https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2024.4.105 *THEATRON*, VOL. 18. NO. 4. (2024): 105–110.

British Theatre in the Age of Anxieties: The Dystopian Turn

MÁRIA KURDI

Merle TÖNNIES and Eckart VOIGTS, eds. *Twenty-first Century Anxieties: Dys/utopian Spaces and Contexts in Contemporary British Theatre*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022. 260 p.

The present book is volume no. thirty-two in the series "*CDE (Contemporary Drama in English) Studies*" (current series editor: Annette Pankratz), which is affiliated with the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English. In terms of the established practice of the society, they hold meetings hosted at respective universities across the German-speaking countries every year, where the participants are experts of drama and theatre from other parts of Europe too. Selected papers from these conferences or workshops make up the material of the CDE volumes. The society also started a peer-reviewed journal, *JCDE* (*Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*), which is operated by an international editorial board. Thus, uniquely, Germany can boast of having important forums of dedicated scholarly research into contemporary drama in English. The studies in the volume reviewed here focus on contemporary British theatre from the special viewpoint of representing twenty-first-century anxieties of different sources and are authored by scholars—from Germany, Britain, and elsewhere—who bring a considerable range of approaches and opinions to the discussion of the main subject and its corollaries. While they tend to deal with drama texts primarily, some of the authors call attention to the innovative features of certain performances staged within or outside theatre buildings.

"Anxieties" in the title of the book are identified and commented on at some length by all of the authors who point to them, explicitly or implicitly, as a source of negative inspiration for the playwrights and theatre makers explored in the contributors' respective papers. It is, of course, difficult to isolate a group of just twenty-first-century works that respond to specific anxieties, given that eminent playwrights who feature in several papers of *Twenty-first Century Anxieties*, Caryl Churchill (1938) and Martin Crimp (1956) in particular, have built up an oeuvre that has developed for decades up to the present. Their respective works of many years demonstrate continuity in several ways, for instance, tending to anticipate anxieties more fully experienced by humankind only in the 2000s. Also, the present collection testifies to the legacy of especially the "in-yer-face theatre" of the 1990s, referring to Sarah Kane, Martin McDonagh, and others, while even some recognisable haunting of the well-made-play, which has had a long history in the British theatre world, can be traced in post-millennial British drama. Concurrently, brand new voices are considered, those of authors who come up with a variety of striking formal and often genre-defying innovations to vividly stage feelings of unease caused by chaotic and unexpected climate changes, political insecurity, and unpredictable environmental catastrophes, affecting both the society and the individual on a scale not experienced and recorded before.

In their introduction, editors of the present book, Merle Tönnies and Eckart Voigts, highlight the relevance of using the terms "dystopian and utopian spaces and contexts" of the title to the discussion of the ways in which authors of twenty-first-century British "eco-drama" address the anxieties which have become part of our everyday life. They say that "[f]rom the 2000s onwards, dystopian theatre seems to be a central form that has managed to give political concerns an adequate

space" and, therefore, dominates the contemporary stage, whereas utopia, as traditionally held by many, showing "visions of a perfect and idealized world, may lack essential ingredients of drama" which makes poor theatre. However, Tönnies and Voigts add that utopia carries a new potential for the stage these days by finding its way into dystopian plots and dramaturgies as a hopeful vision of resistance to situations of apparently unavoidable danger (3-4). The characteristic interconnectedness of utopia and dystopia, suggested to be dissimilar to their usually more separate presence in other literary genres, becomes a major thematic line in the volume. Most of the contributors ambitiously formulate their own standpoint regarding this relation through analyses of selected contemporary British plays and their dramaturgies. Also, several contributors underline and confirm the observation and idea that it is neoliberal politics and its disruptive social consequences, which generate anxiety in individuals over sensing, albeit not always consciously, the lack of any kind of alternatives. These two interacting parallel strands constitute the shaping forces behind much of contemporary British drama, manifest in the dystopian/utopian spaces' impact on dramaturgies and the anxieties within neoliberal contexts, impacting the choice of themes.

The first paper in the collection, *"Something's Missing": Feeling the Structures of Project Neoliberal Dystopia* by Elaine Aston, sets the tone by stating that utopia and dystopia are "[t]wo interconnecting threads of a double-sided fabric," suggesting that they can even coalesce. She also expounds how that strong link can be understood in theatrical practice: "[…] when theatre engages with the social lacks created by the social inequalities and injustices of the world there is, it has the capacity to elicit utopian yearning for an alternative world that is not yet but might be" (11). Aston places "neoliberal governmentality" in a critical light as she relies on Fredric Jameson's idea that neoliberal methods of maintaining power relations have "worked hard to maintain the belief that there is no alternative," and "the one way we have been able to imagine change is 'in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe'" (19-20). Thus, as she assumes, the unshakeably dominant rule of neoliberal ideology and discourses have generated polarising practices and feelings of dissatisfaction. The play text the critic addresses in some detail is Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016), in which three elderly women are talking with each other in a garden. An Edenic scene, one might presume, but also calling to mind both Beckett's *Come and Go* (1976) with its flower-named female protagonists imparting secrets two by two about the third woman and the timeless birthday party at the beginning of Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), where the women characters talk past each other. As in the earlier Churchill play, the dramaturgical strategy in *Escaped Alone* relies on monologues too, contrasting the seemingly collective yet fragmented conversation. These give voice to "individual terrors" in Aston's wording (21), complemented by monologues of Mrs. J, an outsider to the company, which convey a more general feeling of impending catastrophe. Aston's reference to moments of "intensified affect" (22) describes the nature of Mrs. J's inserted texts precisely, which function as indicators of a half-hidden context behind the characters' sense of some menacing future even worse than the present. *Escaped Alone* experiments with new forms of character construction, in line with Cristina Delgado-García's claim that the term "character" needs a redefinition since much of contemporary British playwriting exposes "a discontent with ideas of subjectivity formulated around a solid idea."[1] Also, Mrs. J's oblique presence and menacing speech addressed at no one, introduces an element of

[1] Cristina DELGADO-GARCÍA, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (Berlin–Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 11.

the surreal into the drama, reminiscent of the start of *Top Girls*.

Comparably with Aston's ideas, another contributor, Trish Reid in her *Dystopian Dramaturgies: Living in the Ruins*, refers to political scientist Wendy Brown's book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: the Rise of Undemocratic Politics in the West* (2019), according to which, as Reid's words run, "while it seems clear that neoliberals and neoliberalism prepared the ground for the ruined political landscape we now inhabit, they are not necessarily its cause, at least not in a straightforward sense" (89). Prominent among Reid's examples is *Victory Condition* (2017) by Chris Thorpe, in which a nameless young couple are on the scene talking not to each other but at the audience in overlapping monologues. As Reid contends, the disjunctions in the drama "work on a number of levels and the fragmentary structure of the performance reflects the ruined history from which it arises," showing the characters alienated not only from each other but also from themselves. Nevertheless, Reid sees a utopian moment in the expression of some "egalitarian sentiment" in the Man's monologue, which "gestures towards the possibility of a better future" (95). Believe it who may, Beckett would probably say.

The paper by Anette Pankratz, *Civil Wars and Republics in Contemporary (Dystopian) Drama*, looks at works that put forms of resistance to the socially dividing effects of the neoliberal present on stage, and it is Rory Mullarkey's *The Woolf at the Door* (2014) which she introduces as a highly complex play text. Pankratz claims that the innovative technique of the playwright lies in evoking history by merging past, present, and future while treating the revolutionary acts of the people against what they think to be their enemies with a lot of irony. For instance, the English Civil War is evoked "by way of two reenactors," implying that "the historical revolution seems to have regressed into a performance devoid of meaning." There is also "comic incongruity" in Mullarkey's representation of the revolution in the here and now, Pankratz observes, because "[i]t is unclear who is fighting whom" (155-157). The author also emphasises the device of "carnivalesque reversals: the staid middle-classes turn revolutionaries; the abject move to the apex of the sociopolitical pyramid," and, for her, the play "does not present alternatives, but a shrug and a laugh" (160, 161). More than just a shrug is offered, though not a real alternative, by naming the homeless ethnic *Other* who finally becomes the new ruler, Leo Lionheart, suggesting that history may repeat itself, despite what seems to be a positive change for the moment.

Other contributors to the collection depart from some theoretical basis to ground their paper in for an exploration of the utopian/dystopian theatrical representation of the apocalyptic crisis humankind is facing. Vicky Angelaki foregrounds the spatial approach in her paper *Environment, Virus, Dystopia: Disruptive Spatial Representations*, initially emphasising that it enables a redefinition of how the dystopian mode works in the theatre. Further on, she explores the significance of space basically in two plays: Martin Crimp's *In the Valley* (2019) and Liz Tomlin's *The Cassandra Commission* (2019), which draw power from "allusion and their expansive visual horizons" (44). More importantly, Angelaki offers a new look at Churchill's *Escaped Alone* inspired by space-centred considerations. The scholar describes its strategy of throwing "spatio-temporal linearity into disarray" through "the shifts in time, space, and tone between the segments depicting the four women in the garden and Mrs J's interjecting monologues, which shift us someplace else altogether, however indeterminate" (52). Joining this, Julia Schneider's paper also tackles space in its dramaturgical importance, confirming the view that "utopias and dystopias are by definition spatial concepts" (73). Their spatiality is illustrated by the analysis of Cecilia Ahern's *Flawed* series (2016), in which a "flawed," racially *Other* character contests the dystopian space by "highly performative" (80) acts and

the creation of spaces of resistance (84) to the given constraining power relations. Foucault's *Of Other Spaces* is one of Schneider's critical sources, and features in the theoretical underpinning of some other papers too.

In '*To Watch Is Not Enough': Utopia, Performance and Hope(lesness)* Nicole Pohl argues that "performance art can be and perhaps should be both ethical witnessing and utopian performativity," as its response to the environmental crisis calls for the ethical gesture of sympathy and also action to achieve some transformative change. To expand on her belief in the positive nature of utopian desire as a catalyser of embodied critique via performance of the dystopian present and the ramifying problems generated by the uncontested rule of anthropocentrism, she adds: "[e]thical witnessing can exist even in hope(lessness), as it creates meaning, a sense of responsibility, agency, and potentiality, even if it is for a post-human world" (29). The concretising realisation of "utopian performativity" in Pohl's carefully defined understanding is then explored in some very recent plays and theatre events. Her reference to one of these demonstrates how a performance artist, Lisa Christine Woynarski, "underscores human embeddedness in ecological systems, and transforms material agency to non-human (or more-than-human) species" (37) in a devised piece titled *The Celebrated Trees of Nashville, Tennessee* (2012).

The paper *Towards a Genealogy of the British Feminist Dystopian Play* by Paola Botham draws on applicable theories of feminism. Botham contends that the "British feminist dystopian play [is] a form of political theatre […] a progressive endeavour" in contrast with "anti-utopia as a reactionary one" because it resists closure, that is, the kind of ending conceived in terms of the ruling dystopian order. Moreover, she attributes "catachrestic" power to feminist dystopias on stage (68), borrowing a rhetorical figure from the analytical toolbox dealing with the subtleties of often women's poetry. Looking at Lucy Kirkwood's *Tinderbox* (2008), which she describes as a feminist play, Botham underscores that resistance to the male-dominated dystopian order is presented ambivalently in the play; patriarchal power does not have an end but shifts from one man to another while the female protagonist "liberates herself, yet in a violent and individualistic manner" (69). Her killing the second man who also cheats her can be called revolutionary, and the end of the play uses the iconography of the sea as feminine power where she wades into the cleansing cold water and imagines a potentially different, utopian future, which defies the pervasive rule of the dystopian present.

The title of Peter Paul Schnierer's paper speaks for itself: *Visions of Hell in Contemporary British Drama* places the theme in a broad context, surveying the iconography of purgatory and hell in Western culture, art, and theatre from Dante onwards. Among the cultural forms, drama can be distinguished by its largely ironical treatment of the diabolical; in fact, the devil was "increasingly portrayed as ridiculous," Schnierer contends, for instance, in Ben Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass* or in "the number of Faust plays right up to the present" (202). Regarding the twenty-first century, the critic refers to some British plays, Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) and Martin McDonagh's film script *Bruges* (2008) among them, distinguished by new visions of demons and the hellish "gesture at our helplessness in the face of newer apocalypses." This seems to contradict what Schnierer said about the comic portrayal of the demonic above, but he adds as a conclusion: "[b]etter the devil you know" (208), which suggests a potential (utopian?) alteration of power relations between the indeterminate demonic menace and humankind in our time. As a thought-provoking parallel, the Irish Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer* (2006, first performed in London) can be mentioned, which stages characters belonging to the lowest, down-and-out social class. A stranger from outside joins them in a game of cards; having hooves instead of feet, he is the devil incarnate; the game with him draws on the sym-

bolism of legends. The outcome is that the apparently ne'er-do-well characters manage to make him the loser. Pál Göttinger, director of the Hungarian premiere (2008, Hungarian title: *A tengeren*) said: "although the characters do not 'know' what is happening, they somehow feel it, sense it. This is why, [...] they start defending themselves. Clearly, it is only their love for each other that can save them from the Devil".[2]

Two papers ground their investigation in the dystopian view of what happens to language and communication in an age when many feel insecure and anxious about the future. Luciana Tamas's *A Description of This World as if It Were a Beautiful Place: From Avant-Garde Destruction to Dys(u)topias* evokes the disruptive textual experimentations of the avant-garde to arrive at contemporary examples that use fragmented communication, choosing them from the performance projects of the *Forced Entertainment* company. Leila Michelle Vaziri, in her *'I Am the Abyss into Which People Dread to Fall': Encountering Anxiety in Dystopian Drama*, emphasises the crossing of borders such as time, bodily pain, and the expressivity of language in the theatre of anxiety. In Scottish playwright Alistair McDowell's play *X* (2016), she explores "how, in anxiety, time and language are connected and destructed simultaneously" (189). By way of a parallel, Vaziri comments on Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* as well, seeing it as a piece representing the "economic and ethical destruction of society" through events that invade, most of all, individual lives (198).

Finally, there are two papers concerned with just one play each, by prominent authors Richard Bean and Martin Crimp, respectively. In their analyses, the authors manage to bring together and tackle a broad spectrum of the issues discussed in most of the whole collection. Mathias Göhrmann's *The Spectre of Utopia/Dystopia: The Representation of Anthropogenic Global Climate Change as Culture-War Issue in Richard Bean's The Heretic (2011)* focuses on dramatising "eco-anxiety" (166) manifest in the characters' antagonistic views regarding climate change. Bean's protagonist is a female scientist of sharp intellect, Dr. Diane Cassell, who "does not conform to hegemonic thinking patterns" (172) and remains sceptical about the changes much stressed by the rhetoric of a powerful lobby of activists that influences university politics too, with implications of financial interest. Set in the context of university management and the surrounding internal debates, *The Heretic* can be called a campus drama, a rare sub-genre in contemporary theatre, although not exceptional if we think of David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992) with its warlike clash between teacher and student. In *The Heretic*, the university proves to be a highly appropriate context to demonstrate the workings of a culture war, which divides the staff of a department (a mini society) over subscribing to the ideologically driven ideas that climate change is a formidable, immediate threat or challenging their extremities and occasional manipulative coerciveness on scientific grounds and empirical data. In our post-truth era, as Göhrmann words it, "the culture war's neoliberal qualities" are assessed by this drama, in which Diane's antagonists try to silence her while "seeking to exploit scientific research for either neoliberal profit maximisation or an oppressive green orthodoxy" (171). At the same time, Göhrmann notes that this "debate-based" drama does not lack a satirical tone either, which sweeps in the direction of both sides (171, 177). I think this basically language-driven, realistic play has its antecedent in Bernard Shaw's theatre, considering also its closing a return to "romanticised normalcy" (179), a utopian event of reconciliation that may remind us of Shavian plays like *Major Barbara* (1905) where the weighty social issues and antagonisms converge into a similarly fragile

[2] "Interview with Pál Göttinger," in *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: "Right beside the Beyond"*, ed. Lilian CHAMBERS and Eamonn JORDAN (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012), 245.

"happy ending" to emphasise that a partial and temporary resolution of conflicts is possible only on the individual level.

'Hiding from the World': Dystopian Subjectivity in Martin Crimp's In the Republic of Happiness posits Ilka Zänger's idea that "Crimp's bleak visions of society doubtlessly resonate with the idea of dystopia" (209), from which her argument departs. This is a shockingly experimental play of three loosely connected parts (a structuring not unique in Crimp's oeuvre): one about the collapse of family, another about individual crisis in the throes of the expanding commodity culture, while the third one leads the reader/audience to the republic of happiness, seemingly a utopian space but proving to be a dystopian scenery of all-powered dominance versus self-loss and dementia. Zänger lends prior attention to the fate of dramatic language when she highlights that the overarching "general deterioration can be best illustrated by the use of language which is no longer the means of conversation on which human connection is built but has turned to an empty vessel of impulsive utterance often sounding artificial and bereft of human decencies," applying the refrain-like slogan of never "going deep" (212-213). Furthermore, Zänger's study joins the widening scholarly examination of Crimp's dramaturgy by stating that here "[t]he crisis of the subject becomes a crisis of conventional drama," entailing "the dissolution of dramatic form"—and that of characterisation, we might add (218).

All in all, the papers in this absolutely resourceful CDE collection present a convincingly detailed picture of multiple layers of the ways in which utopia and dystopia intertwine and reinforce each other's role in the theatrical making of meaning. The authors, ranging from distinguished professors to emerging scholars and PhD candidates, offer in-depth analyses of aspects of the overall subject in several respective dramatic works which represent an important, renewed, and renewing aesthetic trend in contemporary British playwriting. Also, the papers include contextualised references to several other plays and playwrights, inviting fellow scholars and doctoral students to contribute to an ongoing worldwide scholarship by addressing them in theoretical framings complementary to those employed by these authors with so much professional zeal and ambition.