Youth violence on the British stage: In-yer-face theatre

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Abstract

Throughout the 1990s, British theatre shifted its focus on themes that were ever more extraordinary, and thus ever more violent. Aleks Sierz, a theatre critic, dubbed this shift 'in-yer-face theatre'. The aim of this paper is to examine how those who had pioneered this movement, including Martin Crimp, Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Judy Upton, and Moira Buffini reflect the theme of violence in youth in their plays. The overarching goal of 'In-yer-face theatre' is to shock viewers as well to have them come face-to-face with own inner beasts through the use of obscene language, and by means of evoking one's inner violent instincts. In 'In-yer-face theatre' not only adults but also youth kill, rape, torture. Both youth and adults alike are victimized by the darkness swirling around within the pits of souls. Each playwright has her/his own way of portraying this violence on stage, *Vincent River, Ghost from a Perfect Place, Ashes and Sand, Normal, Welcome to Thebes, In the Republic of Happiness*. Crimp blames the emergence of violence upon capitalism. Neilson and Ridley equate violence with the struggle to stay alive. Buffini shows how ruthless youth at war can be, whilst Upton deals with the crimes committed by female gangs—a problem which had plagued much of the United Kingdom during that period. Not only do playwrights force their audiences to confront reality, but they also cast their own bleak outlooks concerning the future. Since they deem that modern youth, like adults, is cruel, remorseless, and void of any sense of empathy.

Keywords: In-yer-face theatre, youth violence, contemporary British playwrights, cruelty.

İngiliz sahnesinde gençlik şiddeti- suratına tiyatro

Özet

1990'lar boyunca İngiliz tiyatrosu daha sansasyonlu ve dolayısıyla daha fazla şiddet içerikli temalara odaklanmasıyla yön değiştirir. Bu dönemde ki farklılık tiyatro eleştirmeni olan Aleks Sierz tarafından 'Suratına Tiyatro' olarak adlandırılır. Bu araştırmanın amacı, 'Suratına Tiyatro' oyun yazarlarının; Crimp, Ridley, Neilson, Ravenhill, Upton, Buffini, gençlerin içindeki şiddeti eserlerine nasıl yansıttıklarını incelemektir. 'Suratına Tiyatro'nun en önemli amacı müstehcen bir dille insanoğlunun en temel dürtülerinden biri olan şiddeti uyarıcı olarak kullanarak seyircide şok etkisi yaratmak ve seyircinin gerçeklerle yüzleşmesini sağlamaktır. 'Suratına Tiyatro'da sadece yetişkinler değil çocuklarda öldürür, tecavüz ve işkence ederler. Yetişkinler kadar çocuklar da içlerindeki şiddet içgüdüsüne yenik düşerler. Yazarların hepsi eserlerine, *Vincent River, Ghost from a Perfect Place, Ashes and Sand, Normal, Welcome to Thebes, In the Republic of Happiness*, gençlerin içindeki acımasızlığı farklı şekillerde yansıtırlar. Crimp şiddetin ortaya çıkmasında kapitalist sistemi suçlarken, Neilson ve Ridley şiddetin ortaya çıkısını, hayatta kalma mücadelesi olarak eserlerine yansıtır. Buffini, savaşın gençlerin içinde ki acımasızlığı nasıl ortaya çıkardığını gösterirken, Upton

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1990'larda yaygın olan çeteleşme olayını oyununa yansıtarak vahşi bir kız çetesinin işlediği suçlardan bahseder. Aslında yazarlar sadece seyirciyi bir gerçekle yüzleştirmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda geleceğe karşı olumsuz bakış¸ açılarını da yansıtırlar. Çünkü onlara göre yetişen gençlik tıpkı yetişkinler gibi acımasız, merhametsiz ve empati duygusundan yoksundur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yüzüne tiyatro, gençlik şiddeti, çağdaş İngiliz tiyatro yazarları, zalimlik.

Introduction

"Kids are no longer innocents who have to be protected" (Allahar, 2006:104).

It is the children of today who are the guardians of future generations, which hence is why both families and educators alike wish to rear safe, healthy, and intelligent generations of children through the best possible means. Unfortunately, it is incredibly difficult to accomplish this idea in the face of major, often destructive challenges such as imperialism, colonialism, and conflict. According to a report (1998) published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Great Britain (which researches the cause-effect relationship between youth and violence), "children's involvement in violent offending appears to be increasing" (CBF, 1995: 4). Youth-based violence is a rapidly growing contemporary social problem plaguing much of the world at large—to the extent that it has become the focus of many an author, playwright, and artist.

William Golding's 1954 novel *The Lord of the Flies,* for example, deals the subject of a group of children stranded on a deserted island commit various acts of violence, barbarity, and torture. Dorris Lessing explores the effects of state policies such as racism, war, and colonialism upon children in her two sets of novel series *Children of Violence (1952 – 1969)* and *Canopus in Argos Archives* (1979 – 1983). Fernando Meirelles's 2003 film *City of God,* moreover, takes a serious multi-dimensional look at both child-child and child-parent youth violence. Playwrights who subscribe to the in-yer-face movement of theatre have—since its emergence in the late 20th century—also not been shy about drawing attention to this spike in youth violence in their works in the name of creating awareness.

