play is not exactly that, but it resembles that. And generally speaking when you go to a David Hare play you resent his presence as he is almost too much there His insights, his philosophy, and his emotional qualities, which at their best are very

powerful, predominate, and the play feels like a realization of that worldview. And when I am in the right mood for it, I love that worldview and it has been very important to me, particularly in his work in the 1970s and 80s. There is no question that it's had a huge influence on my work, and one would probably argue that I am following in his footsteps. I wrote *Temple*, he wrote *Racing Demon*. I wrote *Limehouse*, he wrote *The Absence of War*. And there is definitely a line of affinity and emulation. As you say, I really admire him and if I take a play that I really love by David Hare, *Racing Demon*, and compare it with *The Absence of War* and *Stuff Happens*, *Racing Demon* is an entirely fictive piece so, therefore, it has 6 or 7 invented characters on a spectrum of positions relative to the Church of England, which was sort of the focal point of a set of debates about sexuality, the role of faith, what to do under a period of right-wing governance, how the church might relate to the community. It is full of these powerful questions. He talks a lot about hanging around in the General Synod and meeting priests but entirely imagined as well. So he has taken those research elements and synthesised them into, I would argue, this very rich, very funny, very warm, very moving piece of theatre.

The reason I call *Stuff Happens* a tautology is because it is as if by simply representing a reality you draw insight out of it, whereas in fact I felt that it only *represented* a reality, so you have the kind of long reality that we are actually very familiar with. The scenes at Camp David, the scenes with Blair and Bush. We have seen it in a number of documentaries that were, to be honest, more informative than any other examples. You could pick up any number of books which would tell you about it. So it then becomes what it becomes: more of a kind of opportunity for actors to show their imitations of Tony Blair or George W. Bush. Another example of writing that is like that, which I also talked about in that article, is Peter Morgan, who is even more culpable of this because obviously he has gone on to write *The Crown* since that time which did not exist in 2010. The Crown is a classic example of political theatre as a tautology. It is politics. It is a historical theatre. And it apparently takes no view, and it is not really about anything, or if it is, then yes, the questions are so generalized or soap opera-like that you are just watching it for imitation. Who is playing the queen? Is she like the queen? Is she not like the queen? That is a tautology, I think, sort of.

I see that as a tautology, so it is almost like the job is to do a one-to-one representation of a reality that actually we are overwhelmed with anyway. We see it all the time and I wonder what light that kind of work sheds upon that, and unlike the worst of verbatim theatre, great verbatim theatre (I would include plays like *The Permanent Way* by David Hare) as he says himself, take the facts and restore the mystery to the facts so they go beneath the surface. They are often about figures who are not in public life, so we are getting a kind of much more direct and familiar account of the situation. It is partly my argument that I advanced a bit about some of James Graham's plays, which I love and I would not put them in the same camp, but they have got at their most popular a desire not to take a view on the characters and situation and

just they just think they can just show it. But we know that that is in itself a political judgment. Luckily he is a very entertaining writer who has a very strong sense of character, so you can forgive a lot because of those plays. *This House* and the others are just gloriously entertaining pieces of theatre. But what they are actually saying, how they relate to the questions the audience has in their mind about their own moment in time: that is sometimes less clear to me, and then it pushes it back towards the potentially tautologous, which is a very…I accept that is quite an extreme point of view. I do not think it is entirely unfair, but it is a risk that we all run if you reproduce factual reality on stage. The real question is: what are you adding to it? And that is the right, that is the responsibility of the writer.

My closest work to that would be that BBC World Service play, *Fall of the Shah*, about the Iranian Revolution. That is clearly not my story, but I am interested in it as a historical event that I am trying to find a dramatic form to show. But I also know that a lot of it is not that familiar to the listener, so my duty is to represent that as clearly and as excitingly as possible in an accessible format. But that is very different from *The Contingency Plan*, *Fast Labour* or *Temple*. I mean like *Temple*; you could see the play in the same mode because it seems to show us what happened in the Church of England during the Occupy events. But it is a much more personal play about leadership, faith, and integrity and the figure of the Dean has all those qualities within him and in British life contemporary British life. So yes, one could go to it and say, "Oh well, this is what happened in Saint Paul's Cathedral during the Occupy events." No, actually it was not exactly what happened because I brought my imagination to bear on things and when I talked to people, they all had different accounts. You are taking a view as a writer and trying to find a route as close to what you consider the truth as possible. But at the same time, I pushed it toward fiction. I depersonalized the names. I brought qualities of myself into the characters, as in the best work by David Hare. That is what he does too.

