

Political Returns on the Twenty-First Century Stage Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* and *Seven Jewish Children*

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ABSTRACT

There is some hesitation in theatre scholarship to confront and engage with the resurgence of political theatre in the 21st century, despite the vast numbers of political plays that have been performed in a variety of genres on the British stage in the last decade. This article considers the rejuvenation of political theatre in the 21st century and focuses in particular on Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000), *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009). I argue that these plays rehabilitate explicit political comment for the stage as well as discover fresh theatrical languages to represent what are often familiar political narratives. The discussion borrows from the writings of Jacques Rancière to help identify strategies Churchill's plays use to find innovative ways of producing new forms of political subjectivity in audiences.

KEYWORDS

Caryl Churchill • *Far Away* • *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, *Seven Jewish Children* • political theatre • Jacques Rancière

A political turn in twenty-first century British theatre has permeated new dramatic writing and has delivered a wide range of explicitly political representations to audiences over the last ten years. This revival seems all the more deserving of close consideration because of its particularity to theatre as a cultural form. In both fiction and theatre of the twenty-first century, common themes of powerlessness, uncertainty, bewilderment and fear are prevalent, if not pervasive, but in literary fiction these themes are frequently suggested in genres, styles and settings that connect obliquely rather than directly to the social, political or economic world. In contrast, the British stage has seen these themes evidenced in a considerable renewal of a range of different modes of explicitly political theatre.

Just before the millennium, a revival of verbatim theatre led the way with Richard Norton-Taylor's play *The Colour of Justice*. This play focuses on the racist murder of black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, the notorious bungled police investigation and subsequent trial, and was performed at the Tricycle Theatre in 1999. After this, scores of verbatim plays were written and performed, variously exploring political themes such as Bloody Sunday, the privatization of British railways, the unexplained deaths of soldiers at Deep Cut army barracks in the UK, the killing by the Israeli army of an International Solidarity Movement activist, the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, and the 'War on Terror'. While this theatre flourished where journalism seemed to fall short, not all critics felt enthusiasm for verbatim theatre's dependence on reported facts and testimony to create innovative political theatre. Steve Waters (2004) argues that the job of 'the playwright's imagination' should be the exposure of 'the facts behind the facts'. This might be a problem if verbatim theatre was the sum of politics on stage, but on the contrary, it has been accompanied by an abundance of other, perhaps more imaginative, modes of political drama over the last twelve years. Highlights include Mark Ravenhill's (2007) play *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, summarized on the back cover of the play text as 'an epic cycle of plays exploring the personal and political effect of war on modern life'; Dennis Kelly's provocatively titled, *Osama the Hero* (2005) (of which Michael Billington writes: 'in the current climate, dissent is suspect, nonconformity dangerous and any attempt to look at recent events from a non-Western angle automatic proof of guilt' [2005]); and debbie tucker green's *Stoning Mary* covered the brutalities of AIDS, child soldiers and execution by stoning, and presented a drama in which stories conventionally imagined as taking place in the developing world are played out by white actors in British accents. Aleks Sierz (2011: 97) describes this device as one that 'destroys the safe distance that audiences usually put between us and them'. Hailed as the big new play of the twenty-first century, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusa-*

lem (2009) is also an explicitly political ‘state of the nation’ play, dealing with youth unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, homelessness, Englishness and racism. The central character, Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron is the charismatic Romany outsider, threatened with eviction by the council, demonized by the residents of the new local housing estate and brutally beaten by local villagers.

Caryl Churchill is a member of a generation of playwrights who have been making political theatre over the last four decades. Along with contemporaries such as David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar, she is a significant figure in a twenty-first century political theatre renaissance. Since 2000, she has written four plays: *Far Away* (2000), *A Number* (2002), *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009). She has contributed a short piece titled ‘Iraqdoc’ to *War Correspondence* (2003) at the Royal Court, adapted Stringberg’s *A Dream Play* (2005) and translated Olivier Choinière’s *Bliss* (2008). This article will focus on three of her twenty-first century political plays: *Far Away*, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* and *Seven Jewish Children*. These plays are part of a wider resurgence of political theatre on the British stage, but they are also evidence of Churchill’s foresight in anticipating and contributing to the shaping of a revival of political languages for the stage. As well as leading the way for new writing in the rehabilitation of political theatre, in these plays she also maintains her reputation as an innovator in dramatic form and also continues to discover new theatrical idioms for addressing the political contemporary. It is surprising that Dan Rebellato (2009: 176) claims that Churchill’s recent work has expressed ‘a withdrawal from explicit’ or even ‘distaste for political [...] commentary’. On the contrary, this article argues that Churchill’s work not only returns to an open engagement with a political agenda, particularly in its concern with processes of de-politicization, the politics of seeing and telling, and spectators as potential political actors, but simultaneously — and no less tangibly — in its explicit opposition to the political agendas of neo-liberalism and neo-imperialism.

Churchill’s work offers a complex theatrical mix of tensions between the individual and the collective, private and public spheres, and emotional, philosophical, psychoanalytical and political conceptual frames. Although she writes about a multiplicity of individual and social experiences — her plays are never reducible to a single set of messages — Churchill has simultaneously experimented with a range of overtly political representations throughout her career. As well as revealing an interest in Zen philosophy, *Owners* (1972) is also an unequivocal critique of capitalist property relations. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), centres on the 1640s English Civil War and revolution and demonstrates Churchill’s developing interest in the related subjectivities of class and

gender, but it also offers a clear defence of the work of Communist historians, such as Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson and A. L. Morton, against revisionist re-writings of the revolutionary events. *Vinegar Tom* (1976) dramatizes fictional scenes from the seventeenth-century witch hunts, bluntly revealing connections between patriarchal networks, political scape-goating and acts of complicity in the seventeenth century and in the contemporary moment. *Cloud Nine's* (1979) first act exposes the connections between capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and homophobia through its Brechtian vignettes of verse and the famous cross-casting of women playing men, men playing women and a white actor playing a black servant. Many of Churchill's plays in the 1980s continue this audacious political trajectory: the complex politics of *Top Girls* (1982) include a critique of Thatcherism, a challenge to liberal feminism's neglect of class oppression as well as a dissatisfaction with (socialist) oppositional discourses; *Fen* (1983) centres on a community of rural working-class women and their peculiarly marginalized positions in the political economy; and *Serious Money* (1987), set just after the deregulation of the stock exchange, offers an uproarious satire on the exploits and greed of the City of London. Churchill began the 1990s with another play about revolutionary events, *Mad Forest* (1990), which is set in Bucharest before, during and after the Romanian revolution.

Despite an overtly political start to the 1990s, many of Churchill's late 1980s and early 1990s plays relate more obliquely to political discourses. Plays like *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1991) and *Hotel* (1997) experiment with multiple performance forms, such as theatre, dance, mime and song, and appear more concerned with philosophical, psychoanalytical or emotional subject matter such as possession, forgetting and memory. Academic scholarship has celebrated Churchill's dynamic innovations with form, particularly her interweaving of text, dance and song, in ways that are considered to probe conventional structures of meaning-making. But theatre critics bemoaned the esoteric character of these plays and audiences looking to Churchill for an unmediated dialogue with the political world were left ungratified.

Churchill's political commitment, her investment in socialist ideas, continued to present itself in her plays, albeit more indirectly, during the late 1980s and into the 1990s. However, it is also clearly the case that political theatre *per se* was in retreat during the 1980s, and in exile during the 1990s. A combination of economics and ideology contributed to a severely inhospitable climate for political theatre, while at the same time re-popularising the West End musical in the commercial sector — 'Thatcherism in action,' as *Guardian* critic Michael Billington (2007: 284) argued. This period witnessed the emergence in subsidized theatre of a violent, brutal and at times nihilistic new form, appropriately named

'in-yer-face' drama and associated with playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Antony Nielson. The break-up of the USSR, Francis Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis, postmodern incredulity towards grand narratives and poststructuralism's preoccupation with language, text and signification at the expense of the extra-textual material world, all seemed to contribute towards political inertia and a despondent, bewildered and passive civic subjectivity during this period.

A post-political world, where conventional oppositional strategies for resistance have been neutralized, necessitates new theoretical-political languages with which to politicize engagement with the existing order. An emerging language that is especially helpful in navigating the politics of Churchill's twenty-first century plays are the theoretical writings of Jacques Rancière, since his models involve the language of performance and spectatorship. Rancière equates politics with an emergent subject position that demands to be heard in the public arena. It is a mode of subjectivity that begins to speak for itself and, in the process, produces a disturbance and re-ordering of public space, a space that is reconfigured as a result. Politics is thus a disruptive intervention, one that challenges the existing political order and produces a new topography of positions and roles. The emergent subject is she who demands a new role for herself, a new part to play, having previously occupied 'the part of no part'. For Rancière, 'politics' has a double meaning: it refers both to a 'political subjectivization' arising from antagonizing the existing order through a new mode of subjectivity that demands to be heard, reconfiguring public space in the process, as well as to the politics of administering, maintaining and conserving the existing political order, to which Rancière assigns the term 'police'. Politics as police represents a depoliticized public space, the result of the maintenance of the existing political order. Identifying ways in which previously excluded subjects, those whose role is the 'part of no part', can interrupt, antagonize and rearrange the current political co-ordinates offers an enabling framework within which to discuss Churchill's twenty-first century plays.

Far Away

Billington refers to the 1990s as 'a world without any grand narrative to make sense of the randomness of experience'. He asks: 'if you take away God, Marx and Freud, what have you left?' (Billington, 2007: 359). It is this state of de-politicization and post-ideological haze that precipitates Churchill's re-connection with political theatre in the twenty-first century. New writing's recent turn to the political in British theatre was ignited by the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror, but significantly Churchill's *Far Away* is a pre-9/11 play. Playwright Simon Stephens

(2004) describes it as the ‘strongest theatrical response to 9/11’, despite its precedence of the destruction of the twin towers. *Far Away* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in November 2000 and directed by Stephen Daldry. It then transferred to the Albery Theatre in the West End for a short run in early 2001. Max Stafford-Clark, ex-artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre, sees in *Far Away* evidence of Churchill developing ‘her own response to a political agenda which she has discovered she cannot effectively address directly any more’ (Roberts and Stafford-Clark, 2007: 178). In the play’s spare, cryptic and fabulist character, *Far Away* might be said to lack directness of approach to the political agenda. However, Churchill’s political plays have never limited themselves to criticizing the deficiencies or excesses of the political system. Her theatre moves beyond liberal Left critiques towards the defamiliarization of ways in which, in Rancière’s terms, politics as police operate. Churchill is interested in revolution rather than reform, and her theatre attempts to make space for what lies beyond existing systemic structures and discourses. In the process, it attempts to reconfigure political coordinates to offer a utopian glimpse, the ‘not yet’ of a better world that might begin to present itself.

In 1996, Hare bemoaned that ‘consciousness has been raised in this country for a good many years now and we seem further from radical political change than at any time in my life’ (2005, 115). One of the objectives of *Far Away* is to make visible the political paralysis, if not evisceration, of a radical, oppositional political discourse — an objective that is as important to political change as exposing the horrors of the system. *Far Away* is a fifty minute compressed epic in three short acts. Act 1 involves two characters, Harper and her young niece, Joan, and details of setting are limited to: ‘*Harper’s house. Night*’ (Churchill, 2000: 3). Joan and Harper’s conversation becomes increasingly sinister as revelatory moments of truth emerge intermittently in response to Joan’s persistent questioning of Harper, regarding the ominous activities of her uncle, which involve a lorry, children and blood. In Act 2, Joan is a young woman, working in a hat factory with her co-worker and future lover, Todd. Although their talk revolves around the topics of pay, conditions and company corruption, this is not a Fordist production line: Joan and Todd are university educated graduates of Art School and create beautiful, extravagant hats, each one an individually crafted piece of art. The famously shocking coup de théâtre, as the stage direction describes, is a ‘*procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution. The finished hats are even more enormous and preposterous than in the previous scene*’ (Churchill, 2000: 24). Set ‘*several years later*’ (Churchill, 2000: 28), against the backdrop of an apocalyptic dystopia of global war involving all constituents of the human and non-human world, Act 3 is located once again

at Harper's house. Harper and Todd's surreal exchanges ('Harper: You were right to poison the wasps. Todd: Yes, I think all wasps have got to go' [Churchill, 2000: 28]) demonstrate a significantly shifted register from Act 1. The increasingly bizarre conversation ('Todd: The cats have come in on the side of the French' [Churchill, 2000: 29]) indicates a world removed from known political coordinates, but at the same time recognizable as a dystopian place of environmental implosion and permanent planetary warfare.

In discussing the 'right-wing frenzy' (Ranci re, 2009: 37) of attempting to establish 'the triumph of the market in all human relations' (Ranci re, 2009: 38), Ranci re (2009: 38) describes the drive to transform 'our societies into free aggregates of disconnected molecules, lacking any affiliation, wholly amenable to the exclusive law of the market'. Disaggregated and disconnected become the dominant traits of politically subjectivity imagined in *Far Away*. Act 1 presents young Joan, a child subject who is invested in the assumption that she is part of an interconnected web of social relations. She demonstrates herself as an active agent, one who wilfully bears witness to the sinister events at her aunt's house. She climbs out of her bedroom window because she 'wanted to see' who let out the 'shriek' (Churchill, 2000: 7), to know what her uncle is doing and she shows concern for 'the children in the shed' (Churchill, 2000: 11). Unwilling to play 'the part of no part', Joan continues to insist upon the disturbing details of the scene to her lying Aunt. Harper shifts uneasily from one dubious explanation to another, before admitting that Joan has 'found out something secret' (Churchill, 2000: 11). Joan concedes that she would 'rather not have seen' (Churchill, 2000: 9) and Harper warns her 'I'm trusting you with the truth now. You must never talk about it or you'll put your uncle's life in danger and mine and even your own. You won't even say anything to your parents' (Churchill, 2009: 12). The truth is unspoken, privately retained and re-signified as threatening to both the self and others.

By Act 2, Joan has learned to repress the truth and has relinquished her part as a questioning voice in the political field. Alisa Solomon (2001: 3) views this as evidence of 'how thoroughly Joan's rebellious spirit has been contained within the dominant values of the political culture'. As Joan and Todd sit at a work-bench making beautiful hats to be worn by prisoners on a parade leading to their executions, their concerns are with their own internal company politics rather than their role in the executions. This is a determined 'unseeing' of the kind China Mi ville (2009) fictionalizes in *The City & the City*, where two states occupy the same geographical space, the respective communities wilfully 'unseeing' each other even as they pass in the street. In *Far Away*, a questioning discourse of sorts is still evident ('There's something wrong with how we get the

contracts’) and even a pugnaciously ethical code: ‘What if we don’t deserve them What if our work isn’t really the best’ (Churchill, 2000: 19). But the audience plainly sees Todd and Joan’s inability or refusal to question the most significant systemic malevolence.

Withdrawal from ‘explicit political comment’ — the description *Rebellato* applies to Churchill’s twenty-first century plays — is precisely an (in)action that *Far Away* demonstrates as strengthening the political order. Like the successful pacification of Joan’s emergent subjectivity as a young, critical questioner, a radical oppositional discourse outside of enclaves of radical environmentalism or small circles of Marxists was barely discernible in the 1990s. Post-9/11, the 1990s appear to be a more peaceful time. However, it is worth remembering that this decade witnessed the Sierra Leone civil war (1990–2002) and the first Gulf War (1991), swiftly followed by the Bosnian war (1993–5), the Chechen war (1994–6) and the Kosovan intervention in 1999 — all interspersed with repeated coalition bombings of Baghdad. The familiar claim that the events of 9/11 transformed the rules of global warfare overlooks the significance of these events. As Slavoj Žižek predicted:

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia will change the global geopolitical coordinates. The unwritten pact of peaceful coexistence — the respect of each state’s full sovereignty, that is, non-interference in internal affairs, even in the case of human rights — is over. (Žižek, 1999: 81)

In *New Left Review* Edward Said (1999: 74) wrote, ‘punishment is its own goal, bombing as a display of NATO authority its own satisfaction’ while Tariq Ali accused NATO’s new mission statement as converting ‘a defensive alliance into a mobile, global police force which can hit a target state anywhere in the world to defend the interests of the United States, defined, of course, as “human rights” and the “free market”’ (Ali, 1999: 62). Despite these voices, opposition to the Kosovan war remained very much a minority position, a fact that makes Churchill’s public opposition to this war all the more significant.

Increasing numbers of brutalizing global conflicts and the removal of restraints on military interventions are clearly important contexts for *Far Away*, especially its final apocalyptic act, in which war no longer holds geographical, temporal or even human boundaries. Here, animals, landscape and the weather join with humans from every part of the globe in an ecocidal apocalypse. Having learnt to unsee the systemic horrors that surround them in Act 2, by Act 3 it is too late for Joan, Todd or any other character to undo this spiral of environmental and social devastation which has reached fantastic proportions:

Todd: I’ve shot cattle and children in Ethiopia. I’ve gassed mixed troops of Spanish, computer programmers and dogs. I’ve torn starlings apart with

my bare hands. And I liked doing it with my bare hands. So don't suggest I'm not reliable.

Harper: I'm not saying you can't kill.

Todd: And I know it's not all about excitement. I've done boring jobs. I've worked in abattoirs stunning pigs and musicians and by the end of the day your back aches and all you can see when you shut your eyes is people hanging upside down by their feet (Churchill, 2000: 34–5).

Although this phantasmagorical vision is nightmarish, it enacts a cold logic that rationally hypothesizes a post-ideological, violent imperialistic world order in which the postmodern subject has mutated into ludicrous, ceaseless difference ('Portuguese car salesmen' [Churchill, 2000: 30], 'Russian swimmers', 'Thai butchers' and 'Latvian dentists' [Churchill, 2000: 31]). An identifiable paradigm of power is lost amidst the incessant mutation of the subject, which in turn produces an inter-subjective politics based on the only experiences left in common: that of difference, isolation, estrangement and enmity. The (in)action of 'un-seeing', which arises as a result of the withdrawal from challenging the substance of political existence is shown to be akin to a decisively performative act, one that wilfully colludes in bringing into being a renewed, social existence defined by the logic of a sadistic neo-imperialist order.

Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?

America's execution of a neo-imperialist agenda and Britain's (and other Western allies) complicity in this project provides the political context for *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* First performed at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in November 2006, the play was directed by James Macdonald. *Drunk Enough* consists of eight brief scenes and has two characters, Sam and Jack. Churchill later revised this to Sam '*a country*' and Guy '*a man*' in her character list because she recognized that audiences were reading Sam as a representation of the American icon 'Uncle Sam' (correctly) but were incorrect in assuming that Jack symbolized Britain. Many critics read these characters as Bush and Blair, a reading that reduces the political richness of the play. Churchill had always meant Jack to be an individual, 'a man who falls in love with America' (Churchill, 2008: 269), as she explains in her notes to the play.

The theatrical conceit of *Drunk Enough* is that Sam and Guy are in a sexual relationship. Macdonald's production famously sat the men on a sofa, which was slowly raised off the stage, ascending in intermittent junctures. While the stage was steeped in darkness, the sofa itself was lit by bright bulbs, bulbs that self-referentially signalled the theatre and stardom. Where the visual performance signifies an image of lovers, an

erotic charge and closeness, interwoven with irritation and rejection, the dialogue is often coldly political, consisting of references to a post-war American imperialist project. This works to defamiliarize the rogue exploits of world leaders, a defamiliarization that is necessary to encourage new ways of seeing a familiar political narrative. The act of reframing serves to counter the uncertainty, bewilderment and paralysis that seem to form the coordinates of twenty-first century subject positions. *Drunk Enough* theatricalizes processes that encourage spectators to dis-identify with such subject positions.

The play-script and Macdonald's production reference many topical themes. The bright bulbs of the Royal Court production evoke the twenty-first century obsession with fame and celebrity, while the play's eroticization of political relations was further emphasized by the use of the sofa, which additionally connects with the pervasive sexualization and, indeed, pornification of twenty-first century consumptive practices. The language is spare and the dialogue elliptical, imbuing exchanges with the odd double effect of being at once unfathomable and accessible. The unfathomable is produced through aggressively unfinished sentences:

Guy: icecaps
Sam: who fucking cares about
Guy: floods
Sam: because we'll all be dead by the time it
Guy: another hurricane moving towards
Sam: natural
Guy: but it's greater than
Sam: natural disasters
Guy: not coping very
Sam: surprise
Guy: predicted and there is an element of manmade
Sam: stop fucking going on about
Guy: carbon
Sam: junk science (Churchill, 2008: 306).

At the same time, this dialogue speaks the language of accessibility: audiences are very familiar with the word and clause choices, which are simple and conversational, while the performance additionally militates against impenetrability through the intimacy of lovers who complete each other's sentences. The double effect of this dialogue is also resonant of twenty-first century experiences of political subjectivity. Post-millennial politics assumes an informality through casual gestures, such as politicians communicating through Facebook and Twitter, but, at the same time, mainstream party politics continue to estrange electorates through its occupation of the same narrowly drawn political ground, offering similar management strategies of the economy and state.

Critics were quick to identify the significance of the personal/political theme in the play. Visually, the audience is presented with lovers splayed on a sofa, touching and holding one another, yet aurally they hear a litany of political, economic and militaristic acts of aggression perpetrated by the USA and Britain over the last few decades. Hare's comments on Britain's political identity appropriately capture this sexual-political parallel. He suggests that: 'If, as Stanley Kubrick claimed, large states often behave like gangsters while small states often behave like prostitutes, then we may at least console ourselves that we have descended to a point where we are more whore than racketeer' (Hare, 2005: 208). However, *Drunk Enough's* violently pruned conversations, together with the ontologically incoherent set-up (a country and man as lovers) makes this personal-political encounter difficult to read. As a result, the audience is encouraged to question whether this image relates to the personalization of politics, the politics of personal relationships, the deconstruction of the binary divide, or as Rebellato (2009: 36) suggests, 'a deliberate holding apart of the two spheres'. The creation of an odd disjunction of two discursively distinct spheres aids the encounter of a recognizable political condition from new, or at least oblique, positions.

Rancière is helpful in providing ways in which this reading can be developed. His concept of the 'distribution of the sensible' refers to what the established social order — or the police as Rancière would say — determines can be experienced and perceived through the senses: what can be seen, heard, thought and felt. This distribution involves inclusion and exclusion and also delimits what is said, heard and seen. Politics emerges when the effaced — those whose part is to play no part — reorder the sensible so that their presence becomes visible and the field of the sensible is redistributed and reconfigured in the process. Facilitating the distribution of the sensible is what Rancière calls 'consensus', a condition where the distribution is undisturbed. Conversely, 'Dissensus' is the interruption of the sensible. This refers to the intervention of politics, the result of which is a reconfiguration of the field of perception and signification and, in turn, the redistribution of capacities and incapacities and the emergence of alternative possibilities. Rancière writes:

Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. This is what a process of political subjectivization consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open in the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible. (Rancière, 2009: 49)

'Dissensus' operates with the assumption of equality as an axiom rather than a goal, so all are capable and, as a result, scenes of dissensus can appear at any moment and in any location.

In *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* the sensible — what can be said, heard and seen — is re-distributed. America is present on stage in the shape of Sam, a lover, which confuses two ontologically different phenomena: a human and a country. Sam is not a metaphor or personification of America: he is America. Sam's embodiment of America — as land, nation and concept — produces a disordering of categories and threatens a reconfiguration of the field of perception. Through this particular redistribution, complicity in American global domination is made simultaneously strange and familiar, which in turn produces a new topography of the personal-political binary, as evidenced in the following political exchange:

Sam: coffee
Guy: two sugars
Sam: invading Grenada to get rid of the government because
Guy: byebye Lumumba
Sam: byebye Allende
Guy: bit negative
Sam: people we love and help
Guy: Israel
Sam: Shah of Iran, byebye Mossadegh
Guy: oil
Sam: Saddam Hussein
Guy: great
Sam: shake his hand. (Churchill, 2008: 276)

Brashly denuded of an ethical register, this account of global manipulation is accompanied by a contrasting set of visual codes of human intimacy and empathy, codes that seem to be incompatible with what is said and heard. It becomes impossible to synthesize these contradictory significations into a coherent articulation that makes sense according to the existing political distribution.

This disruption of the sensible appears to be part of the reason why many theatre critics were frustrated with the play, accusing it of being both a 'shallow piece of shrill US-baiting' (Taylor, 2006) and 'meaningless sentences about foreign policy, reduced to a kind of nonsense poetry' (Godwin, 2006). It is inconsistent, or at least insufficient, for *Drunk Enough* to be deemed simultaneously tediously transparent and frustratingly opaque, but more importantly, this critical reaction might be read as an anxious retort to the play's treatment of political subjectivisation. For Louis Althusser, the police say 'hey you' and a subject is hailed into existence through interpellation. For Rancière, the police say, 'get on with what you were supposed to be doing. There's nothing for you to see here'.

Here, subject formation works through dispersion, not unification. Powerless subjects are returned to pre-speaking positions rather than hailed into existence as speaking subjects.

This distinction helps to make sense of *Drunk Enough*, and the play's politics, which work through a critique of the dispersed subject partly by making visible and experiential the idea of 'the part of no part' of the audience. The role of the audience in *Drunk Enough* is consciously alluded to in Macdonald's production by the bright bulbs surrounding the focus of the action, which clearly signals what is to be watched, and by implication, the presence of watchers. Crucially, other structuring devices in this production that help to position the audience and guide its role as spectator are fiercely undercut. The extensive use of severely elliptical dialogue positions the audience as frustrated eavesdroppers, excluded from both the political manoeuvrings and domestic saga of Sam and Guy's interactions. But they are also located as voyeurs, drawn to the erotic charge of the scene, and simultaneously made to feel uncomfortable because of the scene's exclusionary strategies: the audience is ultimately excluded and dispersed rather than constituted as spectating subjects. The audience is therefore prevented from occupying a privileged viewing position. It is not surprising that critic Michael Coveney (2006) reported feeling 'helpless, limp with outrage and beset with insignificance' in his role as a member of the *Drunk Enough* audience. The play makes its exclusionary strategies visible and the audience consequently experiences its own omission from a shared semantic field, an omission that duplicates the experience of twenty-first century political subjectivity.

Seven Jewish Children

Churchill wrote *Seven Jewish Children* in response to the Israeli siege of Gaza in January 2009, which resulted in the widely reported deaths of thirteen Israelis compared with over thirteen hundred Palestinians. It is a very brief play — the original production was ten minutes long — and was performed by nine actors at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs. It was directed by Dominic Cooke and famously offered free entry, with a collection taken from the audience for the charity Medical Aid to Palestinians (MAP). The play is also downloadable from the internet free of charge, and anyone is entitled to perform it on condition that a MAP collection is taken. It comprises seven brief scenes covering key moments and events in Israeli history, starting with the Holocaust, the establishment of the Israeli state, moving on to Jewish emigration to Israel, the six-day war, water distribution, the first intifada and ending with the Israeli siege of Gaza in January 2009. The play's notes read:

No children appear in the play. The speakers are adults, the parents and if you like other relations of the children. The lines can be shared out in any way you like among those characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time and child are different. They may be played by any number of actors. (Churchill, 2009)

Those often assigned ‘the part of no part’ — children — have appeared frequently in Churchill’s plays and their presence brings into relief the sharp disjunction between a set of moral codes imparted to them and a very different set of priorities that inform the operations of wider society. In *Far Away* the young Joan is repeatedly lied to because it is impossible for Harper to both tell the truth and uphold the moral code. In *Seven Jewish Children*, adults similarly struggle to balance their roles as moral educators and upholders of truth as the two prove to be incompatible. The absent children offer a structural parallel to the present audience who become implicated in the politics of representing the conflict. Unlike the children who know nothing, the audience at least knows something and is thus party to what is (not) said.

The phrase ‘tell her’ forms the beginning of most lines in the play. Section one opens:

Tell her it’s a game
Tell her it’s serious
But don’t frighten her
Don’t tell her they’ll kill her
Tell her it’s important to be quiet
Tell her she’ll have cake if she’s good
Tell her to curl up as if she’s in bed
But not to sing. (Churchill, 2009: 1)

The repetition of ‘tell her’ interspersed with the occasional ‘don’t tell her’ draws attention to the politics of telling: of what is told, to whom, when, and how, modes of telling that are pertinent to the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as to the maintenance or indeed disruption of the political order more generally. In the context of this conflict, Sky broadcasting and the BBC refused to transmit the Disasters Emergency Committee humanitarian appeal to the public, an aid appeal for food, medicine and blankets, on the grounds that they did not wish to be seen to support one side or the other, a decision that was heavily criticized by human rights activists. *Seven Jewish Children* appeared on stage less than two weeks after this incident, which makes its intervention into public muteness on the conflict all the more potent. Through its timing and context, the play’s concern with British complicity in the politics of Israeli self-justification became intensified and contributed as much to the play’s political meaning as the Israeli occupation itself. The line ‘tell her more when she’s older’ ironically corresponds to the infanti-

lizing effects of muteness on the occupation in public discourse. Outside the world of the play, it is not only children who are excluded from the political discourse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Alongside a small number of other plays that have staged the conflict — such as Hare's *Via Dolorosa* (1998), Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner's *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) and Naomi Wallace's *The Fever Chart: Three Versions of the Middle East* (2010) — *Seven Jewish Children* offers an incisive intervention into a muted public discourse on this national struggle. Churchill's play is politically acerbic, but its political potential multiplies through its accompaniment of a post-show discussion, an event commonly hosted by political theatre in the 1970s and resurrected by verbatim theatre around the turn of the millennium.

The role of the audience as both spectator and participant in the writing of a political narrative of the Israel-Palestinian conflict strengthens *Seven Jewish Children's* processes of subjectivization. Invited to consider if, or what, to tell children about the conflict and to deliberate the issues in post-show discussions, audiences are offered the opportunity to accept or decline their emergence as speaking subjects. Churchill explains the origins of the play:

It came out of feeling strongly about what's happening in Gaza — it's a way of helping the people there. Everyone knows about Gaza, everyone is upset about it, and this play is something they could come to. It's a political event, not just a theatre event. (Mark Brown, 2009)

This is the first of her plays she describes as 'political event'. As well as offering provocative political representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its other political merits — no ticket fee, a collection for MAP and the organization of post-show discussions — invoke a more participatory form of political subjectivity.

Seven Jewish Children is an antagonistic play in the Rancièrian sense. It attempts to create a space where the ultimate voiceless, stateless, players of 'the part of no part' — the Palestinians — might begin to emerge as speaking subjects. Defenders of Israel accused Churchill of anti-Semitism; Melanie Phillips (2009) described the play as 'a direct attack on the Jews' and a 'ten minute blood-libel' and supporters of Israel, such as the Zionist Federation, applied pressure on theatres to cancel performances of the play. This censorious response to *Seven Jewish Children* demonstrates the degree to which the play as an event created space to articulate what is not permitted to be said. In this way, the play can be seen as a Rancièrian attempt to destabilize and redistribute the sensible and as such to reconfigure the discursive terrain of the conflict.

Churchill's plays expose the ways in which dominant discursive fields delimit possibility and in doing so produce a normative affect of fear,

powerlessness and uncertainty. By making this delimitation visible, the possibility for new political configurations begins to present itself. *Far Away* is a cryptic, spare and abstract work, but it possesses a political clarity that aligns the connections between global warfare, neo-liberalism and ecological crisis in the twenty-first century. The play also laments the politically debilitating postmodern deconstructions of agency, staging multiple subjectivities, fragmentation, the end of grand narratives, philosophical displacement, ironic art and the primacy of signifying practices, only to implicate them in the nightmare of the play's political hypothesis. Joan's transition from a speaking, questioning and critical subject in Act 1 to a compliant unseeing one in Act 2 demonstrates the ease with which a state of Rancièrian consensus has been restored. By Act 3, it is too late to interrupt the field of the sensible: politics is over; the only mode of interaction is violent combat between ever changing and mutating factions.

With its furious critique of American neo-imperialism and Britain's complicity in this project, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* is certainly 'explicit political commentary' of the sort Rebellato claims Churchill has left behind. But through its formal experimentation and innovative staging strategies, the play also begins to discover new ways of inciting political agency through exposing mechanisms of political censure. The play's innovative form, particularly the conceit of staging a sexual relationship between a country and a person, defamiliarizes the very recognizable politics of neo-imperialism: the audience is presented with a redistribution of the sensible, a reordering of what can be said, heard and seen. The absence of a clearly articulated opposition to the neoliberal agenda in public discourse produces the assumption, indeed production, of a compliant, pro-war, neo-imperialist civic subjectivity. Those spectators unwilling to consent to this political identity are re-cast in the role of 'the part of no part', not even granted the part of passive onlookers. The play highlights the positioning of the non-consenting electorate in their role of playing 'the part of no part' and moves towards a scene of dissensus, where the audience's affront to being assigned 'the part of no part' might lead to a change in the rules.

Of the three plays discussed, *Seven Jewish Children* moves closest to producing a Rancièrian dissensus, which makes visible both established thinking of what can be said as well as the promise of future speaking subjects who can transform the political topography. *Seven Jewish Children* is once more 'explicit political commentary' in its forceful critique of the Zionist permeation of Israeli political rhetoric and the dehumanizing effects of the occupation. The play's question of how adults should relay violent events to children produces a powerfully provocative frame for re-thinking the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A process

of political subjectivization is instigated by the play's interpellation of audience members as both adjudicators and narrators of the conflict: what will they tell their children, family and friends about the play? Will they take up the invitation to be speaking subjects in the post-show discussion? The play produces new subject positions for its audience and in doing so imagines a new cartography of the possible.

Churchill's twenty-first century theatre has returned to open dialogue with the political world. Her plays directly confront ecological crisis, the expansion of global warfare as a consequence of neo-liberal, neo-imperialist motivations, American global exploitation and the complicity of other Western nations, and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. Nevertheless, Churchill simultaneously recognizes that staging critiques of the system is limited in its political potential. As Hare theatrically proclaims: 'We have looked. We have seen. We have known. And we have not changed. A pervasive cynicism paralyses public life' (Hare, 2005: 116). The plays discussed here do much more than make visible the violence of the existing political order. They utilize the potential of theatrical experience to incite different modes of perception, modes that make visible the passive and cynical narratives that are discursively assigned to civic subject positions. In her twenty-first century dramas, Churchill goes further in producing new positions from which to view, politicizing modes of seeing and, through these strategies, making the return of Rancièrian politics a possibility.

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