In-yer-face theatre: Philip Ridley, Judy Upton, Anthony Neilson, Moira Buffini, Martin Crimp

Throughout history, writers for theatre have naturally employed a variety of techniques in order to reflect the social and political shifts of the period within which they are living in, including society's response(s) to those shifts. One instance of this is the inter-locking relationship between theatre, the wars at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the revolutions occurring in Germany and Russia. The pioneering theatre of the German playwright Erwin Piscator went so far as to examine the state of much of Prussia-Germany's lower class during this period from both social and political angles—thus appropriately dubbed *politic theatre,* given its being drawn from authentic documents. Bertolt Brecht, likewise, had felt the need to have his audience think about rather than merely spoon-feed them facts. In attempting to do so, he had incorporated the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* or the estrangement effect into his plays whereby he evoked his viewers to criticize their present state of existence. This, in turn, had led Brecht to become the father of the *epic* theatre movement. What is more, is that not only had much of Europe collapsed both politically and economically following the Second World War, but European society was also now shrouded by the dark cloud of distrust and isolation towards the outside world. This cloak of dusk that hung-over Europe throughout the 1950s became the subject of a theatrical

wave known as absurd theatre (coined by the critic Martin Esslin), featuring the works of playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Eugène Ionesco. It was a wave that largely focused on portraying the meaningless of life alongside people's profound sense of loneliness and desperateness. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger (1956)*, respectively handles the woes of post-war British society through both political and economic lenses. During the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had retracted her support of arts in order to focus on the re-structuring the economy instead, which hence "made the whole theatre system increasingly driven by commercial objectives" (Sierz, 2012: 31). Other playwrights such as Harold Barker, Edward Bond, and John Arden—all of which following in Osborn's footsteps—had thoroughly criticized the then-ruling Conservative Party's negative stance towards theatre. Towards the end of the 20th century, another movement within British theatre had into the spotlight that sought to force audiences to confront—rather than be preached at about—reality: in-yer-face theatre dubbed so by Aleks Sierz.

Dominic Dromgoole suggests that In-yer-face theatre is drastically different from its predecessors, stating that "in the eighties, most theatres wanted well-meaning, well-reasoned, victim-based plays. But in the nineties, some theatres gave young writers complete freedom. There were no ideologies, no rules, no 'taste' – writers were free to follow their imaginations" (Sierz, 2001:37). These young playwrights do not take pleasure in depicting all that is right and good within the framework of a given set of rules. To the contrary, they prefer to deliver reality in its rawest form. Sierz broadly defines in-yer-face theatre as being

> […] any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown on stage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are (Sierz, 2001: 4).

Sierz is of the opinion that in-yer-face theatre is potent enough not to let its audience calmly sit back and passively watch the show, albeit due to the graphic nature of its content and language use. The audience hence is forced to experience and even physically become a part of the portrayed reality on a disturbing level. In-yer-face theatre frequently deals with topics deemed taboo by society at large and rubs into its audience's faces. In this sense, in-yer-face theatre is both shocking as well as stimulating. Sirez furthermore notes that it is relatively easy to distinguish this wave from other theatrical forms, due in part to the fact that much emphasis is placed upon the role of language, and that the linguistic medium of an in-yer-face pay is 'filthy' (Sierz, 2001:5). He argues that "because humans are language animals, words often seem to cause more offense than the acts to which they refer" (Sierz, 2001: 7). In essence, playwrights purposely choose to use obscene language in order to tear down the barrier between the audience and the taboo.

In-yer-face playwrights, moreover jolt their audiences through showcasing sudden, unexpected acts of violence such as murder, rape, or abuse; their logic is that "if they are dealing with disturbing subjects, or want to explore difficult feelings, shock is one way of waking up audience" (Sierz, 2001:5). Thus, when we the viewer confront events that we other otherwise turn a blind eye to, alongside emotions that send chills through our spine, we become forced to critically question both the world we live in as well as ourselves—hence being *in-yer-face* in the truest sense of the word. Violence, in turn, is a quintessential means of accomplishing this, given that it makes us feel vulnerable, and it moreover awakens our inner sense of fear. "Violent actions break rules of debate; they go beyond words and thus can get out of

control" (Sierz, 2001:8). Violence, in other words, can be more powerful than words when it comes to making us comprehend the issue at hand. On the in-yer-face stage, youth too—just as much as, if not more so than adults—succumb to this inner beast as well: they too kill, rape, and torture. The writer is of the idea that violent tendencies exist within all of us, merely waiting to be unleashed at the drop of a hat. Sarah Kane's *Blasted (1995)* had marked the peak of in-yer-face theatre in terms of its radicalness—this coupled with the critical works of various other unique playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Judy Upton, Moira Buffini, and Martin Crimp.