Hakan Gültekin Thank you, Steve. Actually, my last questions are about *The Contingency Plan*. Well, as you mentioned, *The Contingency Plan* was staged with a new version. And during the press night, the post-play panel, you said that "people do not look for false hope" and "the theatre is a place where truth can be staged." Can you talk about the process of theatricalizing the truth? Is it easy? How can a playwright organize his/her works in accordance with the truth?

Steve Waters This is very specific to the concerns of *The Contingency Plan* because clearly, the climate crisis is scary beyond belief and so profound. Obviously, I wrote those plays in 2008 and they were staged in 2009. It was seen at the time as a speculative play about a reality that was not happening. Now it is happening. Back in 2009, that was the sort of situation that might have been like 2030 or 2050, and the speed of change is so fast.

Hakan Gültekin Apocalypse felt like something in the future, but it is the reality now?

Steve Waters Now the reality is unfortunately apocalyptic, so we are in that reality. So then the play has a new responsibility. Clearly in its first outing *The Contingency Plan* was to shock and to warn and to provoke the audience into reflection and action, to stop this getting worse than it needs to be, but also to help people think about living in these times, and I think that is one of the reasons why it is a double bill of plays, each one taking a different approach to the question because what I am examining more clearly now is in *Resilience*. The total failure of our political systems to deal with the challenges of climate change as in *On the Beach*. It is cutting into our psychology, driving, pushing us into more extreme forms of behaviour. Robin, the character who becomes increasingly destructive and suicidal, I think you could just see him as a scientist who has gone mad, but there is a way in which he embodies some of the painful contradictions of living with climate change in his own psychology. The sense of the burden of the past coming down on the present and the losses of the natural world. It is the Cassandra figure that has the burden of knowing, the burden of being aware of that. Having met a lot of scientists who are working in this area I was very struck by their predicament: knowing something which potentially is catastrophic and having to just carry on with their work and their lives. And some of them take the risk of becoming political at the cost of their career and their reputation, like Will in the play.

There is so much going on in that double bill play and that is one of the reasons why it had to be a double bill that plays quite complexly, and it goes back to your question about truth. It is a big word and a difficult word to get to the bottom of. I do not think by the way that it is available for us humans to know the truth. It is just how we are. It is beyond our brains. It is beyond knowledge. There is a truth that is bigger than all of us that we will never have access to, and I do not say that in a sceptical way, I just mean that as a fact. So when I say "the truth," I do not mean that I am representing the truth in my work because I could not possibly dare to assume that I know that. But the truth in a different sense, what I think that is about is the writer asking themselves really difficult questions that they do not flinch away from. In narrative terms, so you set something going, let's say, like the collapse of Robin's psychology leads him to increasingly dangerous and extreme actions. When I was watching the play I was thinking, gosh, that is a really painful thing to show to an audience, but to *not* do that would be sentimental and would be to back away from the implications of what you are exploring. Likewise, I do not want to spend every second of the day thinking about the gravity of the climate crisis, but the theatre is one place where we can genuinely stare that in the face. We are not facing the end of the world. I do not believe that for a second, but we are facing irreversible and dangerous changes that could really transform the world that we imagine we live in. We have not got time or leisure to think about that most of the time. And if we do, we think about it in a really unhelpful way, and theatre can lay that out in detail for the audience really in a way that is like tragic knowledge, and tragic knowledge is a kind of truthfulness where you contemplate something that is almost too powerful to think about in everyday life. But because of the beauty of the actors, and the brilliance of the design, it was

a beautiful production. One of the ones I am the proudest of. I love that space, as it puts a distance that enables the audience to contemplate things they would ordinarily not want to think about. And the final truth is I do not want to deceive people if I find things out about politics, glaciology, or sea level rises.

Hakan Gültekin …and about democracy in *Resilience*. It was totally about democracy and the challenge of the climate crisis for democracy.

