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Right from the centre: The dramaturgy of right-wing politics in Chris Hannan's *What Shadows* (2016), Chris Bush's *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* (2018), and Rob Drummond's *The Majority* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

Reactionary retrenchment in UK society, including the resurgence of national chauvinism and anti-immigration sentiment, has recently stimulated explorations of right-wing politics in theatre. This article offers a reading of three recent productions that illuminate the way that reactionary politics is currently framed, explored and interrogated in UK theatre: *What Shadows* (2016) by Chris Hannan, Chris Bush's *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* (2018), and Rob Drummond's *The Majority* (2017). The article argues that these pieces' approach towards right-wing politics emerges from anxiety over ideological polarisation and a perceived breakdown in communication in political discourse. It suggests that this attempt to generate nuance, neutrality and complexity while dispensing criticism equally across both poles of left and right on the political spectrum implicitly works to authorise a 'moderate' centrist position. While the thesis of each play functions to validate a centrist position that is presumed to be automatically reasonable, the article considers the potential liabilities inherent in such dramaturgical framing in broaching topics relating to the far right and reactionary right.

KEYWORDS

What Shadows; The Assassination of Katie Hopkins; The Majority; right-wing politics; tone-policing

Introduction

In 2018, UK Theatre newspaper *The Stage* reported that a play called *The Ununited Kingdom* by theatre company Silent Uproar had been pulled from further performances following two previews at Hull Truck ahead of a planned run in London. Playwright Joseph Wilde said that the piece was written 'in response to the alarming surge in ethno-nationalism and Islamophobia,' and was about 'the mindset of those drawn to the far-right [and] the dangerous way in which narrative can be used to co-opt identity for extremism' (*The Stage*, 8 May 2018). Involving a story in which a teenage girl joins a racist gang, cast members reportedly complained during the production both about the play's representation of Muslims and the way that the actions of far-right characters apparently went unchallenged. Deploping the lack of consideration for the Muslim

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experience within the play, Omar Baroud, the play's one non-white actor, said in *The Stage*: 'you wouldn't show a play about the Nazis and not show the Jewish side of the story'.

The incident is instructive in appreciating the current perimeters that determine what it is considered acceptable to represent in terms of far-right politics within contemporary UK theatre. *The Ununited Kingdom* contemplates suggests the practical operation of tacitly agreed ethical norms that govern the way that certain kinds of right-wing attitudes and dispensations can and should be addressed. In this case, the insistence was upon the provision of some kind of narratological or rhetorical balance to accompany expressions of explicit racism. Since the play was putatively 'about' the convictions of the far right, the presumption was that the piece should have opened up consideration of the issue to multiple perspectives: imperative insofar as one of the central aspirations of fascist discourse is to erode the right that non-white racial and ethnic groups have not just to formal and legal equality but to actual continued existence. In the instance of *The Ununited Kingdom*, the apprehension that racist, far-right politics would be reproduced through their medium of representation prompted a mutiny by the cast that scuppered the production.

The disquiet over *The Ununited Kingdom's* alleged partiality is particularly telling, because the play lacked characteristics that this article argues are becoming increasingly recognisable in explicitly political 21st-century UK theatre. Namely, the pursuit of objectivity in the address of political topics that uses dramaturgical methods of framing that increasingly assume an equivalence between left and right on the poles of the political spectrum. It is in the context of plays that specifically address right wing – including far-right – politics that this trend becomes particularly apparent. This article will explore how these attempts of recent political theatre to address right-wing and far-right politics implicitly authorise a 'moderate' centre position, one that is not only no less ideological than the positions they critique, but to some degree arguably works to legitimise the nationalistic, racist and socially reactionary perspectives they examine. In acknowledging a disparity between how such works ostensibly operate politically and what their dramaturgy actually reveals about their ideological functioning, this article examines Chris Hannan's *What Shadows* (2016), Chris Bush and Matt Winkworth's *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* (2018) and Rob Drummond's *The Majority* (2017) to demonstrate how their treatment of politics reveals as much about the contemporary operation of the centrist theatrical imaginary as it does about the various forms of right-wing politics they address. It locates these plays as working according to a liberal-centrist assumptive framework that tends to see the optimum ideological perspective as existing relationally between two given positions, even when the right of those positions has shifted significantly rightwards over the past 40 years. In order to do this, the article identifies an often relativistic neutrality implicit in the treatment of politics that performs putatively as an objective perspective, and argues that it emerges from a dramatic culture suspicious of being thought of as dispensing certainties while being simultaneously preoccupied with concerns about political polarisation in broader society. Significantly, it will show how these themes rearticulate tropes in contemporary political discourse that decry a general lapse in civility and standards of decorum in the public sphere. Fundamentally, this article examines the liabilities inherent in maintaining the position of studied objectivity in the dispensing

of political ideas, critiques how this allergy to certainty applies when dealing with right-wing and far-right politics, and asks whether these plays, in their presentation of political discourse, are truly as complex as they claim.

Objectivity, complexity, illumination

The notion of objectivity is clearly important to the practice of political theatre which is ‘political’ in the most straightforward sense, the kind of theatre that Amelia Howe-Kritzer maintains, ‘presents or constructs a political issue or comments on what it already perceived as a political issue’ (2008, 10). In the UK’s subsidised sector, this is often habituated towards the presentation of dialogue between characters holding different opinions on the same subject: ‘the national debating chamber’ (cited in Higgins 2015), as Rufus Norris, Artistic Director of the National Theatre, has it. The lineaments of this contemporary form of issue-centric political theatre can perhaps be traced to the model of the state-of-the-nation play, which became popular in the 1970s, with large-cast post-Brechtian plays by dramatists, such as David Edgar, Howard Brenton and David Hare prevalent on prestige stages but always dogged by what Liz Tomlin calls ‘a potential for autocratic authorship and ideological steer’ (Tomlin 2018, 235). The likes of Edgar and Hare had repudiated what they saw as the crudity and simplicity of the agitprop they previously practised in favour of a more subtle and ambiguous dramaturgical form that they felt worked more dialogically with the audience. These putatively more sophisticated forms, balancing psychology and historicization, eschewed didacticism, and in the words of Hare in his King’s College, Cambridge lecture of 1978, ‘avoided the godlike feeling that the questions had been answered before the play had begun’ (cited in Hillman 2015, 384). However, as Rebecca Hillman notes in her reappraisal of the agitprop of the 1960s and 1970s, such a view underestimates the dialogic potential in the relationality enabled between performer and spectator in agitprop, and moreover, fails to recognise the inherent complexity of analysing politics in terms of systems:

Rather than agitprop equating to an absence of analysis or complexity, then, perhaps it is more accurate to say that in this theatrical form one sort of analysis or complexity tends to replace another – this is in so far as analyses of character psychology are replaced by analyses of political and economic systems, and the cause and effect of material reality is focused on, through an examination of the characteristics of systems of business and governance rather than the characteristics of people who run them. (2015, 388)

Nonetheless, this pursuit of complexity helped embed the notion within UK theatre that overt didacticism lacked legitimacy as a mode of dealing with political questions. In subsequent years, the democratising ‘pluralism of authors, actors and narratives’ (236) identified by Tomlin involving verbatim and other techniques that foreground ‘authenticity’ – a recognition perhaps coterminous with Sarah Grochala’s (2017) theorising of a turn in political theatre from ‘serious’ to ‘liquid’ drama, where shifting paradigms related to time, space and character replace realist, issue-based representation – suggests a loosening of the traditional conception of addressing politics in theatre, that, as Jenny Spencer puts it, tended to assume that ‘the audience’s opinions, actions and political

views are rationally driven.’ (Spencer 2012, 8) As Tomlin notes, while dramaturgy that intends to deliver specific ideas and elicit certain responses has long existed in tension with more open texts that refrain from prescriptive readings and set transmission, in our contemporary moment:

The rise and rise of the autonomous spectator has cemented the now long-standing resistance to the historical understanding of a political theatre that seeks to offer ideological steer with the intention of eliciting a collective ideological response and political effect beyond the theatre. (2019, 4)

Concurrent with theatre that progressively exhibits this lack of investment in communicating unified meaning, it is noticeable that plays that do engage with contemporary political issues often just as frequently themselves refrain from offering determinate perspectives, remaining instead deliberately interpretatively open and preferring the kind of ambiguity propounded by Hare. The objective of this style of political theatre appears to be not to attempt to persuade an audience, lead them to a conclusion or prompt them towards a particular view or decision, but merely to allow the spectator to become better informed on the issue at hand: as Hare himself more recently put it, ‘[T]he aim is to illuminate, not wag fingers’ (cited in McKie 2011).

A crisis of conversation and centrism: right-wing politics in recent UK theatre

By far the most common way in which right-wing politics finds expression on the UK stage is as a subject interrogated by left-liberal and centrist playwrights, developed and produced in a system that is in broad ideological alignment with those tendencies, though perhaps it is a mischaracterisation to suppose that UK theatre is, as journalist Helen Lewis has recently written, operationally ‘run by the left’ (Lewis 2020). Indeed, since the only example Lewis cites of the supposedly left-wing theatre establishment increasingly ‘expend[ing] huge amounts of energy on fringe issues beloved by its base’ are of some theatres changing signage for their toilets and the National Theatre altering its pre-recorded show announcements to ones in line with gender-neutral terminology, instead it seems UK theatre has seen a steady growth in work that has engaged seriously with right-wing thought, policy and culture over the past decade. This collective shift in focus becomes all the more marked in comparison with the issues that it neglected to address in the first decade of the new millennium; reviewing the period 2000–2011, Aleks Sierz had this to say on his perception of the blind spots of new writing:

Before we get too complacent about how contemporary new writing is, it might be worth noting there were no major plays about the house-price boom, the ethics of choosing schools or, with only one or two exceptions, global warming. Who spoke up for ordinary middle-class couples doing ordinary middle-class things? [...] The monarchy remained virtually undiscussed. Few plays featured Conservative politicians; few examined our ideas about Europe. [...] Although frequently invited, the fabled right-wing play failed to arrive. There was a lack of engagement with moral values; instead, there was an assumption that we all share liberal ideals, which were usually unspoken. (Sierz 2011, 236)

Here Sierz identifies a corollary between the deficit of interest being paid to culturally traditional and conservative concerns and the liberal assumptions that underpin the

handling of more preferred topics. Over the course of the past decade, however, there is much to suggest that the antagonism implicit in this dichotomy has substantially weakened: not only have a surge of plays dealt with a plethora of right-wing and reactionary issues, attitudes and institutions during that period, but it is increasingly possible to distinguish ways that the representational methods customarily used to negotiate these topics themselves have undergone significant alteration. While Sierz's evaluation of a theatre culture's address of particular topics solely through the lens of new writing is admittedly an incomplete picture, it is still remarkable to consider how many of these issues have been treated to sustained examination over the past 10 years, with a slew of plays that have dealt with the monarchy, far-right extremism, and notable past Conservative politicians.¹

It is of course wholly natural that the topics broached by the UK's theatre culture will inevitably be determined by responses to the prevailing political and social climate, and to some extent the examination of right-wing politics is directly attributable to recent and decisive shifts in the domestic balance of political forces. The Conservative party's relentless focus on Brexit as a single dominant issue during the 2019 General Election brought home a substantial parliamentary majority, with related strategies including threading 'new models of articulation' (Patel and Connelly 2019, 971) of nationalism and xenophobia into the mainstream of political discourse, platforming racism that had been consistently adumbrated 'in a state-sanctioned way through the referendum' (Benson and Lewis 2019, 2219). This built on decades of much political and journalistic discourse dedicated to boosting the supposedly 'legitimate concerns' of white Britons antipathetic to immigration (Mondon and Winter 2020, 40–49). It is often remarked that the Brexit debate has created a polarising effect whereby a preference expressed on the UK's membership of a supranational trading bloc has come to stand in for a complex of profoundly felt attitudes, with 'leaver' and 'remainer' now supposed to have taproots in more deeply entrenched cultural dispositions (Duffy et al. 2019). Yet the crisis of democracy and political constitutionality represented by the Brexit debacle is in itself merely the most recent in an ever-developing series of crises commonplace since the financial crash of 2007–8 and subsequent Great Recession: a crisis of capitalism, the effects of which are still being played out in repeated disruptions of the political status quo. At the end of a decade of unrelenting 'Pasokification' – where liberal centrist parties all over Europe have routinely haemorrhaged votes to left-wing and right-wing populist alternatives due to their association with neoliberal policies of free-marketry and globalisation – it is evident that it is not just the parties of liberal centrism, but its ideas and institutions are being strongly challenged (Forrester 2019; Wilkinson 2016). This crisis of centrism is often mediated as a return to 'tribalist' politics (Goodhart 2017), rather than, at least for the period 2015–2020 under Corbyn's Labour, a reversion to a historical two-party norm with both Labour and the Conservatives sharply differentiated in their policy offers.

As this article will show, the conception of the UK as a divided nation has clearly proved attractive to a number of theatre-makers oriented around the political centre. Equally, playwrights have become exercised by the perception of a drop in standards of public debate, deploring both an apparent decline in the substance of the discourse itself as well as the manner of its ventilation. James Graham, a playwright who engages largely with the visible level of politics as it is represented in the media, staging explorations of

parliamentary democracy, party politics, and giving prominence to examinations of specific political figures and their legacies, has described his witness of a ‘conversation crisis in public and civic life’ which betokens ‘the death of complexity’ (Graham 2018). Writing of a climate of public debate where ‘we’re just not as nice as we used to be’, Graham suggests ‘civility itself is now regarded as an obstacle to change, where once it was its best hope’. For Graham, in the present political climate, unguarded certitude can scarcely be disaggregated from partisan abuse, and certainty itself is inimical to the satisfying complexity that ought to characterise the theatrical experience. As Charlotte Higgins wrote in the *Guardian* of the state of political theatre in the UK, albeit with no lack of certainty herself: ‘everyone knows that certainty, where it exists, is dangerous; in practical terms, it is usually a flight of the imagination’ (2015). Graham’s claims are emblematic of the way that anxiety over polarised discourse has been at the centrepiece of a number of recent investigations of right-wing and far-right politics, which increasingly exhibit tendencies that put a premium on deploring the debased tone of political communication rather than evaluating its ideological salience. The case studies in this article largely eschew either analysis or consideration of the pathologies of the right and far-right themselves and instead persistently situate the parameters of their investigations within the notion of a breakdown in dialogue. The overall picture is of a non-committal and stanceless form of post-political ambivalence in the address of far-right and reactionary politics, with liberal-centrist notions of balance, and putative objectivity the crucial determinants in defining the way that such works become politically legible to audiences. In the following case studies, it will be argued that the fetish for ‘balance’ and ‘ambivalence’ in each work actually invests them more with the quality of neutrality than objectivity: a neutrality that effaces meaningful material and ideological differences between the poles of the political spectrum, a stratagem that both valorises a mythical ‘reasonable centre’ and downplays regressive aspects of the political right.

What Shadows

In 2007, Dominic Cavendish, Theatre Critic for broadsheet newspaper *The Telegraph* wrote an article called ‘Would an Enoch Powell play be staged?’, which speculated about a ‘liberal establishment’s stranglehold on theatrical production’ that ducked out of conducting ‘awkward public debates [about] such headline concerns as violent crime and lenient sentencing, the failures and future of multiculturalism and the perception that human rights legislation leads to frequent breaches of common sense’ (*Telegraph*, 31 December, 2007). Within the article, Cavendish interviewed three Artistic Directors of prominent London theatres that he considered adherents to the ‘liberal consensus’ about how receptive they might be to plays that addressed issues framed by and aligned with right-wing agendas. Lisa Goldman of the Soho theatre said that she looked for work ‘that flies in the face of received wisdoms’, while Nicholas Hytner of the National Theatre argued ‘good plays add complexity upon complexity. They do not send audiences out knowing confidently what they are supposed to think.’ Cavendish concluded himself disheartened by the Artistic Directors’ ‘willingness to caricature “right-wing” as the embodiment of all that is reactionary and simplistic’.

Within a decade, Cavendish’s provocation to the arbiters of the liberal theatrical establishment actually became a reality with Scottish playwright Chris Hannan’s 2016

piece *What Shadows*, which uses Powell as a pivot within a broader exploration of race and Britishness. The play tells parallel stories of Powell's declining career and descent into Parkinson's disease alongside the tribulations of black Oxford University historian Rose Cruikshank, who seeks to enlist Powell's contribution in writing a book about the relationship between British and racial identity called '*Who Can Tell Me Who I Am?*' (Hannan 2016, 7) To do this, Rose reaches out to Sofia Nicol, another historian, apparently sensationally ousted from her university tenure before the action of the play begins in a media storm instigated by Rose herself, whose activism ensured she was 'tor[n] to pieces' (9) in the broadsheet press. Sofia divulges her thesis at the outset of the play, that of an apologist for white supremacy, which in its attempts to efface the orthodox conception of racism itself relies on believing in a hierarchy of racial supremacy:

We're all racist. We all belong to groups which find other groups offensive. Nice lovely liberals despise white racists, look down on white racists *like they are a lower race.* (10)

While the notion that 'leftists are the real racists' is a familiar reactionary bromide, Hannan's *What Shadows* encourages the audience to take this attitude seriously, and configures Rose and Sofia at two poles of opinion. Henceforth, the play continually reiterates the value of communication and civil disagreement, investing its faith not in the content or validity of the judgements and opinions being contested, but instead locating its estimation of value in the fact that proponents of different perspectives are merely engaged in dialogue, productive or otherwise. The unity of Rose and Sofia in formulating a joint project implies that the combination of both poles of opinion will produce a superior synthesis, with a practical and applicable truth transcending their mutual partiality merely by virtue of being located somewhere in the middle:

Sofia: So much hate out there, so much anger. I think of identity as an unexploded bomb. Why would I approach a bomb with you?

Rose: I could help to analyse it.

Sofia: Could you help defuse it?

Rose: We could write a manual.

This surprises and interests Sofia. It possibly surprises Rose too.

Sofia: A manual?

Rose: How to talk to the enemy. (22–23)

This type of faith in communication across the political divide is exemplary of predominantly centrist complaints of an apparently toxified political discourse. The importance of Rose and Sofia's rapprochement after Sofia has accused Rose of having led a rancorous campaign in which she 'led the students, [and] made speeches' (9) against her is that it relocates the problem in the style of the debate itself rather than in the actual injustice of the issues being discussed. This is underlined by Sofia's continual injunctions to Rose that the 'story's not complete till we see things from everyone's perspective' (65), which further helps cultivate the thesis that concerted political investment in a specific point of view is a monocular constraint on the attainment of genuine insight. Eventually,

the play's dramaturgy implicitly vindicates Sofia's perspective that racism is less about structural inequality enabled by white supremacy than the vagaries of 'group partiality' dynamics supposedly inherent to all ethnic groups; it is revealed that Rose has repressed a memory in which she was part of a group of black children that spat at and assaulted a war widow called Grace in Birmingham, who it is strongly hinted is the constituent that Powell himself referred to as the 'only one white' (54) left in her street in the Rivers of Blood speech.² Rose is not only ashamed at the disclosure but feels the hypocrisy tarnishes her anti-racist credentials: '*I spat at a white woman. How can I stand in front of my students and teach?*' (75, emphasis in original.)

Powell's trajectory provides a mirror to Rose's, with the play charting his public downfall following the Rivers of Blood speech in private terms, showing breakdown in his marital and personal relationships, blinded to other perspectives by his inflexible anti-multicultural commitment. Both Rose and Powell, on opposite poles of a continuum between racist and anti-racist, are therefore compromised figures, with their certitudes about identity shown as inadequate frameworks to apprehend the elusive complexity of the issue. They reach no agreement when they meet at the dialogic set-piece upon which the play closes, a discussion prefaced by Sofia's remark to the bullish Rose that Powell 'has his truth' (82), a normalising statement of centrist disinterestedness that attempts to distribute equal validity between voices that are not in fact equally legitimate. It is eventually Rose who offers what purports to be the final consoling thought of the play, proffering the notion of a civil accord between racist and anti-racist as an imperfect but necessary and worthwhile compromise: 'When your community meets my community, you know one half of the story, we know the other. We keep each other honest.' (92)

The emphasis throughout on multiple perspectives and varying accounts is considered both proof of objectivity and an illustration of complexity that recalls Goldman and Hytner's insistence that not telling the audience what to think is a signifier of a worthy political play. The dominant media ecosystem had a part to play in being scrupulous to implement notions of balance and purported objectivity, which surrounding publicity made a virtue of by portraying Powell as a figure who aroused mixed feelings rather than an outright bigot or crude racist. Ian McDiarmid, who played Powell, batted away any ethical misgivings about vocalising nearly all of the infamous Rivers of Blood speech in scene 10 by praising Hannan's creation of a 'rounded character [...] packed with contradictions', expressing his delight at the play's address of 'the ambiguity of human nature' (McDiarmid cited in Fisher 2016). Dominic Cavendish called the play 'the most provocative theatrical act of the last decade' and averred that 'given the current, high levels of concern about immigration [it was] a depressingly necessary evening' (*Telegraph*, 2 November, 2016).

Any countervailing sentiment raised in opposition intensified when BBC radio's *Archive on4* programme chose to redeploy McDiarmid as Powell to read the speech in full in a reflection on the impact of the Rivers of Blood speech 50 years on. The programme's presenter, Amol Rajan, trailed the show in a tweet that attracted criticism for failing to contextualise the significance of the speech itself:

On Saturday, for 1st time EVER, Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech will be read in full on UK radio (by actor Ian McDiarmid). Please join us @BBCRadio4 8pm. Super-brains Nathan Gower + David Prest have done an amazing production job. (BBC 2018)

In the show, the voices of contributors offered opposing sentiments on the speech and its implications, the rationale being that periodically stopping the speech and adding context worked equally to frame it politically and historically and subdue its rhetorical force. In the Birmingham Rep version of *What Shadows*, a similar effect was attempted by having the characters played by people of colour walk away silently as Powell spoke. There is a very revealing congruence between Hannan's play and *Archive on 4's* approach to the issue. Each shares the presumption that racist politics emanating from the right can be adequately confronted by conventional notions of balance that orientates dangerous and controversial views as if they are within the bounds of acceptable discourse so long as both critical and supportive voices can be found of them. It is from this conception of a balanced argument that the audience must 'make up their own mind'. Equally, the BBC's ostentatious balancing of views is compatible with the character of Sofia's iterations on the importance of obtaining multiple accounts; indeed, in this way, Sofia, a figure who has apparently built a career on challenging the notion of racism from a reactionary perspective, becomes progressively normalised and is held up as a responsible arbiter between extremes as well as a placatory salve to the negative stereotype of Rose as an angry black female academic.

The radio programme featuring McDiarmid's turn as Powell was broadcast the very same week that the Windrush Scandal broke, with the revelation that an unknown number of people born British subjects in Caribbean countries that had arrived in the UK before 1973 had been wrongly detained, denied legal rights, and, in at least 83 cases, deported from the UK by the Home Office. The legitimacy of their legal rights to stay in Britain was questioned due to frequent changes to immigration law between 1948 and 1973, with the Home Office's failure to keep records of the individuals who were permitted indefinite stay in the UK in the 1970s resulting in it being impossible to produce the evidence needed to support their claims of continuous residency. The scandal was a direct consequence of then Home Secretary Theresa May's 'Hostile environment' Home Office policy, a deliberately punitive governmental stratagem, which, as Wardle and Obermuller say, 'reinvent[ed] a language of anti-immigrant sentiment' (Wardle and Obermuller 2019, 81–82). The juxtaposition of the broadcast of Powell's speech on the BBC with its disingenuous conception of 'balance' alongside the reality of the effects of the legacy of Powellite racism on immigration policy also highlights significant faultlines in Hannan's play, with its focus on the misfortunes of white women rather than racism as it is felt and experienced by the minority ethnic population. Within the play, the closest that Rose herself gets to articulate an instance of racist discrimination is when she describes how her own mother, a woman of Caribbean origin with exceptionally white skin tone, disowned her for being too black in appearance. Apart from the white Grace's ordeal at the hands of black children in her street, in the first scene the play chooses to locate the power asymmetry between a black woman and a white woman in terms of Rose exercising dominance over Sofia.

When Rose tracks down Sofia, then living in reclusive self-imposed exile as a crofter in rural Scotland, Hannan's stage directions intervene at a critical point in the discussion to indicate an authorial inclination towards the belief, not far from Cavendish's own conviction expressed in his article, that the power of the liberal over the conservative is a genuine and meaningful power disequilibrium in society, certainly as potent as racism itself:

Rose: You said all racism is equal.

Sofia: Yes.

Rose: Not when the police can kick your head in for being black. Not when whites have the power.

Sofia: Who in this conversation has the power?

She's the one in the oilskins. (11)

These stage directions explicitly proffer the message that power is more fluid, contextual, and contingent than that which a dichotomy based merely on skin tone could capture, a contention that offers a relativist appreciation of the subject over one that is materially grounded in historical structures of oppression. Taken together, these examples suggest that Hannan's play inclines towards conservative mythologizing about political correctness, which itself derives from the same assumptive framework that propelled the real Enoch Powell's fears that the Labour government's 1965 Race Relations Act would confer a 'protected status' on people of colour, which would effectively be a form of discrimination against whites. Like Powell's speech itself therefore, which was supplemented throughout with the testimony of anonymous constituents to create a buffer of rhetorical distance between his own identity as a statesman and the unreconstructed yet authentic and legitimate racists he represented, the dramaturgy of Hannan's play implicitly authorises reactionary premises, much as its fabric and architecture ostensibly emphasises the complexities of rounded characters, multiple account and contrasting perspectives.

The Assassination of Katie Hopkins

Another recent UK play, which like *What Shadows*, makes a fetish of the presentation of balance and complexity rather than the issues it purports to examine is Chris Bush and Matt Winkworth's *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* (2018).³ In this musical, the eponymous far-right tabloid and media provocateur is imagined as being murdered at an awards ceremony as the piece starts, with the rest of the work unfolding as an ensemble satire on the tendency of social media and the broadcasting commentariat to amplify outrage. A mock-verbatim play, which traded heavily on scrupulous neutrality in its presentation, the piece proffers a very minimal critical framing around Hopkins's professed Islamophobic ideology, only referring to specific outrages associated with her various proclamations in passing. Instead, the controversy is relocated and restricted to the battle between her supporters and detractors that

negotiates her posthumous value as a political and cultural commentator. This contestation is mainly relayed as it plays out in the online platforms and legacy media, with the piece's fundamental message a cautionary tale about the supposedly debilitating effect of polarization on the standard of public discourse. As Director James Grieve states:

In an angry, very divided world we are becoming ever more polarised and ever more oppositional. We are shouting even louder. [...] Chris and Matt have created a piece of musical theatre that takes a step back, takes a deep breath and tries to understand what's happening to us. (Grieve 2018)

Bush has explained in interview that the choice was made to use Hopkins to explore the 'dehumanisation' of figures with significant media profiles with the specific aim of 'challenge[ing] a left-wing hypocrisy' (Ahmed 2018), namely that those on the left conveniently abhor violence unless a right-wing individual is subject to it. The play recruits a succession of opposed opinion with choral segments detailing every conceivable perspective that it is possible to have upon Hopkins herself, covering the full spectrum:

COMPANY:Katie Hopkins is a monster

Katie Hopkins is a bully

Katie Hopkins is my hero

Should be ignored

Should be knighted

Should be banned from Twitter

Should be left to drown like the –

Should be free to say whatever she – (14-15)

What on the surface is presented as studied ambivalence on closer inspection discloses a habitual framing sympathetic to the right. In the aftermath of the killing, it is the reactionary Kayleigh who is repulsed by the lack of empathy from the workers at the human rights organisation that she interns for, turning into a campaigner advocating for a 'Katie's Law' that would repeal prohibitions on Hate Speech and supposedly open up free expression. While street parties spring up throughout the nation celebrating Hopkins' demise in a reprise of the spontaneous festivities that accompanied Margaret Thatcher's death throughout the UK, complete with frivolous fairground-themed aural accompaniment playing in the background, Kayleigh is given a sincere and direct address to the audience without music denouncing 'nudge-nudge wink-wink fucking banter.' (34) Here it is the left that is portrayed as breaching decorum, and the reactionary character that displays empathy and works to affirm the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Kayleigh's downfall as a reactionary lightning-rod is caused when email messages prior to her political conversion surface in which she had called Hopkins 'hateful' (97) and her supporters 'crackpots, Nazis and the mentally ill.' (98) Within the piece's conception of cultural and political conflict, it is a lapse of civility that destroys her credibility with her

own side, which is undercut by the piece's overall insistence on the implacable emotional identification with which both sides of the political divide stick to their beliefs and champion their icons. As with *What Shadows*, the play's putative engagement with the noxious realities of far-right bigotry and prejudice are shuffled out of the way in order to foreground concerns about the toxicity of discourse surrounding the topic itself. In both, racism is a vehicle for investigating supposed lapses in the standard of discussion that the existence of racism itself gives rise to. Like Hannan's play therefore, at the surface level, Bush's work exhibits a commitment to objectivity with the compulsive inclusion of contrasting perspectives and the performative indulgence of conflict in dialogue, which instrumentalises reactionary politics in favour of policing tone.

The Majority

Rob Drummond's *The Majority* has already had the benefit of detailed scholarly exploration in the form of David Overend and Oliver Heath's article, which uses the statistical voting data gathered throughout the production's run at the National Theatre in its analysis (Overend and Heath 2019).⁴ A one-man show about the relationship of the exercise of democracy to collective decision-making via a series of participatory 'yes or no' votes, the piece is set in the aftermath of the Scottish Independence referendum of 2014 and is steeped within the rancorous political miasma inaugurated by the UK's Brexit vote, although in fact it syncopates equally well with large-scale electoral outcomes that were considered improbable before they eventually happened, such as the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016. As Overend and Heath suggest, the production's aim was to prompt spectators into engendering a more open disposition towards adherents of opposed political viewpoints, in order 'to counter the lack of nuance in the Brexit debate, and in all British national politics more generally, by challenging the tendency to unequivocally dismiss the arguments of those on the other side' (17). As Overend and Heath observe, the 'provocative theatrics' (2) of the piece involved creating a 'charged environment' (4) that emerged from counterposing Drummond's narrative of a soft-liberal's encounter with the political fringes alongside a series of audience-participation referenda where the questions posited were deliberately 'subjective, provocative and polarising, chosen for their dramatic impact and thematic relevance rather than their fairness or objectivity' (6). Largely, the questions asked to the audience comprise increasingly complex variations on the Trolley Problem, a thought experiment exploring an ethical conundrum based on deciding whether or not to divert a runaway train onto a different siding, typically saving a larger amount of lives at the expense of fewer ones. Throughout the work this hypothetical scenario becomes progressively embroidered to incorporate instances where various numbers and configurations of both violent and non-violent Nazis can either be saved or left to their fates. This mirrors the inset drama's journey into anti-immigrant white nationalism in Scotland, where Drummond's story of meeting leftist activist Eric Ferguson concludes with him being arrested for punching what he takes to be a member of the neo-Nazi White Hand organisation. In fact, the person Drummond assaults turns out to be a charity worker protesting an allegedly preferential housing policy that prioritises conflict-fleeing Syrians over indigenous homeless Scots. As the piece develops, the relationship between the narrative drama and its framing referenda produces a tension whereby fine moral distinctions are crudely

truncated into binary choices that are unable to properly encapsulate the scope of the ethical calculations that have gone into them, and therefore the audience are liable to be frustrated and disengaged by the voting process they are participating in. So far as the play's ostensible purpose goes, these tensions serve to illustrate two important issues emblematic of recent political upheaval: firstly that referendums can be blunt democratic instruments, since it is difficult to compress multifarious and interrelated political, social and economic issues into a binary outcome in a way that does justice to their total complexity; and secondly, that the information upon which an electorate bases its decision is partial and susceptible to manipulation. At the outset of the show Drummond presents a series of questions, which allows the audience to designate their identities and dispositions, from which he is then able to characterise its demographic and ideological composition. So far, every performance has hosted a majority white, liberal and non-male audience (Overend and Heath 10).

Primarily *The Majority* functions to deconstruct elements of democracy and voting, but it is neo-Nazism and white supremacy that provides the thematic grist to this mill. Drummond is apparently persuaded that Nazi councillors have infiltrated a small town in northern Scotland and joins a rally in opposition to a neo-Nazi anti-immigrant street protest. A gentle self-satire, Drummond goes on a journey from complacent non-voting liberal to impulsively violent antifascist, before ending, having 'learned his lesson' via a suspended sentence, cautiously politically engaged and open to reasoned debate. While Overend and Heath have explored the way that the performance effectively weaponises the referendum format throughout the piece by disenfranchising the audience and forcing peremptory judgements, they pay more attention to this voting system than they do to the instrumentalisation of far-right ideology as a dramaturgical device within the play, itself a crucial catalyst to its overall appeal for tolerant discourse. Indeed, it is the representation of the far right that weaponises the play's plea for moderation. While the deliberate inadequacies of the succession of referenda work to create 'a dynamic of frustrated contestation [. . .] within the liberal majority' (Overend and Heath 10), at the same time the shaping of the play's narrative works to nourish the audience's presumed liberal conceits. Indeed, while Overend and Heath see *The Majority* as 'a creative response to the problems of polarisation' (4) this perspective would appear to accept the play's premise that the animosity and lack of receptivity of those on the left and right of the political spectrum means that communication – and therefore an appreciation of complexity – is impossible, as Drummond explicates in the 'Author's Note':

Unfortunately we are currently experiencing a crisis in dialogue and the death of nuance, as far right and far left voices scream across the void at each other in a kind of vitriol vs virtue signal battle for the ages. (Drummond 2017, 4)

The piece represents an appeal for tolerant and measured discourse that emanates from the political centre, with the centre ground itself sanctioned as inherently reasonable when in fact its claim for political legitimacy rests precisely on this premise. While Overend and Heath concentrate on the way that the conundrums posed by the referenda within *The Majority* produce a discomfiting effect, what is surely of equal importance is the sleight of hand within the narrative. While the liveness inherent in the voting process means it holds power over the shape of the show, the narrative itself spun by Drummond exercises power over the audience at the same time: and like the notoriously lie-infused

Brexit campaign itself proved, narratives themselves can hold immense power over an electorate in terms of shaping values and desires.

Drummond writes in the 'Author's Note' about the necessity of his being 'intellectually honest', which is congruent with his characterisation of what political discourse should be: 'open, honest and non-precious' (4). And yet, as might be expected, the notion that the autobiographical story he tells is factually 'true' is routinely problematized, with the audience informed at the outset that the piece is 'the truth' (7) but halfway through also told that 'none of this is real. It's just theatre' (38). These slippages between the authentic and the fictive deliberately muddy occasions where the audience are given the chance to intervene in something 'real', such as deciding whether to interact with a neo-Nazi called Ralph Weiss on Twitter (an individual who is presented as a real individual, but who is not actually real), or to read Eric's purported testimony to Rob about why he absconded from Drummond's side at the protest, which he supposedly asked never be divulged. A repeated narrative mechanism is implemented whereby an incident or perspective is introduced in order to elicit a particular response, after which, when further recontextualising information is supplied, makes that response intolerable. In an effort to forestall Eric from putting a package containing live bees through an anti-immigrant councillor's letterbox Rob graffiti's 'NAZI SCUM' outside her house, before, in a moment of regret as they leave, noticing a child's seat in her car on the driveway. In the same way, Rob's assault on the protester he supposes to be a neo-Nazi is mediated in exultant terms, before the real occupation and 'reasonable position' (44) of his adversary is revealed. In both instances, the bearer of far-right beliefs is shown to be abhorrent and then immediately humanised in a way that constitutes an authorial sanctioning against abuse and direct physical action. As Overend and Heath write, in *The Majority* it is possible for the 'soft liberalism of the protagonist [...] to be upheld or rejected by the audience' (2–3), but this underplays the extent to which the stratagem of recasting events within the narrative in a new light forces the audience into post-facto rationalisations that demand a particular response. Drummond's caveating of these encounters forces an interpretation on the audience, which constrains their appreciation of the issues far more than any of the referenda proffered throughout the piece, since having characters presented in such a way that makes violence and abuse against them unconscionable is far less of a choice than a mere stark binary. Drummond's reported assault of the protester in the piece, of course, recapitulates the real-life incident where US white-supremacist and ethnonationalist Richard Spencer was punched in the street as he gave an interview on the occasion of Donald Trump's inauguration, an event which initiated widespread discussion on the appropriateness of pre-emptive violence against Nazis (Murphy 2017). However, the work's abrogation of the protester as a Nazi elides the political question about how the far right should be encountered in society: it is not possible for the audience to use the incident to properly judge the ethics of violence against Nazis, since it is a case of mistaken identity.

Between these incidents in the narrative, Drummond depicts his adoption of an activist sensibility purely in terms of engaging in vitriolic online confrontation, a parodic avatar of an intolerant internet warrior who exclusively battles the reactionary right:

I have at least half a dozen ongoing Twitter feuds going with dickheads of varying flavours. Anti-vaccination morons, right-wing racists, anti-immigration thugs, pro-life nutjobs and anti-feminist loons.

[...]

The ones I really hate are the ones who try to pretend to be reasonable. Who try to engage you in semantics or logical tricks. No. Fuck off. You don't support LGBTQ rights – that tells me all I need to know about you! (39)

The satire here that characterises the political left as uncivil, censorious and combative is cautionary for the predominantly liberal audience but simultaneously flattering for the preconceptions of the reactionary right, portrayed as victims of intolerance operating in good faith. The final recounting of Drummond's adoption of moderation comes when he encounters anti-abortion advocates in the street and resolves to engage in reasonable dialogue, opening with the question, 'That's fascinating. Why do you believe that?' (57) Once more, the example is revealing, because it envisages an argument concerning a topic about which it is considered legitimate to have a discussion, whereas the same thing does not apply to the racial beliefs of neo-Nazis and white supremacists. Since the play's investment is in the performance of political discussion rather than the content of political discussion itself, this elision between topics, which are self-evidently more acceptable to debate than others is surely significant: what the piece gives to the audience in confronting them with a series of ethical conundrums on the one hand, it takes away with the other by continually avoiding the questions it raises about the far right. *The Majority's* suspension of Drummond between the supposed lunatic fringes of political extremes created unfavourable conditions for its performance due to its collision with real political events when left-wing activist Heather Heyer was murdered by white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. at a far-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. Many were appalled at President Trump's claim that despite the killing, there had been 'many fine people on both sides' of the Unite the Right rally, which was not just felt to provide rhetorical cover for white supremacists but provide an equivalence between the sides. Against this backdrop, it was felt that *The Majority's* insistence on rhetoric and decorum seemed misplaced when compared with the material consequences of the animus of the motivated far right (Rebellato 2017; Billington 2017).

Conclusion

Both Bailey Poland (2016) and Keith Bybee (2016) have written about how in contemporary political discourse, a strategy of 'tone policing' is used as an anti-debate tactic to shift the emphasis from the injustice of the topic being discussed in order to relocate the problem in the style of the debate, being used predominantly against feminists, Black Lives Matter activists, and anti-war protesters. In the examples discussed within this article, it is clear that not only is a concern with tone predominant in contemporary political theatre, but that explorations of right-wing politics tend to locate their encounter of this issue within the bounds of decorum. Both *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* and *The Majority* are explicitly satires of uncivil breaches of discourse. In contrast, *What Shadows* envisages a future where blows will be traded over the nature of identity without any punches being pulled, but still invests

faith in that dialogue occurring, with the notion of talking across the divide paramount. Nonetheless, the case studies explored in this article each locate their intervention into the issues encompassed by the anomie of the far right within this context of a failure of communication, where, it is hoped, greater civility and willingness to listen across the political divide will supposedly allow greater understanding and heal rifts. As with *What Shadows* and *The Majority's* unfortunate synchronicity with the events of Charlottesville and The Windrush Scandal proved, however, the contemporary far right are perhaps not susceptible to rhetorical tactics that attempt to induce them to a 'change in heart', nor is this the stratagem on which their own politics is based. Here, in presentational terms, anything that is learned about right-wing and far-right political conviction tends to emerge as a byproduct of the liberal centre's dispensation towards the balancing of opposed opinion, seen both as necessary for objectivity and proof of complexity and nuance. This attitude is the reverse side of the medal in relation to the notion of 'balance' advocated in the case of *The Ununited Kingdom*, where the fear was that the issue was not being presented in a 'fair' way. Issues surrounding right-wing politics related to racism and forms of anti-immigration sentiment that are the touchstones of the contemporary far-right in these plays tend not to be challenged, subverted, or undermined. In the instance of *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* and *The Majority*, the themes appear little more than fodder for acts of performative litigation between two equally noxious poles. It may therefore even be instructive to consider the ways that these plays depart from the dialogic, open, 'illuminative' model propounded by the likes of Hare and Hytner, which is to say that rather than offering a debate, they instead frame an issue as contested on the axis of horseshoe theory: between two poles, which must automatically be discounted as they are too extreme, with a centre position authorised as reasonable and therefore legitimate. Like Cassius in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* 'modestly discover[ing]' (Shakespeare [[1599] 1984], 1.2.142) Brutus to himself, these plays do not only commit the sin of telling the audience what to think – that moderation is virtue, disagreement should be tempered, all voices should be heard – they go much further in telling the audience precisely *how* to think it.

In the aftermath of the Brexit debacle, the BBC created an unusual online game called 'Crossing the Brexit Divide'. Asked to pick between the character of Erika, an Estonian NHS nurse, and Karen, a British 'entrepreneur', the player chooses a series of dialogue options related to border checks, food standards, and trade issues, with the overall aim of playing 'a person having a difficult conversation' (BBC 2019). By avoiding options, which inflame the other character, the conversation is deemed a success, with the user gaining tips in the ways that 'people can learn to respectfully engage with each other' even when discussing heightened political issues. This attitude is certainly engrained within the plays discussed in this article, if not sustained more evenly across the UK theatre ecosystem as a whole: where a preoccupation with tone rather than substance is a diagnosis of a symptom rather than problem, with a critical engagement with reactionary right-wing politics a secondary consideration.

Notes

1. Some examples of plays dealing with right-wing issues and institutions include plays dealing with the monarchy: Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III* (2014), Moira Buffini's *Handbagged*

- (2010), Peter Morgan's *The Audience* (2013); James Graham's plays on Conservative politicians, including Edward Heath (*Tory Boyz*, 2013), Margaret Thatcher (*Little Madam*, 2007) and Anthony Eden (*Eden's Empire*, 2006); with Richard Bean's controversial *England People Very Nice* (2009) dealing with immigration.
2. Enoch Powell delivered his now-infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech to a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham on 20 April 1968, about the 'preventable evils' of the consequences of immigration, which he asserted would lead to the subjugation of the existing population. The legacy of the speech is mixed. The race war he predicted, which would have seen the streets 'foaming with much blood' has not happened, although the language of blame and othering of immigrants undoubtedly fed into anti-immigrant discourse observable in the UK, particularly over the last twenty years, both in the New Labour fixation on 'bogus asylum seekers' and with Brexit.
 3. Katie Hopkins is a far-right commentator and media personality who wrote about race and immigration for *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* before being sacked from LBC radio in 2017 and permanently suspended from Twitter in 2020 after violating its hateful conduct policy.
 4. David Overend was also the director of *The Majority* in its 2017 run.

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