London-born Ridley (b. 1964), for example, has made contributions to several branches of the arts including film, poetry, and theatre. Suffering from severe asthma throughout much of his childhood, he was inevitably home-schooled, and then later went on to study at St. Martin's School of Art. His first play *The Pitchfork Disney* had helped launch his career when it took to stage in 1991. Sierz has described Ridley as being "a pivotal figure in the history of 1990s playwriting" (Sierz, 2012:89), whilst Dromgoole had commented that Ridley's first play was "one of the first plays to signal the new direction for new writing" (Sierz, 2012:89). Two of his plays that were to follow, *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992) and *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (1994) had set his dark and ruthless style of theatre in stone. Among his successive works, he describes *Sparkleshark* (1997), *Fairytaleheart* (1998), *Brokenville* (2003), *Moonfleece* (2004), and *Karamazoo* (2004) as being "a storyteller sequence which is a series of one-act dramas written for young people" (Middeke, 2011:426), whereas he denotes *Vincent River* (2000), *Mercury Fur* (2005), *Leaves of Glass* (2007), and *Piranha Heights* (2008) as being "rich in metaphor and verbal imagery" (Middeke, 2011:427), and are thus interpreted by critics as being far more realistic in nature. It is impossible to see happy parents or happy families in any of his plays. In fact, the critic Martin Middekke notes that Ridley avoids using the 'good parent' image altogether, stating that "this parental absence connects with a profound sense of loss and abandonment, often works through visually in the surroundings of the plays" (Middeke, 2011: 429). Youth in his plays, in essence, is doomed to going astray and falling down broken paths from the very onset.

Judy Upton (b. 1967), had also "proved a regular contributor to The Red Room's repertoire in the 1990s" (Aston, 2003: 64), having made her debut in 1992 with her first ever play *Everlasting Rose*. It was not before long that her *Ashes and Sand (1994)* had made its way onto the stage of the Royal Court Theatre, and had earned her both the George Devine Award alongside tremendous critical acclaim. Her Verity Bargate award-winning *Bruises* (1995), alongside *The Sharewatcher's House* (1995) both earn a place within the in-yer-face genre due to the violent nature of their content. Sierz had placed her work under the "New Young Writers" group (Sierz, 2001: 205). She has also been referred to as being a political playwright for her two plays *Know Your Rights* (1998) and *People on the River* (1997).

The Scottish playwright Anthony Neilson (b. 1967) was born in Edinburgh into an ultra-artistic family. He studied at the Welsh College of Music and Drama, and as both acted in as well as written a number of plays. His play *Normal: The Düsseldorf Ripper* (1991) "became a contentious fringe success" (Sierz, 2001:68). His 1993 play *Penetrator* had furthermore entered him into the category of contemporary playwrights alongside Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. Shortly thereafter he had found himself on the stage of the Finborough Theatre with his two works *Year of the family* (1994) and *The Lying Kind* (2007). In addition to *Penetrator* (1993), *The Censor (1997)* and *Stiching* (2002) also come forth as being tremendously important pieces within the *in-yer-face* movement. In Sierz's view, "a certain amount of shock is necessary in-yer-face theatre reinvigorates the mainstream" (Sierz, 2001:66). Neilson himself similarly feels that theatre "should be an emotional experience rather than being too

logical" (Sierz, 2000:66). In other words, theatre is only successful when it strikes a chord with people's emotions on a multitude of levels.

Sierz, in inference to in-yer-face theatre, had commented that "there was a crop of British plays about murder and prisons" (Sierz, 2001:206). It was during this period that Moira Buffini had written *Jordan* (1992) with Anna Reynolds, which talks about a woman who kills her own infant child. The play wound up earning her the Time Out Award, thus kick-starting her professional career in theatre. Buffini herself was born in Cheshire in 1965 and had studied English Literature and Drama at Goldsmith's College. Her play *Silence* (1999), known for its avant-garde style and approach to language, had furthermore won her the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. She also won the Oliver Award for *Dinner* (2003), which deals with the subject of revenge all the while entertaining the audience through her brilliant use of comedic elements peppered throughout the performance. Other of her works include *Welcome to Theb*es (2010), which criticizes both politics and the social order, as well as *Wonder.land* (2015), which debuted at the National Theatre. She still maintains an active career in theatre.

Martin Crimp is perhaps the most seasoned amongst his contemporaries, whereby he "has influenced many of the new generation of 'in-yer-face' playwrights, yet his work appears to be more appreciated overseas than in his own country' (Dolley&Walford, 2015:58). His aim is to expose the realities of society through violence themes and unfiltered language. He has influenced both his peers and non-British playwrights alike. Crimp was born in the cities Kent in 1956 and has been writing for theatre since the 1980s. He spent a considerable chunk of childhood living throughout various regions of the United Kingdom given the nature of his father's profession as a signaling engineer for British Rail. It was during his time at St. Catherine's College that he immersed himself in French, British, and Classical Latin literature and theatre, thus kindling his interest in theatre. It was when he later moved to London that he decided to become a professional playwright. After writing his first play, *Clang,* he then wrote a novel titled *Still Early Days*. However, it was his time spent working for the Orange Tree Theatre that proved to be the most fruitful period of his career, whereby he produced two award-winning plays including *Three Attempted Acts* (1984) and *Definitely the Bahamas* (1987), followed by several more successive works which would shape his career. Whilst his 1990 play *No one Sees the Video* criticizes people's lust for consumption, his play *The Treatment* (1993) earned him respect as a successful playwright throughout the world of theatre. *Attempts on her Life* (1997), on the other hand, emerged as a piece that was drastically different from his other works due to its lack of a protagonist. *The Country* (2002) talks about the relationship between men and women as well as ever-increasing societal corruption. His trip itch series of three short plays *Whole Blue Sky, Fewer Emergencies,* and *Face-to-the-Wall* (2002) all grind the audience's nose into violence through various means. What is more, *In The Republic of Happiness* (2012) snags the attention of critics upon its dealing with the theme of crumbling relationships within families.

Plays: *Vincent River*, *Ghost from A Perfect Place*, *Ashes and Sand*, *Normal*, *Welcome to Thebes* and *In The Republic of Happiness*

Philip Ridley is accepted as being one of the pioneers of in-yer-face theatre, as well as being enormously influential. His intent is to awaken his audience to the smell of reality by focusing on the theme of violence, and especially the violent potential of youth. *Vincent River* deals with the subject of both British society's as well as British youth's negative outlook towards homosexuality. Dan Rebellato has commented that "*Vincent River* is a tour de force of simple, almost classical playwriting" (Middeke, 2011: 436) because Ridley cleverly prefers to approach the portrayal of violence linguistically rather than

physically. He conveys the audience to the romance between two gay characters, Davey and Vincent, using extraordinarily emotional language. Then he describes the death of the dramatic murder of Vincent and the inner torture faced by Davey in response. Neither person's family accepts or respects their sexuality. Davey, who is 16 years of age, becomes engaged with a girl named Rache in order to gain acceptance from society, as well as in order not to cause his mother any emotional burden. Before long, he stumbles across 30-year-old Vincent who works in a library, and the two falls for one another. The two then agree to discreetly meet up for sex in the restroom of an abandoned railway station. Davey is the first one to leave the bathroom. Vincent on the other hand upon attempting to leave becomes noticed by a gang of teenagers. The way that Ridley illustrates the youth speaks for itself:

> Davey ... Start walking down the tracks – A noise! Footsteps! Voices! Too far away to see faces. But they're men. Late teens. Early twenties. There's one, two ... five of them. Their cigarettes glow orange. Two of them are drinking straight from bottles. One of them's wearig a zip-uo jacket with a hood. I've got a top just like that. I watch their glowing cigarettes moving down the slope. One of them stumbles. Falls over. Others laugh. The one who stumbles says something angry. Others stop laughing. They cluster against one side of the platform. They're having a piss. That's all they're here for the one who stumbled aims his piss at his mates' feet. They all jump back. They're laughing. I hear one of them say, 'You drunk bastard!' They continue pissing... (Ridley, 2009: 84)

Upon closer examination of Ridley's language, the reader ought to immediately notice how the youth aggressively approach one another and how they urinate upon one another in order to show dominance, as well as their abuse of alcohol and cigarettes, coupled with the utter barbarity of their actions. In this sense, the youth represents a hideously violent generation. They immediately understand Vincent's fear and homosexuality and begin to assault him verbally. Shortly thereafter, Vincent finds himself cornered in a bathroom stall:

> Davey ... His left leg is broken. Twisted under his right. Skin is punctured with bone below the knee. Both legs are covered with cuts. Like they've been clawed. Waht could've marks like that? ... ıt's the nails! Nails sticking out of the wood they've hit him with. His groin is fool of blood. His stomach is covered with dark patches. Bruises. Deep cuts all over his chest. A gaping wound across his neck. And his face – oh, my God! His face! His teeth are smashed. His nose smashed. Just blood. I look at him for a long time. He's not moving. Not breathing. Nothing (Ridley, 2009: 86).

Ridley does not skip a single beat when it comes to painting the atrocity, and it is this scene that ultimately becomes the most graphic and heart-wrenching in nature. He swathes his audience in the negative world of this band of twenty-something youth who cruelly and unsympathetically slaughter someone in his thirties simply because he is unlike them. Furthermore, no one cries for help upon noticing that they have killed Vincent; instead, they merely abandoned his corpse and fled the scene. Later on, Davie himself is also assaulted by a group of youth younger than himself.

> Davey I was standing on the corner. Last night. Brick Lane. Near that bagel place. Ya Know? There were three of 'em. All younger than me. They looked at me. I looked at them. One of 'em said, 'What you fucking staring at?' I said, 'Dunno but it's staring back!' I didn't run. One of 'em grabbed me round the head. Others lashed out. Didn't fight back. Didn't even struggle. Just thought, Hurt me as much as you fucking like. I forgot everything. I disappeared. There was nothing. Nothing. (Ridley, 2009: 71).

David, who feels immense grief over Vincent's brutal death, chooses not to fight against the youth, instead of paying for it by taking their beating of him. Ridley skilfully forces the audience to face the reality of the brutal nature of much of contemporary male youth, as well as sketches how those whose lifestyles go against the grain of the norms of society can become marginalized in the coldest of fashions.

Intriguingly enough, Ridley's *Ghost from a Perfect Place* informs viewers that violent acts are not exclusive to male youth, but also can be observed in female youth as well through female gangs. Here, a 76-year-old ex-gangster named Travis returns to his old neighbourhood Bethnal Green and knocks on the door of 78-year-old Torchie. As soon as Torchie recognizes Travis, he shows him profound respect. The two reminisce about the past; meanwhile, the stunningly eye-catching character of Rio enters. Rio, despite not knowing who Travis is, attempts to woo him into the bedroom, but Torchie puts his foot down. Rio suddenly becomes frustrated at Torchie's reaction, she waves the light that is in her hand and signals for her two gang mates Miss Kerosene and Miss Sulphur to enter the room. First, the girls tie Travis to a chair and slap him, then they light a cigarette and burn him with it. Nevertheless, when Rio learns that Travis is her father, she sets him free and gives him permission to leave. Towards the end of the play, the gang lights a massive bonfire in front of Rio's house that is powerful enough to illuminate it, thus, coupled with the sound of shrieking screams, closing the play. "The bonfire suddenly flares even brighter. There are distant cheers of many girls. The room lights up." (Ridley, 1997: 99). It is that bonfire that Ridley uses in order to depict the ferociousness and danger of the girl gang, whereby he stresses the sense of insecurity and hopelessness faced by today's youth through the re-worked theme of bottled-up inner violence. Additionally, even though Rio appears before us as very much being the ring-leader of the gang, all three girls nevertheless act horrendously towards one another. Miss Kerosene, for example, accuses Rio of not hitting Travis and furthermore expresses that she wishes to be the ringleader. Rio, responds by hitting her rather viciously. According to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation "it is certainly true that most acts of aggression to children, women, and men which result in injury or death (and fear of these) are carried out by males, and in particular young males" (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1995: 41). Ridley essentially counters this claim by teaching the reader-viewer that females can be just as sickeningly violent as their male counterparts.

Judy Upton's *Ashes and Sand*, in parallel with Ridley's play, also focuses on the barbarity of female gangs. Upton mentions that initially, she read "newspaper reports about girl muggers on the Place Piers" and then she used "experiences from her own teenage years" (Sierz, 2001:216) in her play. According to Sierz "the violence of the play is never explained, except in the most general way: the culture of unemployment has created an enraged youth. But if aggression is a law of nature, the implication is that nothing can be done to change it" (Sierz, 2001:216). In contrast to Ridley, although she depicts the violent nature of the girl gang at hand, she also delves deeper into the actual problems that they are facing and delivers that to the audience. The four gang members, Haley, Anna, Lauren, and Jo, scrimp together enough money in order to travel to Bali, albeit by means of theft and mugging. During the first scene, viewers observe the girls viciously mug a man and rob him of his money. As the play continues, the audience becomes acquainted with two police officers by the names of Glyn and Daniel. Glyn is someone who takes his job seriously, whereas Daniel steals women's shoes, likes putting on makeup, has full knowledge of the girl gang, and moreover is in a romantic relationship with one of its members, Haley. Not only does the hang harm and rob people older than themselves, but they also viciously harm one another. Jo, for example, at one point pulls a knife on Lauren for her being intimately close with her boyfriend. In the consecutive act, an argument breaks out between Jo and Lauren—who stole from Haley—over the money they saved for their Bali excursion: "Jo slaps Lauren across the mouth, Lauren slaps Jo in return. Anna intervenes" (Upton, 2002: 3-4). On the other hand, not only does Haley lash out at the other characters, but she also lashes out at herself as well, "cutting up her arms whilst Haley sits down" (Upton, 2002: 22). In act two, Anna, Lauren, and Jo senselessly strip a man down and stab him. The girls, afraid of getting caught, flee the scene, run over to Haley, and ask her to talk to Daniel and have him tell the police that they (the girls) were with Daniel the whole time. Daniel, meanwhile, is preparing to flee to another city altogether. When Haley learns his escape, she becomes furious at him

because she cannot stand the idea of being abandoned by him. In the final act, the gang head over and break into Daniel's house, thoroughly kick, punch, and scream at him, and then paint his body with his makeup supplies. When he is ultimately found by his colleagues, he goes into shock.

Upton, in essence, attempts to draw a connection between the forthcoming generation of youth's sense of cruelty and aimlessness with their lust for consumerism. The girl gang literally has no goals whatsoever. Their sole dream is to save up enough money to go to Bali, however, they betray Haley in order to achieve this. The other three girls go so far as to steal Haley's savings and blow it on clothes. Haley keeps a notebook on hand serving as the gangs' *to-do* list, as it were. When the money is stolen from her, she tears out the first few pages of the notebook, knowing full-well that trip to Bali will never be real. Upon her learning of Daniel's moving to another city, she tears out the remaining pages as well. What remains behind is Haley who has no aim in life whatsoever—which, hence, is why she jumps on the opportunity to torture David. In this sense, what Upton is ultimately suggesting is that contemporary youth are ruthless, wanton, soulless, and consumeristic.

Anthony Neilson, akin to his contemporaries, also views modern youth through a similar, pessimistic lens. He is of the belief there is a heavy price to pay for taking pleasure from cruelty. In his plays, the price that the anti-hero eventually pays is death. Sierz interprets Neilson's *Normal* as being "the most polished and poetic of Neilson's plays. Normal is full of detail and rich in theatrical inventiveness. The dialogues are razor-sharp and psychologically alive, the writing intelligent and aphoristic" (Sierz, 2001:73). Neilson keeps his audience hanging on the edge of their seats both through the mediums of language and content. The play opens with the emergence of a swan figure symbolizing purity; however, towards the closing of the play, the swan is violently slaughtered, thus symbolizing the dark side of humanity. The subject is the dialogue between the German serial killer Peter Kurten and his lawyer prior to Kurten's execution—there within Kurten's admitting to the killings and his describing of how he had committed them. Neilson in depicting this historically real man's story, does so by re-enacting Kurten's violent childhood on stage before the audience. In Kurten's own words, "there is no innocence in this world" (Neilson, 2011: 13). He goes onto explain that this very lack of innocence is he turned out the way he did, and it was during his childhood that he discovered his inner beast. When he was no more than 8 years of age, he pushed two children that he was playing with into a river, causing them to drown to their deaths. He furthermore admits to getting a rise out of this, whereupon he smiles and says "I know I shouldn't laugh" (Neilson, 2011: 18). At age ten, he walked up to the house of the man who was the reason behind why the stay dogs in his neighbourhood went off the grid. Upon entering in, he witnesses blood on his hands as well as a dog quivering in fear. The elderly man notices Kurten, grins, and closes the door behind Kurten. Apparently, from that point forward, Kurten starts visiting the man every day after school, commenting that:

> It was during this time that I made an astonishing
> Discovery, that the spilling of blood
> Its coppery smell, its deep colour,
> Caused a pleasing sensation in my crotch.
> I became quite addicted to that sensation… (Neilson, 2011: 21).

Kurten's inner evil, in fact, gives him pleasure. He would later come to satisfy this pleasure by becoming a serial killer, murdering numerous women and men. In contrast, Kurten's lawyer grew up in as innocent and sheltered life as possible. Here, Neilson shows two opposite character types: one, a small, innocent child who discovers his inner sense of ferocity early on in life; and two, a seemingly innocent adult whose

inner cruel side also becomes unleashed. In fact, what Neilson is attempting to prove as the play unfolds is that no human being is entirely innocent, but rather that we all have the potential to be ruthlessly savage. Catherine Storr supports this notion, expressing that "we know in our hearts that each one of us harbours within himself the same savage impulses which lead to murder, to torture, and to war" (Zulueta, 2006: 48). Both Neilson and Storr appear to share the opinion that human beings' violent tendencies are innate and present even at the time we are born. As chance so happens, Kurten stumbles upon this when he is but a small child, and it moreover tickles his fancy, thus driving him to commit multiple murders. Additionally, Kurten's own father is both a thief and a rapist who sleeps with his own daughter. As a family, everyone lived in a one-room house, and thus there was no privacy whatsoever. Nevertheless, to Neilson, this, in fact, is not the only reason why Kurten became a serial killer. To the contrary, his well-educated and well-off lawyer Wehner enters into a sexual relationship with Kurten's wife and later kills her as well. To sum up, Neilson puts forth—and in turn, tries to show us—that all of us are capable of committing heinous acts regardless of our upbringing.

Moira Buffini's play *Welcome to Thebes* is based on Sophocles' *Antigone*, and talks about the negative direction in which the political landscape in Britain is going, and the consequences of that in terms of how it impacts youth. Buffini's "artistic imagination" (Voela, 2017:105) leaves her audience very much in awe. Broadly speaking, the subject of the play deals with the shifting of the administration of post-war Africa from men's hands into women's hands, and African people's struggle to try and adjust to that shift. Buffini, in doing this, successfully attempts to describe the past using modern terms. The play itself begins with the depiction of three adolescent Thebian soldiers caught in the middle of the conflict. "Three Theban soldiers enter: Megaera, a woman of twenty, Miletus a sergeant of maybe thirty, Junior Lieutenant Scud, a boy of thirteen." (Buffini, 2010: 3). Here, Buffini tells of how the two youngsters, Megara and Scud, had become monsters. Both Megaera's mother and sister were killed in the conflict; moreover, she herself was both beaten and raped by soldiers. At one point she loses consciousness, mistaken for dead, and placed alongside corpses. When Megaera comes around, she flees into the jungle and survives on "forest nuts and beetles" (Buffini, 2010:6) for days on end. She is then found by the character Miletus, who gives her a weapon and makes her "human once more" (Buffini, 2010:6). Megaera, in turn, becomes both fearless of and ruthless towards all people. Buffini provides little in the way of detailed information about the character of Scud other than that he killed his younger sister by smashing her spine into fragments. What is more, despite his young age, he expresses that he finds the explosion of bombs to be thrilling rather than frightening.

> Scud: They are called bomblets- and they're yellow. Look like little cans of fizz
> And children pull on them because their thirst is bad BOOM
> And you become a rain of meat
> And women pulling bits of you from out their hair
> And screaming oh disgusting get me some shampoo (Buffini, 2010: 4)

Violence and death have become a normal, everyday occurrence for both Scud and Megaera. Scud also is now no longer aware of who he is fighting for/against, nor does he know why his country is as complicated as it is. According to Miletus, Scud is "only old enough to kill, not vote" (Buffini, 2010: 70). All three characters continuously throw themselves into danger and they assert that they have no sense of hope to the point that they pounce on anyone and everyone at the drop of a hat. During this point, Scud, spots a Greek diplomat by the name of Tathybia, mistakes him for a ghost and points a gun at his head. Scud then is viciously shot by a Greek security guard named Phaeax. At the end of the play, Miletus heads to Greece and Megaera aimlessly follows suit. Buffini, like Upton, attempts to show the audience

that youth at present are vicious and that they have zero hopes about the future ahead. At the same time, Upton illustrates how both war and politics can quite literally eradicate a generation of youth, and that it can turn that generation savage. Scud, for instance, sees bombs as being toys and laughs in the face of death. Megaera has lost her sense of fear and has had to resort to becoming violent in order to stay alive. In such a context, Buffini blames national states and politics for being the reason why a lost, violent generation has emerged, and in turn, forces her audience to come face-to-face with the ugly reality of the impact of war on children.

Martin Crimp, who has contributed significantly to the in-yer-face movement, reflects the reality of violence in society through linguistic profanity. He approaches this theme in his plays a rather different manner from other playwrights in that he feels that capitalism is to blame for people's behaviours. According to Clara Escoda, Crimp's *In the Republic of Happiness,* "redefines ethics not as a pre-existing, normative epistemology, but as stemming from a common human vulnerability, bodily exposure and mutual need" (Aragay & Middeke, 2017:197). In this sense, Crimp talks about people's desires and needs changing with the flow of the direction of society rather than violence tendencies being innate. He thinks that one of the largest disadvantages that both youth and adults alike face is the ever-increasing lust to consume that is sweeping the world at large. *In the Republic of Happiness* depicts two sibling characters, Debbie and Hazel, who get together with their families for Christmas. Debbie, who is no more than a child herself, becomes pregnant, and what is more, she uses her pregnancy in order to obtain lavish Christmas gifts from her family such as a car and fancy clothes. Her sister Hazel picks up on Debbie's intent and verbally calls her out on it by, for example, going on about how much she wanted a car for herself as well. Debbie claims that she can do anything and everything in order to obtain that car—whereby, in her mind, getting her wish will mean that she will become "a new kind of magnificent human being" (Crimp, 2012: 14). That is to say, the young characters within Crimp's play have tendency to assault others verbally in order to feed their addiction to all things material. This verbal abuse moreover exists among the other characters as well—that is, Debbie and Hazel's mother, father, and grandparents. Each one belittles the other without thinking twice and yet continue onwards with their lives as though nothing has happened at all. In contrast to this, the relationship dynamics between the female and male characters can be observed in a song that they sing that is simply peppered with violence.

> Debbie/Hazel
>
> We're going to marry a man (going to marry a man)/ The man will be rich/ The man will say bitch: / I'll make him pay for my meals/ I'll strut and fuck him in heels/ That's our incredible plan/ yes our incredible plan. / We're going to carry a gun/ (going to carry a gun) / The gun will go bang/ and puncture the man: / I'll aim my gun at his head/ I'll pump his balls up with lead- / Oh what incredible fun/ Yes what incredible fun. / We're going to sharper a knife/ (going to sharpen a knife) / The knife will be real/ The blade will be steel/ I'll cut my name in his thighs - / cut out his tongue if he lies... (Crimp, 2012: 18-19)

Here, both sisters sing a pleasant melody about torturing their future spouses with weapons and knives. The ironic twist to this is that it can only be a carol sung at Christmas time and within the domestic sphere. In Crimp's play, committing violence in order to feel happy is a means to an end. He uses the above song as a means of unleashing the characters' inner darkness. However, what can be conclusively drawn from this is that the children's own parents and family environment are as much at fault for their upbringing as the political system is.

Conclusion

"To be a child in the twenty-first century is both a blessing and a curse" (Lebrun, 2011: xi). Despite many of us living under supposedly improved conditions and with ever-advancing technology, these two positive factors nevertheless have a negative impact on the twenty-first century youth. For example, even though sound communication technology rests at many people's fingertips, youth are becoming more and more antisocial with each passing day. A similar conclusion can be drawn in regards to our ability to possess more material goods than ever before in the sense that it is making youth even more greedy. It is perhaps for these reasons why youth appear to be more cruel, insensitive, and distant from societal values. Theatre as a branch of literature attempts to reflect this societal issue. In-yer-face theatre forces society to face its problems by using the theme of violence as a tool in order to illustrate this. Hence, British in-yer-face playwrights put forth that youth are not as innocent as they appear, and consequently awaken us to this cold, dark reality. Buffini, Upton, and Crimp essentially blame capitalism and politicians as being the reason behind youth violence, whereas Neilson and Ridley stress that nobody is innocent in the first place. In each of the aforementioned plays, the element of a family is missing outright. In *Vincent River,* neither Davey's father nor mother is seen. Moreover, Vincent's mother is seen after Vincent dies; his father, on the other hand, was never present in his life at all. In *A Ghost from a Perfect Place,* the three gang characters of Rio, Miss Kerosene, and Miss Sulpher, also have no relationship with their parents of any sort. Upton, likewise, does not introduce the concept of parenting in *Ashes and Sand*, and respectively leaves out any background information about any of the characters' parents. In *Welcome to Thebes,* both Scud and Mageara's families were slaughtered during the war. In *Normal,* on the other hand, although Kurten's family never enters on stage, and although Kurten's relationship with his family is minimal at best, he does mention that everyone had lived together in a one-room house, that his father had beat him and his siblings, that his sister had vanished after being raped by both his father and brother. *In the Republic of Happiness,* Crimp opts to paint the picture of a miserable rather than happy family in which nobody shows any respect towards one another, and where everybody verbally abuses one another. In this regard, both Crimp and Neilson alike provide us with protagonist characters who lack any sort of ideal family model in which to revere.

"Most children are not born dysfunctional, but they are created by people in their lives and in the society, they see as a role model" (Lebrun, 2011: xii). In referencing Lebrun, one can say that the violence exhibited by the addressed characters in the addressed plays are the products of the society within which they are living in. Ridley, in *Vincent River*, talks about the violence faced by a homosexual character who is pushed onto the fringes of society. In that world, children torture, assault, and even murder adults. Davey and Vincent's homosexuality, furthermore, is neither accepted nor tolerated by their families. Within this context, Ridley criticizes and blames society for rearing their children to be violent. The character of Rio in *A Ghost from a Perfect Place* is also void of either a mother or father figure to look up to. She shares the same home with her grandmother, and it serves as a role model for her gang peers when it comes to sadism. Upton intentionally leaves out the families of the female gang characters in *Ashes and Sand*. The girls themselves have wound up becoming destructive towards both others as well as themselves—and even one another. In *Normal,* the anti-hero Kurten has a family; however, his father rapes his sister, turns a blind eye to his other son raping his sister, and he a thief as well. To him, people are born savage and reckless. In other words, Neilson does not solely point to Kurten's family as being the reason why he is the way he is but instead shows—through Kurten—that even a character as seemingly innocent as Wehner can be made to take another life given the right circumstances, thus unleashing an inner beast. Buffini in *Welcome to Thebes* depicts a generation of children—who have lost their families to war, who enjoys playing with bombs, and who are completely desensitized to murder—

stripped of their humanity. Here, she critiques the fact that politics and conflict have brought them to this point from which they no longer can return. In Crimp's *In The Republic of Happiness,* the two sister characters verbally abuse one another just as they have learned from their families. Moreover, the character of Debbie's sister is angry at her sibling's lust for a car and jewelery. Crimp, in doing this, is letting his audience into the world of contemporary youth's unquenchable thirst to consume anything and everything. Likewise, one gets the impression that the rest of the family members get a pleasurable high out this, as can be seen when the girls sing the rather violently-toned carol/song at the end of the play. Crimp's ultimate message, hence, is that the political system coupled by the family (or lack thereof) are to blame for the violent cruelty within which youth are now brought up in.

In conclusion, in-yer-face theatre takes a firm stance against modern society's perceiving of today's children as being innocent and wants us to deal with the reality that the future is bleak. Thus, in-yer-face playwrights argue that in British society, youth lacks in any sense of hope about the future for the sole reason that they are unable to release their inner sense of obscurity through any other means.

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