Steve Waters And democracy, absolutely. I am very flattered when people say that the original plays were prescient or the idea that they saw into the future. I do not consider them to be impressive, I just think I was paying attention. For instance, I wrote it when Labour was still in power, but I knew for a fact that the Conservatives would be coming into power, and they did. I knew that in the Conservative Party which is our current version of democracy, there are very contradictory forces, and some of them, and the tension between them, are really dangerous. And that is true of British life. As you say, Brexit is a version of that tragedy playing out between Britain which is outward going, generous, pluralist, interested in modern life, and open to the world, and Britain that is generally quite old and trapped in its identity. And I understand. I feel sympathetic to people who feel like that in the country, and some of them are people I know, and love, but it is not good for Britain to retreat. And it has retreated, particularly in England. So those forces are what we watch in the Conservative Party, trying to deal with this tremendously challenging problem that they have no language to deal with. And one way that of course they do not deal with it is they do not confront science, they do not deal with experts, and so on.

So again, the pandemic shows us what happens when that occurs: that you lead to really bad forms of governance and people die. Lots of people died in this country who did not need to die because of that government, and to me, even if every single member of this government changes, they are still guilty of that crime, and they deserve to be wiped out of British political life. I feel very strongly about that. It means that probably some people would see *Resilience* as too political for their taste. They say things like “oh, are politicians really that bad?” and “would they really say this?” And the original review said that this time around people said this is all too realistic. And in some respects, I was becoming seen as a tautologist in the way that I described as well, because every day you turn on the television and people are behaving worse than people do in *Resilience*. But I felt it was still back to tragedy. It was cathartic to put that on stage in front of big audiences. So then the final point: I can tell false hope, that a lot of people want hope from stories. The notion of positive change or the possibility of change in the right direction is essential to tell any story. There is a degree to which writing any play is an act of optimism. That does not mean the play ends well and hope prevails. And that is where you have to be real with the audience and allow the theatre to be a serious grown-up form that does not sort of work as propaganda. Anything that seeks to give hope is not a disgraceful thing to do, but it is propagandistic because that is not necessarily where the story is going. And neither play is terribly hopeful.

I definitely think that with the climate crisis. We are not going to stop the climate crisis. That is clear. So really the question now is: How do we make the rising in temperatures less extreme than it should be, will it be by keeping it to 1.5 average degrees centigrade? And how do we sort of weather it out through collective responsibility and care for each other? Is it possible to adapt to the way that we live and make our lives better? Kind of getting rid of cars is great. Would you use, you know, more renewable energy sources that would make our lives better? That would make the air cleaner, for instance. More local food production? Brilliant. That would actually create more jobs, transform the landscape, and break up the power of big firms, corporations, and supermarkets. And that is why it is being resisted, because it is actually the way towards a socialist communal society/ And that is what, you know, people fear to admit the reality of, because they do not want to be seen as politically active. They would like to say we are not political, and I agree that climate change in itself is not a political issue. But, how we deal with it is really a political issue. The people who say it is not happening or just ignoring it, they are just fascists, and they need to be defeated. But the really interesting people are those with right-wing capitalist ways of trying to deal with climate change and left-wing transformative ways of trying to deal with climate change. And the complicating factor is lack of time. One would accept I mean, for instance, nuclear power, it is an interesting one for me because, in absolute terms, I think it is a bad idea. It tends to be very corrupt and I think the administration is immensely wasteful and expensive, but if that is what it takes to get decarbonized energy in the next 20 years then… but the trouble is, it takes 20 years to set up a nuclear power station. So it is not even a quick answer, but it is that kind of pragmatic decision. If somebody tomorrow managed to create carbon capture and storage that worked, I wouldn't say to not do that. We need every tool we can have, but at the same time we are still here, and particularly that is where conservation comes in, which is probably my most pressing question now, which is: how do we restore the natural world on this planet? And again, climate mitigation helps with that, so that is why I am interested in questions of farming, food production, and rewilding. That is my battleground now and funnily enough, I can get quite propagandistic about that because there I want to kind of effect change as quickly as I possibly can, because the situation is really great, but my instinct is always to do that in a detailed and subtle way. Perhaps the question is less polarised, though, so you can explore it in a way, though you do not send people up, but at the same time it is such an urgent question that I feel like I have not got time myself to be Ibsen-like about it, I might need to be more kind of direct, more like Brecht.

Hakan Gültekin Thank you very much.

Steve Waters It was a pleasure to me. I thank you for the opportunity.

Grant Support: The research behind this article was carried out during Dr. Hakan Gultekin's Post-Doctoral research at the University of East Anglia, School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing with the support of The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK).