Beyond ‘Geordierama’: Theatre and Performance in North East England, 2017-18

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Abstract

This thesis presents an assessment of the theatrical culture of North East England through an examination of four theatre productions made in the region between 2017-18: *Beyond the End of the Road* (2017) produced by November Club; *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes* (2017, Live Theatre); *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (2018, Darlington Operatic Society); and *HEATON!* (2018, the People's Theatre in association with Shoe Tree Arts). Each performance analysis is supplemented by interviews with members of the companies and creative teams involved in their making, and centres on a keyword used by the companies to describe their work. These keywords – authentic (*Beyond*), contemporary (*Snowflakes*), lavish (*Priscilla*), and official (*HEATON!*) – enable ways of thinking differently about the North East and reveal a complex and diverse regional eco-system of art practices and modes of theatre industry. These case studies are framed by consideration of the theatrical, cinematic, and popular representation of the North East between 1964-2018 and the limitations of previous scholarly engagement with the region's theatre culture, challenging external perceptions of the region as culturally barren or theatrically unremarkable. They engage with discourses of authenticity in relation to rural place-making, site-specificity, and Northumbrian heritage; the North East's vexed relationship to the metropolitan centre in relation to its claim to the contemporary; the politics of pleasure in the production of lavish theatre; and the ethical and historiographical tensions in staging official history. They also provide insights into methodological dilemmas which emerge from carrying out research in a region which is fraught with anxieties regarding its own agency and (mis)representation, highlighting the importance of attending to self-description in the discussion of artistic works. In doing so, this thesis also provides a corrective to the North East's omission from the national theatre record, shedding light on a heterogenous and multi-layered theatre culture.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis presents an assessment of the theatrical culture of North East England through an analysis of four theatre productions made in the region between 2017-18, supplemented by interviews with members of their companies and creative teams. The first production under consideration is *Beyond the End of the Road* (2017) produced by November Club – a musical about rural farming life set in present-day Northumberland. Second is *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes* (2017, Live Theatre) – a Christmas show about the lives of a young adult couple set in present-day Newcastle. Next is *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (2018, Darlington Operatic Society) – an amateur musical theatre production of the popular Australian jukebox musical. The final production under analysis is *HEATON!* (2018, the People's Theatre in association with Shoe Tree Arts) – an original amateur theatre production which celebrates the lives of notable historical figures associated with Heaton (a suburb of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in which the People's Theatre and Shoe Tree Arts are based).

Collectively, these analyses consider the extent to which the productions go beyond 'Geordierama' – a nickname for the region's populist performance tradition, which often reinforces regional caricatures and reductive stereotypes.[1] Geordierama is succinctly captured by dramatist Alan Plater in his account of North East theatre from the 1960s to the early 1990s.[2] Plater argued that in the 1960s, an onstage character saying "Howay" was 'enough of a novelty to get a laugh without further embellishment' (84).[3] Contrasting this observation with his reflections on the state of North East theatre in 1992, Plater remarked that "Howay" 'is no longer enough' (84). In other words, Plater perceived a shift toward – and growing demand for – more ambitious drama in the region in the latter part of the twentieth century. However, the endurance of canonical productions such as Plater's own *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968) and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (1983-4, 1986, 2002, 2004), and the emergence of the

[1] The term Geordierama can be traced back to Mike Neville and George House, Joe Bennett & The Northumbrian Traditional Group's 1972 folk album, *Geordierama*. But it was arguably better popularised by Scott Dobson's *Geordierama* BBC radio programme in 1981, which used material from Dobson's own landmark work on the Geordie dialect, *Larn Yersel' Geordie*, first published in 1969.

[2] Plater is a Jarrow-born writer whose canonical 1968 text, *Close the Coalhouse Door*, tends to be considered a point of origin for a recognisable North East theatre (a central point of contention which I examine in Chapter Two). Plater has also written the only macro-history of the drama of the North East to date (covering a period from the 1960s to the early 1990s) in a fourteen-page chapter in Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster's landmark study of North East culture, *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism* (1992).

[3] Plater's observation indicates the self-referential nature of Geordierama. The use of "Howay" (meaning "come on") as a punchline in itself is framed as a point of shared identification and humour for North East audiences.

popular *Sunday for Sammy* charity concerts in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (biennial since 2000), disrupt Plater's proposed linear narrative of theatrical progress, telling a more uneven and complex story of the North East's relationship with its own identity and culture.[4]

This thesis illustrates that the four productions it examines extend beyond Geordierama. It reveals a far more multi-layered and diverse eco-system of urban, rural, amateur, professional, community-based, building-based, site-specific, popular, and commercial art practices – but also establishes that the productions still share a regional value system linked to Geordierama. Each production is clearly 'rooted' to a sub-division of the North East: Northumberland, Newcastle, Darlington, and Heaton. Yet, despite the ways in the which the nuances and specificities of the region's counties, cities, towns, and suburbs inform these works, this 'rootedness' is the very thing they share. Each production engages with the question of roots, touching on powerful themes of birth, childhood, family, community, identity, ancestry, inheritance, land, belonging, and duty, which are themselves deeply rooted within the North East. The productions therefore enable insights into the region's knotty relationship with its own culture and traditions, revealing the extent to which broader themes of history and home constituted major preoccupations of its theatrical output in 2017-18.

This shared, regionally specific tradition of staging roots intersects with a wider contemporary mood during 2017-18: the need for safety, security, and escapism in a period of social fracture and economic precarity. The productions were staged while the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (dubbed 'Brexit') still dominated national discourse and international diplomacy. At the same time, buoyancy and hope emerged from the mass mobilisation of ordinary people in politics during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, and the significant gains made by Labour in the early General Election of 2017. These developments, though important to the 2017-18 conjuncture, do not feature as overarching frames in this thesis as the theatre companies did not express overt concern

[4] Indeed, a viewing of some *Sunday for Sammy* concerts released on DVD provide an excellent overview of the genre's preoccupations. In his 2012 stand-up routine, Geordie comedian Gavin Webster jokes that when "posh people" ask him (he puts on a mock posh Southern accent), "Gavin, Gavin, are you a fan of pastiche?" he replies (switching back to Geordie), "Well, I prefer sausage rolls" (qtd. in *Sunday for Sammy*). The punchline encapsulates some of Geordierama's classic tropes, including the classed dynamics of 'ordinary' or 'common' North East versus 'posh' or 'elite' South East; the Geordie's perceived lack of sophistication and intelligence; and a jab at the region's lack of refined culture and cuisine. It also reveals Geordierama's irreverence and self-awareness (Webster's use of "pastiche" is no coincidence). Protagonists of the genre include North East-born stalwarts Tim Healy, Jimmy Nail, Denise Welch and Charlie Hardwick, who have performed in sketches which reinforce tropes such as the 'hard' North-easterner who refuses to wear a coat in the winter; promiscuity and the teenage mother; alcoholism; and stoking of the rivalry between the region's two warring football tribes, Geordies (Newcastle) and Mackems (Sunderland). Beneath these comedic tropes, however, is a deeper anxiety regarding the professional Geordie i.e., the building of careers off the back of these reductive stereotypes.

regarding these events in interview (as I explain in the methodology section below, I rather sought to respond first and foremost to how practitioners talked about their work). Furthermore, events such as Brexit and Corbynism were still unfolding, which means that any critical assessment which used these events as overarching frames would be limited.

While assessing current or 'live' events raises dilemmas for all writing on the nature of the contemporary, the analyses enable consideration of the ideas and narratives that were made available to North East audiences in this moment, and reflection on what or who could be trusted. As the analyses which follow make clear, the productions recycle conventional social mores and regional nostalgia as antidotes to threats to regional cohesion. Although the productions clearly go beyond the stereotypes associated with Geordierama, they also valorise the conservative institution of marriage; emphasise the strength of the family unit; romanticise the working-class; and perform cosy regionalism and narratives of alleged social cohesion and universality, which begs the question of the extent to which the shows perform narratives of hope or offer reassuring, 'empowering' fictions which maintain the status quo.

To explore these matters, each chapter examines a keyword used by practitioners to describe their work: authentic (*Beyond*), contemporary (*Snowflakes*), lavish (*Priscilla*), and official (*HEATON!*). Each word was selected from interviews with practitioners – the process of which is explained in more detail in the methodology below. My decision to use these terms as frames for each analysis stems directly from their importance to the companies as well as the levels of complexity surrounding each term, which became apparent during the interviews.[5] This focus enabled consideration of the dangers of using these terms in passing while giving adequate time, space, and attention to the work of regional companies (which have gone unexamined in scholarship) i.e., prioritising their agency. In this regard, the keywords do not function merely as chapter headings, but as the beginnings of a vocabulary of contemporary North East theatre and performance – which involves testing conceptual boundaries and identifying relationality across a region with high levels of particularity.

While each chapter engages with wider debates in contemporary theatre and performance studies pertaining to each keyword, collectively the four case studies construct an image of the North East's theatre culture in 2017-18. Chapter Three (*Beyond*) explores discourses of authenticity in relation to rural place-making and Northumbrian heritage. Chapter Four

[5] Lavish was taken from the company's website rather than from interview (the reason for which is discussed in the methodology section below).

(*Snowflakes*) examines tensions between the contemporary and the festive, and the vexed relationship between the North East and the metropolitan centre. Chapter Five (*Priscilla*) considers the term lavish in relation to a politics of pleasure and the extent to which *Priscilla* queers the popular image of the North East as bleak and conventional. Chapter Six (*HEATON!*) explores the many tensions which emerge from staging official history in relation to master narratives, historical progress, regional nostalgia, and class.

Analysis of these four productions in relation to dominant regional stereotypes necessitates detailed engagement with the ways in which the broader culture of the North East has been portrayed and understood. As discussed in Chapter Two, the North East is often framed as tight-knit, with strong bonds of working-class community togetherness, left-wing politics, and mutual support. At other times, the region is depicted as a faceless mass of impoverished workers with little hope or joy in their lives. The example of the region's football culture underlines how the North East is frequently framed as a 'proud' and 'passionate' region but whose people seemingly lead lives of destitution and limited culture. Newcastle United club heroes Alan Shearer and Kevin Keegan, for instance, often talk about Newcastle's fans as hard-working, loyal followers spending what money they have on supporting their team (Sealey). Although this characterisation can be considered sympathetic, it also frames football as a single ray of hope in an otherwise hopeless (and monocultural) region.

Consideration of the ways in which the cultural identity of the North East is expressed on stage is particularly pertinent given that the identity of the region is often figured in theatrical terms. One popular example is the common description of the Geordie dialect as 'lyrical.' To continue with the example of the region's football culture, the fact that Newcastle United FC were nicknamed 'The Entertainers' (qtd. in NUFC) in the 1990s is also instructive as it speaks to the complex role that the North East often takes up, as the 'entertaining' region, home of the lively and loveable 'toon,' yet one which heavily relies upon external validation and applause. Even the language used to describe Newcastle United in the 1990s borrows from theatre. In Jackson Cole's words, football grounds would sell out when Newcastle 'came to town,' framing the club as a kind of travelling troupe. Performance, entertainment, even showbusiness, seem to lie at the heart of the region's identity and vernacular traditions.

While this conception of the North East as an entertaining region can be a source of pride, it is important to understand the ways in which the North East is also rolled out as amusement to validate its subordinate tragi-comic identity. As is further discussed in Chapter Two, the

North East is routinely framed as an underdog – poor, down on its luck ('tragedy' seems to befall the region), whose plight is characterised by collective struggle and survival. When the North East is not tragic, it is a comic, unruly figure (see national news footage of barefoot women in Newcastle's city centre or shirtless Newcastle United supporters chanting club anthems). The region can be therefore thought of as theatrical in terms of its cultural identity mentioned above and in the sense that it is recurrently cast as a slapstick or 'moving' stock character in the pantomime of British culture. In this respect, the North East has tended to receive pity over empathy, laughter over respect, voyeurism over agency, in a national drama that frequently sees the region as little more than a 'poignant' or cartoonish figure.

The analyses presented in this thesis address the reductiveness of the popular representation of the North East. They also make a major contribution to scholarly understanding of the theatre of the region, while addressing its relative obscurity in wider culture. On a number of occasions during this project, when telling people that I was researching the theatrical culture of North East England, they replied, "does it even have one?" As someone born in the North East, and who has worked in the region's subsidised theatre sector, its size and significance seemed self-evident to me. Yet, I was also aware that North East theatre was something of an enigma (and not only for people outside of the region). From my time working at Northern Stage in Newcastle in the early 2010s, for instance, I met many people who did not know where the theatre was, or that it even existed. Others referred to it as the University Theatre – a name which cites its position on the Newcastle University campus (which owns the land on which the theatre is built), which it officially jettisoned, however, in the 1980s.

I contend that one reason for North East theatre's relative obscurity is that, to date, no major study of the region's theatre culture has been undertaken, which is itself symptomatic of tensions between the centre and the margins. The North East's position as the furthest English region from London (and furthest north) underpins enduring perceptions of its remoteness and otherness. In addition, there are numerous studies of the North East's dialect and traditional music – sub-disciplines in their own right – which risk over-representing its

vernacular culture and maintain an image of the region as 'authentic' and 'traditional.'[6] But its theatre remains somewhat unknown and under-researched (the reasons for which I explore in Chapter Two). Demystifying North East theatre is therefore vital for the production of a more nuanced account of the region's culture and British theatre as a whole.

This thesis can be also considered a corrective to three conditions that are often placed upon North East theatre in scholarship on British theatre culture. Firstly, such scholarship tends to acknowledge the region's indigenous literary output i.e., plays written by playwrights born in the North East (or who are otherwise seen as legitimate representatives or authentic 'voices' of the region). I argue that this exclusive focus on plays dismisses forms of theatre such as solo, devised or ensemble work, while indigeneity excludes theatre practitioners who have migrated to the region (or might not be seen to qualify as authentic voices of the region). Secondly, such scholarship often focuses upon plays which are set in the North East as opposed to simply made in the region. I argue that local setting, while central to the region's theatrical output, also excludes companies and practitioners who do not make theatre explicitly about life in the region. Thirdly, such scholarship often deems that productions must be successful outside of the region (usually in London) before they are considered nationally significant, which I argue excludes practitioners committed to working locally.

As I also discovered in carrying out this research, landmark texts on regional theatre in Britain have not examined the work of a single region. George Rowell and Anthony Jackson's *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (1984) presents case studies of the Nottingham Playhouse; the Citizens' Theatre, Glasgow; the Salisbury Playhouse; the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent; the Merseyside Everyman Theatre Liverpool; and the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester.[7] Olivia Turnbull's *Bringing Down*

[6] See Dobson's landmark *Larn Yersel' Geordie* (1969); *Geordie Dictionary* (1974); and *Geordie Recitations, Songs and Party Pieces* (1978). More recent work includes Joan C. Beal's '"Geordie Nation": Language and regional identity in the north-east of England' (1999); 'From Geordie Ridley to *Viz*: Popular Literature in Tyneside English' (2000); 'Enregisterment, Commodification, and Historical Context: "Geordie" Versus "Sheffieldish"' (2009); and 'Dialect as Heritage' in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Superdiversity* (2018). The region's traditional music is examined in Frank Graham's classic *Geordie Song Book* (1986); Rod Hermeston's ''The Blaydon Races': lads and lasses, song tradition, and the evolution of an anthem' (2011); Jude Murphy's 'The Gallowgate Lad: Joe Wilson's Life and Songs' (2018) and Peter Wood's 'Billy Purvis: The First Professional Geordie' (2020). More broadly, *North East History* – the journal of the North East Labour History Society – contains a treasure trove of articles on the region's vernacular culture.

[7] Also featured are Manchester's Gaiety Theatre; Birmingham Repertory Theatre; Cambridge Festival Theatre; Northampton Repertory Theatre; Bristol Old Vic Company's Theatre Royal; Belgrade Theatre, Coventry; Nottingham Playhouse; and Sheffield Crucible Theatre.

the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres (2008) presents case studies of the Salisbury Playhouse; the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead; the Redgrave Theatre, Farnham; the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford; the Merseyside Everyman Theatre and Liverpool Playhouse; and Harrogate Theatre. Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin's *The Glory of the Garden: Regional Theatre and the Arts Council 1984-2009* (2010) presents case studies of Birmingham Rep; Bristol Old Vic; Liverpool Everyman; Liverpool Playhouse; Lyric Hammersmith; New Victoria Theatre Stoke; Nottingham Playhouse; Salisbury Playhouse and touring companies Cheek by Jowl; Complicité; and Kneehigh Theatre. This presents a double opportunity to address the North East's absence in scholarship on regional theatre and consider 'the region' as a unit of analysis.

This regional focus informed my selection of case studies. Instead of concentrating exclusively on plays written by North East-born dramatists (produced by professional building-based theatres in urban centres), I embraced a wide range of theatre companies from across the North East. The four productions span amateur; professional; urban; rural; building-based; and site-specific theatrical work, and include musicals; plays; scripts that were partly devised and collaborative; adaptations; performances which both represent life in the North East and beyond the region; and which were made by practitioners born in – and who migrated to – the North East. My decision to present detailed analyses of theatre productions made 'now' (at the time of undertaking the initial research in 2017-18) also makes a virtue of studying what was available to me at that time in capturing a small sample from across the region, rather than looking to pull out interesting productions from a longer period, which would have produced a more superficial engagement with the theatre companies' work.

This decision to focus on what was available for analysis in the North East at the time also correlates to my personal interest in writing on the contemporary and to the testing of a key criterion of value in the thesis: to engage with theatrical work regardless of whether or not I personally enjoyed it (or which might be already considered notable or worthy of study outside of the time period). There is undoubtedly a hegemony in contemporary theatre and performance studies scholarship of work that is already deemed to be of scholarly value before the research is undertaken. Quite understandably, many theatre scholars write about

what they love or find interesting.[8] But this also means that a significant amount of work is overlooked (as are ethical questions about the challenges of engaging with work that the individual scholar finds problematic, dislikes, or perhaps feels unqualified to write about). Consequently, carrying out this work has revealed to me the importance of a diverse and sustained research culture (i.e., a history made of many hands) working longitudinally in partnership with/in a theatre culture to document and discuss its artistic work as fully as possible.[9]

Equally, a key criterion of value in this thesis is that no one company is more deserving of study than another. In place of Live Theatre, an analysis could have been made of Northern Stage or Alphabetti in Newcastle; the Gosforth Civic Theatre; the Customs House in South Shields; the Alnwick Playhouse; the Little Theatre in Gateshead; ARC – Stockton Arts Centre; the Queen's Hall Arts Centre in Hexham; or Theatre Hullaballoo in Darlington. In place of November Club, an analysis could have been made of Curious Monkey; Unfolding Theatre; Open Clasp; Precious Cargo; ZENDEH; the Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company; Little Cog; théâtre sans frontières; Coracle; The Six Twenty; Mortal Fools; The Letter Room, Camisado Club, or Theatre Hoodang. This list of potential case studies also highlights the variety of theatre companies making work in the North East at this time, which patently challenges the idea that the North East has no theatre culture.[10]

The productions examined here offer a chance to traverse a variety of intra-regional territories, and journey into the region's past, present, and future. I travelled to village halls and auction marts of rural Northumberland to watch a musical about farming life (*Beyond*). I then headed south to Live Theatre on the banks of the Newcastle Quayside – the headquarters

[8] As theatre historian David Wiles writes, 'I love the theatre and I love thinking about what I love' (5). For Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson in this respect, 'selection of key individuals, institutions and events for inclusion in the histories which have formed traditionally accepted historical canons or master narratives of theatre have been inextricably linked to the value judgements of individual historians' (7) – indicative of the extent to which debates about value are, for Cochrane and Robinson, 'fundamental to ethical enquiry' (7).

[9] Though not without tensions regarding the bringing of the vernacular into the official, which I discuss below.

[10] There has been something of a regional boom since the mid-2010s (continued during the period of this research). Recent companies include Twisting Ducks; Blowin' a Hooley Theatre; Girl Next Door; Peachplant Productions; TimbaDash Theatre; The 'Theatre N16 Limited' Group (which runs Laurences Blyth and Laurels Theatre in Whitley Bay); Woven Nest Theatre; SHYBAIRN; The House of Love queer cabaret collective (Bonnie and The Bonnettes, MXYM, Mama Rhi & Vol-Au-Vent Love); HangFire Theatre; Workie Ticket; and Kitchen Zoo. There is an equally wide selection of long-standing amateur companies in the region. Examples of such companies include The Castle Players in County Durham; Westovians in South Shields; the West End Operatic Society in Newcastle; Humshaugh Theatre Group in Hexham; BOSS in Stockton; Nunthorpe Players; The Billingham Players; Teesside Musical Theatre Company; and the Yarm Border Players.

of the region's literary theatrical output and epicentre of its twenty-first century urban regeneration – to witness a piece of Christmas theatre about young people in Newcastle, which aligns itself with metropolitan tastes and conventions (*Snowflakes*). I then ventured further south to Darlington in County Durham to watch a global jukebox musical, situated at the more mainstream, commercial end of the art spectrum (*Priscilla*). I then returned to Newcastle and travelled two miles east of Live Theatre, across the Ouseburn, to the People's Theatre in suburban Heaton to witness a large community pageant celebrating the history of the local area, which involved numerous groups and civic institutions (*HEATON!*).

As a result of carrying out this research, I have come to think of history as a tap from which liquid gold is pouring (i.e., *everything matters* and is of great value historiographically). However, the North East's disappearance from the national theatre record means that most of its culture is being lost (which also maintains external perceptions of the region as unremarkable, inert, or barren). Scholarship has sieved out a few drops of gold so far – and there is a growing body of work on the region's theatrical culture in the twenty-first century (which is also examined in Chapter Two) – but a deluge has already vanished and continues to vanish down the drain. Scholars can hope to follow the pipework and recover traces of gold left behind, but lots of activity might be lost forever. In one sense, this underpins my personal interest in the historical present – and my desire to bottle some of the gold before it disappears – even though, of course, one thesis cannot hope to capture all of it.

1.1 Methodologies

1.1.1 Research Interviews

My decision to interview theatre practitioners in the region was initially based on my prior experience as an arts journalist. My decision was reinforced by encountering limited scholarship on the topic of contemporary theatre and performance in North East England. As such, interviewing practitioners became crucial to build my own knowledge and develop empirical material. I travelled to the British Library in January 2017 to undertake a training course ('Introduction to Oral History'), which equipped me with further knowledge of techniques of influencing required to interview elites (i.e., individuals with high levels of social and/or cultural capital who are well-practised in talking about their work); the ethical implications of interviewing potentially vulnerable participants (i.e., a recognition of one's power as an interviewer, promoting care when asking leading questions); and the validation of oral testimony and memory, which can be considered 'unreliable' forms of evidence.

I decided that I wanted the interviews to function as open conversations to enable interviewees to talk about their lives and the issues and ideas that were important to them as individual practitioners. This decision was particularly informed by my engagement with oral history theory. In particular, Alessandro Portelli's suggestion that both interviewer and interviewee are in fact subjects – and that field work 'is meaningful as the encounter of two subjects who recognise each other as subjects […] seek to build their equality upon their difference in order to work together' (43) – contributed to my desire for the interviews to be collaborative and horizontal. This decision prioritised agency and trust-building, which Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki argue is essential to articulate properly and understand a life and which 'helps to neutralise the divisions between scholar and subject' (348).

I then codified this knowledge and intent in participant information sheets provided to each interviewee. Participants provided written consent to being audio recorded and confirmed that no financial incentive could be offered for participation; that interviews would last for approximately one hour; that their participation would not involve any known or anticipated risks or discomfort; that anonymity could not be sought in this case because the research relied on the responses of the specific named individuals due to the relevance of their position to the subject of enquiry; that they would be given the opportunity to listen to the recording; that transcripts would be stored securely on the Newcastle University network; and that the results of this research would contribute to and inform the critical component of the thesis (and that participants' responses would be quoted therein).

In the interviews, we discussed participants' personal and professional backgrounds, their own artistic interests and experience, and how they came to create, or become involved in, each theatre production. November Club was the first company I wrote about, and my interview with founder and Artistic Director, Cinzia Hardy, doubled as a trial. At the start of the interview, Hardy used the word 'authentic' to describe November Club's work, which I found to be an enigmatic term, potentially even an industry buzzword. I was aware of authenticity's arguable overdetermination in scholarship and ubiquity in popular culture, and so I was curious about what appealed to Hardy about the term and how it informed November Club's practice. This led to an expansive discussion of how November Club works site-specifically in Northumberland and navigates the ethics of rural place-making. The interview therefore turned into a dialogue about Hardy's belief in the authenticity of the company.

While I had the idea to replicate this approach for the rest of the case studies, I waited until later interviews to see if it would be appropriate in the case of the other productions. As it turned out, practitioners also used terms that I considered to be similarly complex, fraught, or surprising, which I deemed necessary to examine in more detail. On this basis, I selected keywords for analysis ('contemporary' for Live Theatre; 'lavish' for Darlington Operatic Society; and 'official' for the People's Theatre). I took the word 'lavish' from Darlington Operatic Society's 'About' page of the company website rather than from interview – which was clearly still an important self-description given its prominent position on the company's website – as I was only able to conduct interviews after the production of *Priscilla*. Though not ideal, I came to accept this as one of the challenges of researching amateur theatre, as participants were busy with their day jobs and show rehearsals in the evenings. Though the word lavish was not used in interview, discussions of pleasure and excess were prominent.

The most enjoyable period of the research was carrying out the interviews. One of the reasons for this was because I could take up a position as a novice. In many jobs, there is often an expectation for an incoming employee to come into the job with all the knowhow. But this research offered a chance to be open and vulnerable. Indeed, it became clear to me that I could not (and should not) know the 'answers' in advance. In one sense, I *was* a novice in terms of knowledge of participants' lives. But in another sense, recognising this fact also meant that I played the role of the novice. Taking up this role acknowledged that interviewees were experts in their own lives, knowledge which I was seeking to draw out, and which also helped to establish a rapport and bond of trust. I brought my training in oral history to bear on the interviews in this respect, asking participants to tell me a story about their lives and experiences up to that point, which also meant that our expertise was shared.

1.1.2 Keyword Analysis

In this project, keyword analysis prioritises how companies and practitioners talk about their work. As I mentioned above, my decision to focus on keywords originated from the first November Club interview, where I deemed the word authentic to require further consideration. But the lasting impact of my oral history training also played a crucial role, as I wanted to respond to how interviewees understood and talked about their own work (i.e., to grant interviewees agency in the final thesis). Considering that very little has been written on contemporary theatre and performance in the North East, I also deemed it necessary to establish what might potentially become the beginnings of a vocabulary of contemporary

North East theatre, allowing me to explore whether or not there is a collective understanding or consensus about the language used to describe it.

Here, it is important to acknowledge that focus on keywords is a common feature of academia, where they are often designed to act as prompts, provocations or classifying principles in conference themes and calls for papers. Keywords are in this regard a feature of academic orthodoxy. However, keyword analysis also has a place within a Marxist tradition tracing back to Raymond Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* in 1976. Wider interest in keyword analysis in Performance Studies also resurfaced during the latter stages of my research. Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal et al.'s 2021 article, 'Marxist Keywords for Performance,' argues that a 'range of meanings given to such words as commodity, class, or the state reveals more than a slight degree of imprecision or disagreement' (25), which the authors suggest necessitates 'a need to interrogate the categories used for discussing performance's political economy' (25). Rekindled interest in keyword analysis more broadly also reflects the fact that 2021 marked one hundred years since the birth of Williams.[11]

A potential problem or limitation with keyword analysis, however, is perhaps one that pertains to arts and humanities research more generally: a tendency to focus on definitions and etymologies – part of an urge to state or clarify where borderlines lie between concepts. Not only can this lead to dogmatism, which becomes interminable, but it also postpones analysis because significant time is spent laying out the history (for example) of the word 'popular' with all its potential understandings and adaptations. What is more, keyword analysis might be critiqued on the grounds that it eschews overlaps and associations between terms and concepts, emphasising uniqueness or difference over relationality. Nonetheless, I deemed precision to be necessary in establishing a lexicon for performance, which facilitates productive discussion and maintains a clear focus for analysis.

I then expanded my reading into the various keywords alongside writing about each production. I discovered that three of the four terms constituted live issues and debates in contemporary theatre and performance studies. Daniel Schulze's *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make it Real* (2017) had just been published. Sternberg Press had recently launched a fourteen-part series on contemporaneity in 2016. I found the same level of active interest when researching official history in relation to the

[11] *Red Pepper* magazine introduced a new series on keywords in discourse 'to mark Williams' ongoing influence on our publication and to ensure the accessibility of political discourse and left-wing ideas' (Jones).

rewriting of master narratives, evident in 'Part I' of Claire Cochrane and Robinson's edited collection, *Theatre History and Historiography* (2016). The difficulty here was to quickly absorb a significant amount of literature and constantly keep up to date with new publications emerging on a regular basis, while simultaneously taking up my own position in a number of crowded fields. In what felt like a moment of relief, I found little work on the term lavish, which enabled me to excavate fresh terrain (though this presented its own challenges).

Eleven distinct literature reviews were required and carried out in this thesis. In addition to the four literature reviews on each keyword, I surveyed scholarship on oral history theory and on keyword analysis, cited above. I also surveyed scholarship on Northern identity; the North East region; the history of regional theatre in Britain; and recent publications on contemporary British theatre, at which point I discovered the North East's striking absence. Lastly, I carried out a survey of literature on theatre and performance in the North East – arguably the most specialist (but dispersed) of the areas – which led to my engagement with the work of Plater; Bill Lancaster; Chris Lanigan; Natasha Vall; Dave Russell; Duška Radosavljević; and Rosalind Haslett. The task of assembling this material was itself a major component of the research, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

This iterative process of research – from carrying out interviews, identifying keywords, reading around the concepts in scholarship, through to my consideration of each term in relation to the theatre productions – frames the work that was required to get underneath each keyword. They were wrapped in many layers of jargon and codified a wide range of contradictions (which highlights problems with usage of the terms as shortcuts). It then took me several years of further research, reading around each term, watching the productions, occasionally returning to follow-up interviews for further discussion, and writing multiple drafts of the performance analyses using my own notes and recollections. As a result, I came to think of the keywords as codes or shibboleths just as much as household concepts. On one hand, I thought I 'got' what practitioners meant when they used these words (which in a sense challenges the idea that I was a novice in the interviews). But on the other hand, what I thought I knew turned out to be, perhaps unsurprisingly, far more complex.

Also worth mentioning is that I switched from full-time to part-time study in May 2018 (half-way into the project), which extended the thesis' endpoint from 2019 to 2022. By that point, I had seen three of the four shows, written a draft of the November Club chapter, and was reading widely on the four keywords. In one respect, switching to part-time enabled more

time spent with each production and thus much deeper engagement with companies' work. Yet, I also found that switching to part-time elongated the actual moment of study. It gave me more time and mental space, but the temptation was to simply fill that space with even more analysis and reading (especially as more publications emerged into the field). While switching to part-time made analysis easier because the dust continued to settle on the shows (even though this also meant that shows became less fresh in my memory), the research shifted more from ethnography to historiography. This led to a temptation to continually reframe productions with more historical 'context' – which I found especially difficult in writing about three of the four keywords on which scholars were actively publishing work.

1.2 The Challenges of Contemporary Theatre Research in North East England

The difficulty presented by switching to part-time was not, of course, the only challenge I encountered in carrying out this research. Below, I cover the pragmatic issues raised by the contemporariness of the research and iterative nature of the methodology. I then consider ethical issues relating to self-censorship (of interviewees) and my own vexed position as a regional insider/outsider. I then move to address more conceptual issues – still inflected with ethical tensions – which include anxieties regarding the bringing of the vernacular into the official (i.e., what it means to shine a light on the region's theatre culture in an academic setting); concerns regarding the immediacy of the research; and the risks of neglecting the past in researching the contemporary.

1.2.1 The (A)liveness of Contemporary Research

One clear advantage of carrying out contemporary research is that everyone making the work is alive and can be interviewed, with obvious benefits for documentation. Interviewees are themselves valuable sources of information with unique perspectives on their work. Citing their accounts enables accuracy when discussing the productions and provides them with a greater level of agency in relation to its interpretation, as cited above. I interviewed many participants a second time after watching the theatre productions for further discussion. At the same time, due to the issue of maintaining good relationships with other artists, venues, producers etcetera, who practitioners may want to work with in the future, restrictions tend to be placed on what 'can' and 'cannot' be said (which also means that not everyone is necessarily willing or able to be interviewed). This, I suggest, is heightened in the relatively close-knit and interdependent theatre community of the North East.

In addition, these moments of self-censorship arguably also reveal part of the clandestine nature of the wider theatre industry, where what is known is passed on in 'unofficial' observations that might be considered 'common knowledge' yet cannot be cited. Indeed, in the interviews, participants often self-censored by making clear that they were expressing an opinion (which they may have formed based also on the opinions of others) or that they wanted certain things to be off the record, which might be considered where the 'real' conversation took place. On some occasions, then, interviewees did not want to make private information public in the thesis (but were happy to share this information in interview). On other occasions, it was more of a professional necessity. While these unofficial observations contributed to expanding my own knowledge of issues in the region's theatre sector, I did not cite them in the final thesis and thus ensured confidentiality.

The nature of the iterative approach also meant that the interviews lacked an explicit direction of travel or tangible set of goals. There were moments when interviewees sought to lead the conversation in a particular direction. While this might be considered to reflect their intention to 'manipulate' me as a researcher (leading me to research what they wanted me to research), it was central to the collaborative nature of the interviews. I deemed it necessary to allow interviewees to lead the conversation at times, while staying alert to when the conversation appeared to be veering off-topic. The issue was that I did not truly know what 'off-topic' meant because it might be all relevant in the future depending on what issues would arise in the theatre productions.

The iterative nature of the methodology also reflects the 'live' nature of the research. At the initial point of interview, none of the shows had yet been made. I then wrote about productions immediately after they were staged. They became 'past' and thus part of a historical moment, but arguably not part of a definable period. Covering a wide range of issues and topics during the interviews therefore enabled a sense of flexibility, as there were many unknowns about what issues would arise in each show or where each show would fit in a longer-term history (whether that be practitioners' narratives of their own lives; each theatre company's history; wider socio-political contexts; or in relation to developments in theatre and performance studies). We discussed the past (how each interviewee had arrived at this place and moment in their lives/careers); the present (what they found interesting and important now that they had arrived at this point); and the future (what they hoped for the productions and indeed their wider forecasts regarding theatre, both in relation to their own practice and in terms of wider issues and developments in the industry). I was not sure what

would prove to be essential later in the research process, but I came to think of everything as valuable for producing a more nuanced account.

1.2.2 The Slipperiness of Memory

The fact that I was using oral testimony to generate evidence also led me to engage with central disputes in the field. The main criticisms of oral history tend to be that it deals with memory, which is unreliable and inconsistent; that oral accounts only represent one individual and therefore cannot be used to understand wider social developments; and that the very act of interviewing a participant influences the remembering, thus undermining objectivity. Writing in 1997, for instance, Eric Hobsbawn noted that '[m]ost oral history today is personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts' (206). Catherine Merridale notes that Hobsbawn quipped elsewhere that 'threnodies are not an argument, and memories are definitely not facts' (qtd. in Merridale). Yet, my engagement with feminist oral history theory cited above came to inform my view that oral history is sometimes the *only* method for retrieving undocumented or 'hidden' pasts.

The potential difficulties and limitations of oral history did not therefore strike me as justifications for avoiding it. In fact, some critics argue that the use of unofficial sources and methodologies such as oral history can often help to 'recover the history of those who may not have left written records behind or who were in other ways silent. The history of working-class lives, for example, has been better brought to life by oral history' (Kandiah). Raphael Samuel also argued that, in his view, 'a ballad or song, a novel or a poem, is as much a historical document as a cartulary or a pipe roll' (15) – advocating for as broad a conception of evidence and documentary material as possible in recognition of what he called the promiscuity of sources. These arguments came to influence my view of forms of unofficial history such as oral history to be vital methods of retrieving other or subaltern pasts.

1.2.3 Insider/Outsider

The notion of what 'can' and 'cannot' be said mentioned above also highlighted my own in-between position as insider/outsider. I was independent to the creative process – important in that I could probe interviewees on their working relationships without feeling compromised. At the same time, however, I was part of the process (and history) in the sense that the very act of interviewing people was instrumental and potentially influential. I therefore felt a sense of conflicting allegiances – pressure to act as an ambassador for alternative perspectives and for establishment values. I later came to think of all history as interventionist, which is to say

that the act of producing a history means that the historian unavoidably becomes embroiled. Living and working in the North East in particular can sometimes make it feel as though there is no true outsider position, which is even more apparent in the case of the region's relatively tight-knit theatre sector. While this idea of the tight-knit community can rehearse productive notions of togetherness – that we are all one North East 'family' without hierarchy, pretension, or prejudice (which has a seductive quality) – it sometimes creates pressure to be a 'team player' (which is sometimes used to mask power imbalances in the region).

My vexed insider/outsider position also raised fundamental questions of care and trust. With regards to North East theatre, people (outside academia) hold almost all of the knowledge. I have reflected on what I am doing to this knowledge as a result of bringing it into scholarship. I hope that I am preserving it for the long-term and contributing to its future development with my analysis, bringing these companies and productions 'to light' but also placing them in dialogue with each other. Yet, there is also a risk that I am locking up more knowledge behind the walls of the university. Rather than leading me to think of academia as elitist or carceral, however, carrying out the research underlined to me the importance of the open-access agenda and the idea that universities can (and arguably should) use their resources to equip and empower the local communities by which they are surrounded, and thus prioritise forms of vernacular culture which have tended to be shut out of academic scholarship and professional archival preservation.[12]

1.2.4 Distance, Objectivity, Presentism

The idea that the contemporary historian is in among everything as it is unfolding – too close to the subject and/or material to be able to periodise adequately and 'dispassionately' examine it – also warrants further discussion.[13] While it is true that what the past means cannot be known until it literally becomes past, there is no such thing as objective history (or

[12] As evidenced in pioneering work by Robinson and Laura Carletti on the topic of 'citizen scholars' (2019), which was designed to enable Nottingham Theatre Royal to preserve and manage its own archives and histories by building a research community of experts and non-experts.

[13] Some critics have referred to a 'lingering suspicion of historians as a profession that 'contemporary history' is little more than a tautology' (Lowe). Contemporary *theatre* history might be said to produce even deeper anxieties. Contemplating Edith Wyschogrod's work on the notion of speaking on behalf of the dead, Cochrane and Robinson write that such forms of history might 'provoke the feelings of inferiority which tend to go with the territory of artform history — are we as theatre historians 'real' historians?' (12).

that objectivity increases with the passage of time).[14] As Lancaster argues with regards to North East history, historians are active meaning-makers (38) – not accessing the past as detached observers but always engaged in the negotiation of a variety of ethical and methodological dilemmas about how to gather material; what parameters or limits to set; who or what to trust; how to validate evidence; what to do when one encounters gaps or contradictions in the record; what to include or leave out; how to see one's blind spots; and how to arrive at a position in the production of a narrative, theory, or argument.

The idea that the contemporary historian cannot make history *of* the material because they are too close to it or because the dust has not yet settled on events also casts the contemporary researcher as mere fact grubber. They may be collecting evidence, but evidence *of what*? It is not yet evidence, but just *stuff*. Only future historians are seemingly empowered to decide what is and what is not important. But this perspective on contemporary history creates a hierarchy in which those who generate the macro-histories up to (but not including) the present are the serious historians, while those who research the 'here and now' are casual collectors (i.e., not 'real' historians). It also suggests that the present moment cannot be understood – with obvious implications on our collective ability to theorise and build utopian futures. However, carrying out this research has revealed to me that the present moment *can* be understood. What will or will not be important is unclear, which underlines the need to document as much as possible. More than this, it is arguably *all* important i.e., useful in the production of fuller, more complete, detailed, and nuanced history.

At the same time, however, focus on the contemporary also revealed to me difficult tensions between presentism and action. There is a tendency in the region's professional theatre sector to march on at speed. Once a theatre production has been staged, following Diana Taylor (2003), it slips into the regional repertoire but not necessarily the regional archive, as many of the region's theatres do not maintain stable, accessible archives. Focus on the contemporary moment can therefore sustain or reproduce a lack of care in preserving what is now past and a broader cultural forgetting of what came before, which is ironic in a region so often preoccupied with its own roots. In this way, focus on the contemporary moment can be considered myopic and ahistorical. But equally, this reinforces the importance *of* the

[14] Samuel argues along similar lines that the essays he presents in *Theatres of Memory*, first published in 1994, 'return again and again to the idea of history as an organic form of knowledge, and one whose sources are promiscuous, drawing not only on real-life experience but also memory and myth, fantasy and desire; not only the chronological past of the documentary record but also the timeless one of 'tradition'.' (39).

contemporary moment because only in taking action *in the present* can critics preserve culture in history and/or seek to avert perceived disasters in the future.

1.3 Chapter Summaries and Company Overviews

In Chapter Two, I engage with what is meant by the North East, how it has been represented in the past, and what is already known about its theatre culture. This involves considering the North East's position in a wider geographic and discursive 'North' (of England) and the extent to which the North East has been framed as both 'true' North and a distinctive region in its own right. I then provide an analysis of the region's popular representation in film and television, drawing out central themes, images, and narratives which underpin dominant external perceptions of the North East. This discussion also provides context and backdrop for the performance analyses I present in later chapters. I then move to consider North East theatre's striking absence (arguably disappearance) from the national theatre record. I then present an assessment of the scholarship which does exist on theatre and performance in the region. I close with reflections on understandings of North East theatre.

In Chapter Three, I examine November Club's production of *Beyond the End of the Road* (2017). November Club is a professional site-specific performing arts company established in its current guise in 2007. It is situated in Morpeth and works predominantly in community settings in rural Northumberland. *Beyond* is a musical which depicts present-day rural farming life in the county. The show toured throughout the summer of 2017 to community venues in Hexham; Kirknewton; Thropton; Felton; Norham; Shilbottle; Bardon Mill; Whalton; and Holy Island. It concluded with a one-off celebration performance at Sage Gateshead. I saw the productions in June 2017 at Hexham Auction Mart, Bardon Mill Village Hall, and Sage Gateshead. *Beyond* was written by playwright Laura Lindow; directed by November Club's Artistic Director, Cinzia Hardy; music composed and directed by musician and November Club Associate Artist, Katie Doherty; and performed by a professional cast of seven and a house band. My analysis is supported by interviews with Lindow; Hardy; Doherty; actor Michael Blair; and Participation Producer Sarah Hudson, who was responsible for organising an extensive programme of participatory and community engagement work on the tour.

I use *Beyond* to explore the implications and significance of the use of the term authentic as a descriptor for November Club's work. I argue that authenticity derives from the show's representation of a Northumbrian 'way of life,' exploring culturally and geographically

specific traditions and themes of ancestry, land, work, family, community, and belonging. In this regard, I examine the extent to which conceptions of rural authenticity underpin the production. I also consider the ways in which November Club validates the claim for its work as authentic. I argue that in *Beyond*, this included gathering the testimony of local audiences as well as representing 'real people' (i.e., individuals without a professional stake in the work) in both the creative process and final production. This signals the extent to which November Club prioritises the agency of its audiences, which in turn validates Artistic Director Cinzia Hardy's claim for and belief in the authenticity of the company.

In Chapter Four, I examine Live Theatre's production of *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes* (2017). Live Theatre is a professional building-based new writing theatre company established circa 1973, which, since 1982, has been situated on Newcastle-upon-Tyne's Quayside.[15] Described by Live Theatre's then Artistic Director, Max Roberts, as 'delightful alternative Christmas entertainment' (qtd. in Hardwick), *Snowflakes* is a festive coming-of-age story which depicts the lives of young adults Rosie and Charlie – the titular snowflakes. The play is simultaneously set in present-day Newcastle – against a backdrop of economic austerity, precarity, and anxiety – and the quantum multiverse, an infinite web of interlocking realities between which characters zip. It draws direct inspiration from Nick Payne's 2012 play, *Constellations*, which premiered in London. I saw *Snowflakes* on three occasions during its Christmas run, and my performance analysis is supplemented by interviews with writer Nina Berry and director Graeme Thompson.

I explore the implications and significance of the use of the term contemporary as a descriptor for *Snowflakes*. I argue that *Snowflakes* can be thought of as contemporary in the sense that it stages the national zeitgeist of the mid-2010s, characterised by postmodern flux and the period of neoliberal fallout after the so-called global financial crisis in 2008. Rosie and Charlie are at once trapped in a local here and now (present-day Newcastle) and a global-virtual capitalist continuum (the multiverse) in which they are placeless, nomadic, alienated, and impotent – orphaned, in some respects, by the post-2008 era of British austerity and caught within the contemporary's dizzying interlocking of times, (re)semblances and forms. I demonstrate how these ideas are reflected in *Snowflakes*' staging of the multiverse, which

[15] There appears to be a lack of consensus on whether Live Theatre started in 1972 or 1973, perhaps due in part to its initial formation as a loose socialist collective. Plater cites 1972 (81); Vall cites 1973 (85); while Haslett writes that it began 'in the early 1970s' (276).

internalises neoliberal logics of social atomisation. In this respect, I consider *Snowflakes* an example of what Mark Fisher calls Young Adult Dystopia (228).

At the wider discursive level, I argue that 'contemporary' when applied to *Snowflakes* essentially doubles as 'metropolitan.' In taking inspiration from Nick Payne's *Constellations*, *Snowflakes* dresses itself in metropolitan clothes, which frames London as the de facto trend setter. Importing the art styles and tastes of the metropolitan centre raises the possibility of wooing the metropolitan press, the local press, and Live Theatre's patrons all at once, achieving an apparent utopia of critical and commercial (and local and national) success. However, I consider this to be a strategy which risks reinforcing Live Theatre's position as a satellite of London. I suggest that imitating London reinforces Newcastle's own entrapment and status as provincial (i.e., deferential to the centre), as well as the belief that trends and tastes emanate from the centre and ripple out to the regions, with a number of implications for Live Theatre's power and position in regional and national theatre culture.

In Chapter Five, I examine Darlington Operatic Society's production of the well-known jukebox musical, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (2018). Darlington Operatic Society is an amateur musical theatre company established in 1912 and performs at the Darlington Hippodrome (formerly the Darlington Civic Theatre), which reopened in 2017 under its new name following a major renovation. I saw *Priscilla* on the final three nights of its eleven-night run in April 2018. I interviewed the show's (externally hired, professional) director and choreographer, Martyn Knight; Jo Hand, a professionally trained dancer and choreographer, who describes herself as 'a resident director/choreographer with Darlington Operatic Society, but on this particular production was assistant director to Martyn Knight'; and Julian Cound, a Trustee of Darlington Operatic Society, whose day job is Marketing Officer for Darlington Hippodrome, and who performed in the lead role of Bernadette.

I use *Priscilla* to consider what it means for Darlington Operatic Society to describe its work as lavish. In one sense, I argue that *Priscilla* enables local audiences to briefly escape the reality of austerity. The cultivation of a lavish experience turns the show into a social safety valve – an idea I explore in relation to Carnival. But I go on to argue that there is no true escape – no free-floating world into which audiences can disappear. *Priscilla* is not 'just' hedonistic fun, nor simply a money-making machine for Darlington Operatic Society and the rights holders. In this regard, I explore the ways in which prioritising pleasure remains a political decision. I build upon the work of David Savran who argues that musical theatre is

particularly well-suited to developing a politics of pleasure in that 'the utopian—and mimetic—dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced' (216). This frames my consideration and contestation of the common framing of *Priscilla* as a 'universal' story and 'feel-good' experience.

In turn, this leads me to complicate the extent to which *Priscilla*'s queer politics of representation rewrite Darlington's depiction as a generic protagonist in a story of North East post-industrial decline. On one hand, *Priscilla*'s performance of queer identities unsettles the dominant image of the North East and presents a 'colourful' alternative to 'drab' depictions. On the other hand, I argue that the show maintains the status quo in a variety of ways, suggesting that it is not as alternative as it might appear. In this regard, I also complicate the extent to which *Priscilla* fits within an emerging queer performance scene in the North East, driven by the likes of Curious Arts in Newcastle and Gateshead, *Queer & Now* at Live Theatre, and a growing contemporary drag scene in the likes of *Dragfetti* festival at Alphabetti Theatre in Newcastle and the work of Bonnie and the Bonnettes.

In Chapter Six, I examine the People's Theatre in association with Shoe Tree Arts' production of *HEATON!* (2018). The People's Theatre is an amateur building-based repertory company established in 1911 which, since 1962, has been situated in its own building in Heaton, a suburb of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Shoe Tree Arts Association is a local community arts group established in the mid-2010s. The play commemorates the lives of select 'pioneers' who lived or worked in Heaton between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. As such, *HEATON!* celebrates a history of social reform and innovation in fields such as engineering, the arts, science, and sport. The play is written by Peter Dillon, a local resident and co-founder of Shoe Tree Arts; directed by Chris Heckels, a People's Theatre member since 1970; and was performed by the People's Theatre ensemble over five nights in July 2018. A total cast of approximately forty performers is accompanied by the Heaton Band, Heaton Voices Choir, and a chorus of supporting roles. My performance analysis is supplemented by interviews with Dillon; Heckels; actor Stephen Sharkey; and Anne Cater, a member of the People's Theatre management group and Chair of the production committee at the time of interview.

I consider what the claim for *HEATON!* as an official history might mean, and what this surprising gambit has to tell us about both the position of amateur theatre in the national

theatre-making ecology and how the North East represents its own histories. To do this, I examine how the labels 'official' and 'unofficial' operate as rhetorical, discursive constructions, used to authorise particular statements, evidence and sources. I argue that while *HEATON!* can be thought of as unofficial in the sense that it is the work of a hyper-local amateur theatre community overseeing the preservation of its own heritage (i.e., beyond the purview of academic or civic institutions), it is also official in the sense that it rehearses a regional master narrative and indeed wider narratives of British imperial history which prioritise celebrated individuals drawn from the white middle- and upper-classes.

1.4 Conclusion

There is undoubtedly a 'myth-busting' element to the research, as the four case studies demonstrate that the North East's theatrical culture extends beyond the Geordierama tradition (and the epicentre of working-class industrial Tyneside). At the same time, the productions reveal the residual, even enduring, strength of Geordierama, which sees the companies and productions under consideration return to matters of regional cohesion, traditional social roles, and community togetherness. The research also uncovers a highly resilient region, whose theatre culture has endured and even prospered in the wake of British austerity, having expanded considerably since the mid-2010s. The findings also demonstrate the profound limitations of our understanding of British theatre culture, which has omitted a region with decades-long theatrical activity from the record. Furthermore, it offers insights into ethical dilemmas which emerge from carrying out contemporary theatre research, particularly in a marginalised region which is fraught with anxieties regarding its own agency and (mis)representation; reflections on regional insiderness; and attests to the importance of acknowledging self-identification in the examination of artistic works. This approach signals a privileging of regional agency, yet also highlights the need to critically engage with the terms that companies use to describe their work.

Chapter 2. Northeasternness, Geordierama, and the National Theatre Record

Discussion of the theatrical culture of the North East firstly requires engagement with what is meant by the North East, how it has been represented in the past, and what is already known about its theatre culture. In section 2.1, I begin by establishing a definition of the North East. This involves considering the North East's position in a wider geographic and discursive 'North' (of England) and its framing as a distinctive region. In section 2.2, I provide an analysis of the region's popular representation in film and television, drawing out central themes, images, and narratives which tend to underpin external perceptions of the region. This discussion also provides the backdrop for the performance analyses I present in later chapters. In section 2.3, I consider North East theatre's striking absence from the national theatre record. In section 2.4, I present an assessment of the scholarship which does exist on theatre and performance in the region. In section 2.5, I reflect on further issues and questions arising from the literature on North East theatre.

2.1 Defining the North East Region

North East England is typically situated in a wider geographic 'North' (of England). While the North might be considered an administrative area between Scotland and the borders of Cheshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire, it is also often understood as discursively constructed and socially mediated. In *Looking North: Northern England and the national imagination* (2004), Russell points to the importance of position and perspective in defining the North. From Scotland, Russell writes, 'the whole English North looks rather like the British Midlands, from the north-east of England the immediate terrain can seem 'truly' northern and cities such as Sheffield and Manchester distantly and satisfyingly southern' (14). Ultimately, Russell suggests, 'demarcation can become a matter of individual perspective with boundaries defined according to family tradition, place of occupation and location of leisure activities' (14-15). Who is, and who is not, 'truly' Northern tends to dominate the territorial disputes when they recur, which can be often, in discourse.

Despite efforts to depict the North's cultural diversity and complexity – examined from many perspectives in Neville Kirk's *Northern Identities* (2000) and, more recently, Katharine Cockin's *The Literary North* (2012) – Russell argues that 'its core, stereotypical imagery has basically survived in all its pared down simplicity. The North as urban and industrial, grim

and bleak, harsh and uncultured' (268-9) – potentially established in the first third of the twentieth century by J.B. Priestley's 'half derelict' North, whose people, 'living on in the queer ugly places, are shabby, bewildered, unhappy' (410). Kurt Hutton's 1939 'The Faces of Wigan's Workers' can be also considered instrumental in establishing the popular image of the flat-cap wearing, pipe-smoking miner as the face of the North.

Equally, however, Russell goes on to argue that lying at the core of the North's representation:

> has been its construction as the place where necessary balances and correctives are erected against the bourgeois, complacent, softer, perhaps even effete aspects of national culture and character, often associated with the South. Its status as the 'land of the working class' with the implications of authenticity and moral worth that this generates in the eyes of many external enthusiasts has been vital here. Related to this, although not deriving exclusively from it, has been a widespread belief in its capacity to cleanse and rejuvenate. Just as its bracing climate and rugged hillsides have been invested with the power to refresh the bodies and souls of jaded visitors, so its supposed quick humour, communal warmth, lack of pretension and consequent capacity to prick metropolitan condescension, have been seen as central to the resuscitation of tired cultural practices (268).

The fact that the North can serve as shorthand for a place of social warmth, humour, and lack of pretension on one hand, yet be seen as a backwards place of low culture and education on the other, demonstrates that it can be made to fit a variety of narratives, often contingent on a number of stereotypes. This mutable conception of Northernness informs Russell's conclusion that:

> [t]he question as to whether it has ever been possible to speak of a 'northern identity' in the sense of a shared consciousness of a defined community and culture has not been extensively discussed within academic literature. Where it has, a consensus emerges that northern consciousness is both extremely fragile and generally secondary to other systems of identification (273).

Where does the North East sit within this wider North? On one hand, the North East might be considered quintessentially Northern given how *far* North it is. In this regard, the North East shares in the North's traditions, myths, and dominant perceptions. Yet, the North East is often considered to be its own region, stretching from the Scottish to North Yorkshire borders. In particular, the North East is frequently characterised as a distinct land or sovereign nation. From Dobson's formative 'A Light Hearted Guide to Geordieland' in 1973; John Hall's rallying cry for 'The Geordie nation' in turning Newcastle United into a 'Barcelona of the North' in the 1990s (qtd. in Braid); to Richard Dawson & Circle's 'Republic of Geordieland' (a musical collection recorded during the Covid-19 lockdown), there is an enduring, semi-

ironic tradition of depicting the North East (specifically Tyneside) as its own territory, which tends to be considered antipodal to the English South (East). The North East therefore appears at once a paradigmatic sub-region of the North and, more oddly, a separate region altogether – geographically and discursively vexed.

Also worth mentioning is the North's apparent reputation for complaining (a trait often associated with the North East, too) because it raises the vexed topic of regional advocacy. Citing Martin Wainwright's *True North: In Praise of England's Better Half* (2009), Tom Hazeldine writes that:

> [i]n language reminiscent of Thatcher's diatribe about 'moaning minnies' when challenged by a Tyne Tees reporter about high unemployment in the North East, Wainwright warns about a victim mentality spreading out from the coalfields: a misplaced suspicion that London will never play fair by the region. It would be much better, in his view, to accentuate the positive. 'I know there is a downside to life up here, just as there is everywhere in the world. But we really don't need to go on about it' (3).

On one hand, this notion of 'accentuating the positive' might be said to reflect Colls and Lancaster's belief that the North East should embrace regional pride and put it to work in productively rebuilding the region's self-esteem (xiv) – an idea which I discuss further below. On the other hand, there is a risk that accentuating the positive effectively leads to uncritical cheerleading, which dismisses problems and silences criticisms (in the vein of 'progressive patriotism'). There is also a risk that accentuating the positive tips into outright sentimentalism for an imagined region of excellence that sweeps over internal nuances and differences. Advocacy is thus a central point of contention in the North East – evident in the region's theatre industry in which numerous theatre-makers appear keen to dislodge the 'grim up North' image by positively depicting the region as vibrant, multi-layered, and progressive, and thus free of the 'old' myths and images that emanate from the coalfield. Yet, dilemmas emerge from burying the past or putting a positive spin on all situations to 'sell' the region, pulling together in ways that might deny agency or silence critique.

2.1.1 Region-building in the North East

To examine this further, I suggest that there are two overarching phases of twentieth-century 'region-building' in North East England – with particular debt to the work of Vall – which have maintained advocacy's position at the top of the regional agenda. Phase one began after World War Two during which a variety of regional institutions played a part in constructing the North East. In *Cultural region: North east England 1945-2000* (2011), Vall presents a landmark assessment of English regional cultural policy, revealing the impact of the new

cultural institutions that emerged after 1945 – such as Northern Arts, the Northern Sinfonia, Tyne Tees Television, the BBC, Beamish Museum, and the Amber Film Collective – upon a region with deeply rooted vernacular traditions. Such institutions can be said to have formalised the region-building process. Vall calls Northern Arts 'the Arts Council of Great Britain's regional board that was to become the blue print for regional cultural policy nationally' (99).[16] The North East can be considered a pioneer of regional arts policy, important in constructing the region as distinctive and proving that being the furthest English region from London does not mean it is last in the queue.

Phase two emerged in the 1980s when discussions emerged around how the North East might rebuild after deindustrialisation. Here, the region-building process was renewed and enshrined in Colls and Lancaster's (also landmark) text *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, published in 1992 and reprinted in 2005, in which the pair advocated for 'a federation of *the regions*' against 'the centralised nation state and its absolutist claims' (xiv). For Colls and Lancaster, the North East:

> finds itself as the forgotten corner of a British nation state which, after Raymond Williams, is both too big and too small for the job it has to do: too big to govern effectively (with due representation and understanding), and too small to do what a state needs to do (on a European scale) to ensure the decent and equal welfare of its citizens (xiv).

In the preface to the second edition of *Geordies* in 2005, the pair recall that the book emerged from the 1987 Newcastle History Workshop Conference held at the then Newcastle Polytechnic during 'the era of high Thatcherism,' which over one thousand people from across the North East and beyond attended (Colls and Lancaster vii). They write that *Geordies* sought 'to capture the new zeitgeist of a region emerging from its industrial past but not sure where it was heading' (vii), a debate which was split between a desire to preserve 'a whole culture being wasted and lost forever' and to 'get up, stand up, and make the place again' (vii). Colls and Lancaster also note that memory of the miners' strike 'was still fresh and the Workshop theme, *Speaking for Ourselves,* was an expression of defiance which caught the mood of the moment' (vii). In other words, they talk of a sense of regional unity and common interest in response to the effects of Thatcherism on the region.

[16] Vall also notes that '[o]ne explanation for the north east's distinctive approach to cultural policy may be found in the political regionalism that reached its pinnacle during the 1960s' (101) – an early advocate for which was Arthur Blenkinsop MP and, perhaps more (in)famously, T. Dan Smith.

Notably, Colls and Lancaster recall that the late eighties Workshops 'increasingly explored issues of identity, which began to displace class as their main concern' (vii), later enshrined in *Geordies*' examination of regional culture from many social, racial, and cultural perspectives. In this regard, the Workshops sparked a search for a common identity strong enough to counter that of the Southern, London-oriented 'Englishness' constructed and asserted throughout the Thatcher era. The North East appeared to be uniting, in a sense, against this dominant form of English identity. As Colls and Lancaster wrote in the preface to the original publication in 1992:

> British national identity resides in the south of England. The North East's human and material resources have been squandered because it is invited to share an identity which imagines that the real nation lives somewhere else. We have to reclaim our resources in order to govern ourselves properly and appropriately. Those who can remember, complain about the loss of 'community spirit'. They talk as if this is inevitable, something to do with 'modern life'. *But it doesn't have to be*. […] As with 'community' the North East has tended to believe that there is a dreadful inevitability about its economic decline. It is as if this is a price that Geordies must pay: that former success created pride, and pride must be punished. Once more, we have to say that this erosion of pride has been a disgraceful squandering of our resources. *Again, it doesn't have to be like this* (xiv-xv).

2.1.2 Millennial Rebirth

The next key text after *Geordies* in 1992 was John Tomaney and Neil Ward's 2001 collection, *A Region in Transition: North East England at the millennium*. Tomaney and Ward wrote at a time of 'rapid economic, social, cultural and political change' (2) and at a time when interest in regional history across Europe was high. The North East notably placed arts and culture at the forefront of its regional rebirth after deindustrialisation, arguably signalling phase three in the North East's region-building story. Symbols of this rebirth include Anthony Gormley's iconic *Angel of the North* built in 1998; the opening of the striking Millennium Bridge over the River Tyne in 2001; as well as Otto Rank's former flour mill in Gateshead – the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, which opened in 2002; shortly followed by a concert venue, Sage Gateshead, in 2004; and Newcastle-Gateshead's strong joint bid for European City of Culture 2008. In broad terms, 'culture' became the new face of the post-industrial region – to an extent led by the regeneration of the Newcastle-Gateshead

Quayside – amid an air of hope and optimism for the region's future in the twenty-first century.[17]

Tomaney and Ward's text echoes the regionalist impulses and interests expressed a decade earlier in Colls and Lancaster's *Geordies* but also as far back as the 1960s during the pinnacle of 'political regionalism' outlined by Vall with regards to the formation of Northern Arts and other leading cultural institutions. Tomaney and Ward argue that '[i]n the social construction of new regional identities the uses of history are important. Interpretation of the past is a key element of cultural representation' (8). They note that while this 'can have a romanticised aspect as can be evidenced in Britain by the growth of the heritage industry' (8), the past can also serve as a guide to the future.[18] Their account also points to the significance of history in the North East – an essential tool for locating 'evidence' of a shared identity and in terms of looking to the past to find a way forward – while cautioning against merely romanticising or seeking to reinstate the past.

A key moment in the North East's twenty-first century history then came in November 2004 when, as Adrian Green and A.J. Pollard note, 'the people of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the historic counties of Durham and Northumberland, along with Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland in North Yorkshire, decisively rejected a regional assembly' (i). This formed the backdrop of Green and Pollard's edited collection in 2007, *Regional Identities in North-East England 1300-2000,* which the pair claim 'set out to answer the question as to whether the North East of England can be shown to have been a coherent and self-conscious region over the centuries' (209). They conclude that '[i]t may be effective advocacy to assert that this has always been a region with a unique history and culture, but it is inaccurate history' (209). For Green and Pollard, the notion of a cohesive North East identity 'is a recent phenomenon overlaying a kaleidoscope of sub-regional associations and connections' (i). As such, the region 'appears to be more fissured and fragile than we like to imagine' (i), which echoes Russell's conclusions regarding Northern identity made three years earlier.

[17] See Christopher Bailey, Steven Miles and Peter Stark's 'Culture-led Urban Regeneration and the Revitalisation of Identities in Newcastle, Gateshead and the North East of England' (2004). Discourses of North East revitalisation are not without contention, however, as reflected in anxieties regarding artwashing and gentrification examined by Stephen Pritchard (2017).

[18] In *The New Regionalism in Western Europe: Territorial Restructuring and Political Change* (1998), Michael Keating calls this 'a search for a 'usable past', a set of historical referents which can guide a regional society on its distinct road to modernization, bridging the past, via the present, with the future' (1998: 84).

Also in 2007, Lancaster, Diana Newton and Vall's *An Agenda for Regional History* (2007) was published, which grew out of an international colloquium convened by the North East England History Institute (NEEHI) in 2004, part of a notable flurry in regional history studies across Europe in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[19] In a chapter on the North East, Lancaster reflects on the extent to which the contemporary region creates its own identity 'and how much of this process of representation is a response to external expectations of North East authenticity' (37) – concluding that it is likely a mix. While aspects of the North East's culture such as its dialect might be considered specific to the region, Lancaster suggests that such processes are not exclusive to the North East while suggesting that '[f]urther comparison with other European regions may help to establish how far the creation of an identity in response to external expectations is a peculiarity of English regional culture' (37).

Lancaster goes on to conclude that:

> Geography, culture, the economy, language, consumption, politics all make up the region but they are all in a constant state of flux, often at very different tempos and directions. […] Nonetheless in the North East there have been specific points at which convergence between these different elements appears to have been significant for regional self consciousness. The popularisation of dialect during the Victorian period is one instance, and the 1960s renaissance of regional self-awareness witnessed an unprecedented degree or affinity between politics and culture. The temporal and spatial complexities that the term 'the North East' embraces, indicates that we need a conceptual approach that recognises and can serve to capture the regional dynamic and probe those moments of change which witness the emergence of the reflective and conscious region. Finally, we need to recognise that historians are part of the process, and that our role as makers and breakers of 'myths' is often integral to the regional project! (37-38).

There is a considerable gap after *An Agenda for Regional History* was published in 2007. Not only was there a winding-down of the North East England History Institute (NEEHI), but the global financial crisis in 2008 might be considered a watershed moment, or a cliff-edge, from which the nation was plunged into an era of economic austerity by David Cameron's Conservative government. The subsequent era of British austerity, extending into the 2020s, led some critics to refer to the 2010s recently as a 'lost decade' (Walker and Toynbee), a phrase which might also characterise the North East region's status as a victim of austerity, and wider political inertia evidenced in lack of action at policy levels on climate change.

[19] The North East England History Institute (NEEHI) was established in 1995 by the five North East universities in association with partners including the Open University and Beamish Museum (Cylex).

In 2019, a new major text emerged on the region's history in the form of Dan Jackson's *The Northumbrians: North East England and its People – A New History* (2019). Jackson argues that:

> the more inclusive term 'Northumbrians' avoids bogging us down in the imprecise demarcation of Geordies and Mackems, the two feuding tribes of Tyne and Wear whose modern rivalry has obscured how much they share in common. In their seminal collection of essays, *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, the great duo Bill Lancaster and Robert Colls made a strong case to reclaim 'Geordies' to include everyone within Northumberland and Durham (or at least the industrial parts of those historic counties), as had been commonplace until the 1980s. Enduring local rivalries have unfortunately ruled this out (vii).

Meanwhile, in *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England* (also 2019), Alex Niven suggests that 'an assertive revival of the late-twentieth push for regional devolution, which preceded the retreat into Englishness over the last two decades, must be at the forefront of our contemporary left revival' (10). Both publications can be seen as part of a regionalist resurgence, which broaden the definition of regional culture beyond Tyneside to Northumberland, while in Niven's case rehabilitating what he calls the 'sleeping giant' of regionalism (10). Again, this regionalist tradition can be traced back to the height of political regionalism in the North East in the 1960s. While the publication of major books and scholarship represent particular moments of activity, interest in regionalism has remained somewhat constant along the way – as Lanigan points out, for instance, in articles in *Northern Review* by Colls (1995) and Lancaster (1996); the *Treasures of the Lost Kingdom of Northumbria* exhibition (1996); the *Tyneside Mystery Plays* (1997); and interest in the 'Lit and Phil' (the largest independent library outside London, based in Newcastle city centre) endeavours of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie (qtd. in Lanigan 112).

Worth highlighting at this point is that literature on North East history tends to be dominated by white male authors. While this reality has been acknowledged in the past, such as in Barry Carr's chapter in *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism* on 'Black Geordies' (135); Lanigan in *A Region in Transition* as part of his discussion of the 'maleness' of the North East regional identity project (112), and disrupted by Vall's work (of 2007 and 2011), the field still appears relatively monocultural and male-dominated. Despite anxieties regarding the irony of my own white male identity, I consider this thesis to build upon not only a feminist tradition in North East arts but also specifically the work of Vall in retrieving a feminist practice in the region's theatre industry.

2.2 Thematising Geordierama: Underdogs, Nostalgia, Spirit

Before that, I will examine the North East's popular representations – effectively its canon – to establish some dominant images and narratives. This also provides the backdrop for my own performance analyses which follow. Beginning with the twentieth-century, the region's canonical screen pieces typically include *The Likely Lads* (1964-66); *Get Carter* (1971); *When The Boat Comes In* (1976-77 and 1981); *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (1983–1984, 1986, 2002, 2004); *Byker Grove* (1989-2006); *Spender* (1990-1993); *Our Friends in the North* (1996); up to *Billy Elliot* (2000) at the beginning of the twenty-first century. From this collection spanning four decades, *The Likely Lads* and *When The Boat Comes In* tend not to reappear very often in the twenty-first century – though the latter lives on in an abstract form via its theme tune in Young's 'Breaded Cod' advert in the 2010s – leaving a handful of productions which endure in the contemporary representation and imagination of the region.

The North East as a setting is central in all of these series and films, as is the casting of local actors. The 'grittiness' of the region (both as an aesthetic and in terms of the depiction of 'hard times') is largely consistent, from *When The Boat Comes In* through *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* and *Our Friends in the North*, up to and including *Billy Elliot*, backed up in literature by Catherine Cookson's Tyne Dock (qtd. in McCord Centre). In particular, it is an urban social realism which fuses elements of the British soap opera/melodrama and documentary tradition, dominated by heavy industry, brick and mortar, grey skies, cold weather, cobbled streets, run-down estates, all of which contribute to maintaining the 'grim up North' adage and impression of drab bleak life in the somewhat amorphous North and North East. The region is presented as predominantly poor, white, and broadly working-class.

Yet, the region's canon also demonstrates a clear interest in local, national, and international politics. *When The Boat Comes In* dramatises the interwar political struggles of the 1920s and '30s, exploring the impact of national and international politics upon Jack Ford (a First World War veteran, played by James Bolam, who returns to his poverty-stricken (fictional) town of Gallowshield in the North East of England). *When The Boat Comes In* also establishes a tradition of workerist and trade union organising in the North East and engagement with the legacy of the socialist Left and national miners' strikes (initially of 1912, then later '72, '74, and '84-85), which underpin a broader preoccupation with wage labour, electoral politics,

worker power, trade unionism, and deindustrialisation in the region's drama.[20] In Series One, North East writers Tom Hadaway, Sid Chaplin and Alex Glasgow contributed episodes, evidencing the overlap between film, theatre, and television, while the first series saw the appearance of actor Val McLane, a co-founder of Live Theatre in 1973 (whose younger brother is fellow North East stalwart Jimmy Nail, who starred as 'Oz' in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*).

Auf Wiedersehen, Pet's multiple revivals in the twenty-first century indicate its enduring appeal, while the original series redeployed a number of canonical themes established in *Get Carter* and *When The Boat Comes In* previously. The original series in 1983-84 depicted the lives of seven out-of-work construction workers from across the country, though centring on three bricklayers from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, who travel to West Germany in search of work. *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* continued previous focus on the plight of white working-class men in the region and masculinity.[21] Themes of work and unemployment also endure, shifting into a context of North East deindustrialisation, cast in the shadow of the national miners' strikes of the 1970s, while the first series of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* pre-empts the miners' strike of 1984-85. The all-male white group of 'lads' also establish a number of negative traits with which the North East became linked, which include petty crime and corruption; alcohol; violence; jingoism; xenophobia; and womanising.

Crime and local corruption endure as major preoccupations in the region's canon overall – skirting lawless and respectable society, professional veneer versus seedy underbelly. The noir school of English crime fiction is evident in the gangster plot of *Get Carter*; stories of crooks and petty theft in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*; and police and local government corruption in terms of T. Dan Smith's representation in *Our Friends in the North*. Police detective drama *Spender* in the early 1990s is less well-known due to its short run, though it further evidences the popularity of crime drama in the region and remains significant in terms of Jimmy Nail's

[20] Such preoccupations are also enshrined in the Durham Miners' Gala – an annual gathering and labour festival, first held in 1871, organised by the Durham Miners' Association and held on the second Saturday in July in the city of Durham (Durham Miners). John Tomaney writes that although the last mine closed in 1994, 'the Gala has survived the demise of industry and the conflicts and struggles which it produced' (Tomaney). For Tomaney, the Gala 'expresses a collective memory of the coalfield and the ways of life its supported. It represents intangible cultural heritage. It is living history. It expresses an identity located in place' (Tomaney).

[21] See Karen McNally's 'The Geordie and the American Hero: Revisiting Classic Hollywood Masculinity in *When the Boat Comes In*' (2008).

starring role (contributing to his canonisation in the region, further secured by the popularity of his 1995 song, 'Big River,' now a local anthem).

The relationship between the North East (principally Newcastle) and London also figures heavily in the region's canon. In *Get Carter*, Newcastle-born gangster Jack lived in London for years in the employ of organised crime bosses before returning to Newcastle and Gateshead to attend the funeral of his brother. In the BBC's 1981 revival of *When The Boat Comes In*, the fourth series followed Jack Ford as he returns to Britain penniless after six years spent bootlegging in the United States, as he sets up in London. In *Our Friends*, opening in the 1960s, the character of 'Geordie' (played by Daniel Craig) accepts a job offer from a sleazy crime boss and works as his assistant in the Soho sex industry. In *Billy Elliot*, set in 1984 in County Durham during the miners' strike, Billy auditions for, and is ultimately accepted into, the Royal Ballet School, and is therefore able to escape the poverty and destitution of the provincial North East and 'make it' as a dancer in London.

Broader themes in the region's canon include: gambling, drug-dealing, alcohol and pubs; violence and feuds (both territorial and familial); marriage and relationships; financial hardship; money and debt; football (and sport in general); local politics; socialism; the Jarrow March; working-class life, culture and 'roots' set against metropolitan life and 'posh' taste; regional diaspora and homecoming (cycles of leaving/returning to the motherland); industrial heritage (fishing, factory work, shipbuilding, mining, and wider stories of post- and deindustrialisation); Thatcherism; the Army and First World War; masculinity and sexuality; social mobility (set against the threat that this presents to characters' humble roots and working-class authenticity); ideas of escaping (both financial hardship and the region itself), 'making it big' and 'stardom'; and teen/youth culture and coming-of-age stories. These themes tend to constellate around stories of local communities which valorise the lives of ordinary people (typically dominated by white everymen) and the political contexts in which personal relationships, social issues, and local traditions operate within and sometimes against.

Regarding youth culture, *Byker Grove*, a teen drama set in a youth club in Byker (though filmed in Benwell), a district of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which aired on CBBC and BBC One, arguably warrants a separate thesis due to its continuous run from 1989 to 2006. The fact that *Byker Grove* focused on issues facing young people; its recognition beyond the region; that it cast a small army of local schoolchildren in principal roles and as extras (arguably making it

something of a rite of passage for child actors in the region); that it was created by two women (writer Adele Rose and producer Andrea Wonfor) who are typically overlooked in a region dominated by men; that it launched the careers of Anthony McPartlin and Declan Donnelly (who later formed the television presenting duo Ant and Dec), Jill Halfpenny, and Donna Air all evidence the validity such a study would possess. *Byker Grove* also played a central role in maintaining a soap opera tradition in the region's canon. Indeed, the fact that Rose was the longest-serving scriptwriter for *Coronation Street* signals the extent to which *Byker Grove* might be considered a '*Corrie* for teenagers.'[22]

The work of Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen (b. 1948), a Finnish photographer who moved to Byker, Newcastle in 1969, is also worthy of note here. For seven years, Konttinen photographed and interviewed the residents of Byker's terraced houses until they – and her own house – were demolished.[23] In a biography of Konttinen on Amber Online, the collective writes that her:

> seminal documentation of Byker, the close-knit community of Newcastle that was her home for seven years while destined for wholesale redevelopment, became a touring exhibition, a book (Jonathan Cape, 1983) and the award-winning Amber film. The work led to national recognition as a key photographic and filmic account of a rich working class culture on the eve of its destruction. In 1980, her *Byker* exhibition was the first photographic exhibition from the UK to be taken to China by The British Council after the Cultural Revolution.

While maintaining the Cooksonesque image of the region populated by the quotidian, working-class, urban inner-city, Konttinen is another central female figure in a region often dominated by men. Her work also captured the daily lives of ordinary people and preserved a culture that might otherwise have been lost. Her internationally acclaimed work – alongside that of the Amber Film Collective – can be also read as further evidence of a strong documentary art tradition which underpins the region's canon. It also points to the distinguished cultural position of Byker, perhaps surprising given the area's economic deprivation, which is evident in the recognition of its iconic Byker Wall estate – an unbroken

[22] Also worthy of note is *Super Gran* which ran from 1985-87, a children's television show adapted by Jenny McDade from a series of books by Forrest Wilson, which was produced by Tyne Tees Television for Children's ITV. The series depicts a grandmother with super powers (played by Scottish actor Gudrun Ure) and was filmed in various locations around North East England, including Tynemouth, Whitley Bay, South Shields, and Beamish Museum. As with *Byker Grove*, the series' young actors were typically local children from the North East.

[23] In the *New York Times*, Matt McCann writes that '[u]rban planners sought flashy new development projects, and some sections, like Byker, were scheduled for demolition. Ms. Konttinen was unaware that she was documenting a place that was about to disappear. Not drawn to gloomy topics, she found the place spirited and interesting.'

block of 620 maisonettes designed by Ralph Erskine and constructed in the 1970s; the *Byker Grove* television series discussed above; and in Northern Stage's extensive programme of contemporary performance and community work in Raby Street and the Byker Wall estate.[24]

Despite an internationalist set of preoccupations, however, the region's twentieth-century canon tends to be subject to charges of longing for the past (either simply a love *of* the past or a desire to return to the 'good old days'). Lanigan writes that 'far from seeking to escape past events and dramas, there appears to be a cultural need to hang on to them. Drama, disaster and distress are remembered and celebrated' (124). Lanigan cites Beamish Museum and 'the solidarity and struggle' of Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door* (which I examine at length below), through to:

> the melodrama and sentimentality of Catherine Cookson's novels and more recently their dramatisations; the portrayal of depression of the 1930s in televisions 'When the Boat Comes In'; then again in [the] 1980s with the attempt to escape from a workless region with 'Auf Wiedersehen Pet'; the chronological tales of class culture in 'Our Friends in the North'; and the pride and prejudice in the pithy nostalgia of 'Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads'. These examples and others reveal a region which, despite real and fundamental changes in its economy, captures an uneasy admixture of a pride which is recognized as positive and a prejudice recognized as negative (124).

The revivals of *The Likely Lads* in 1973, *When the Boat Comes In* in 1981, and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* in 2002 and 2004 indicate the regional tradition of reviving local 'favourites,' adding credence to Lanigan's claim. *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* is arguably the leading force here, strengthened by a 'fan convention' in 2013 to celebrate the show's thirtieth anniversary. Jimmy Nail's aforementioned *Big River* in which he yearns for his childhood 'walking on cobbled stone' – a time 'when coal was king [and] the river was a living thing' – can be also seen as crucial in maintaining a heavy sense of longing for the 'good old days.' Thus, the region appears to re-stage frequently its working-class roots. Yet, it is as much the region's high-profile celebrities who maintain the self-image of the North East as 'real' – authentic, honest, and unpretentious (cast in opposition to bourgeois, elite Southerners). While the region appears to cling to an idealised and romanticised past –

[24] Northern Stage's recent work in Byker includes *Byker: Best Summer Ever 2020*; *Byker Audio Stories*, eight 'audio experiences' inspired or spoken by the people of the Byker Wall estate; *Doorstep Music*, a pop-up music programme for residents on the Byker estate while the theatre closed during the Covid-19 pandemic; productions such as *I Have Met the Enemy (and the Enemy Is Us)*, a co-production with Common Wealth at Byker Community Centre in 2019, and a live-stream of *The Kids Are Alright* on the Byker Wall estate, a co-production between Fuel Theatre and Encounter in 2020. In August 2021, Northern Stage also joined with Paines Plough to bring their award-winning Roundabout venue (a portable in-the-round auditorium) to Harbottle Park in Byker, which hosted a three-day mini-festival of performances and community events.

underpinned by dewy-eyed stories of community togetherness, regional cohesion, and social harmony – arguably this is as much an operative fiction told by the region's dominant figures to rehearse their own self-image as authentically working-class and maintain their popularity among regional audiences.[25]

2.2.1 Whatever Happened to Geordierama?

Less has been made of the region's twenty-first century popular representations, which include *Purely Belter* (2000); *55 Degrees North* (2004-05); *Goal!* (2005); *Vera* (2011–present); *Geordie Shore* (2011-present); *Hebburn* (2012-13), as well as those with comparatively smaller distribution, which include Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019); and *The Duke* (2020).[26] Overall, the urban social realism which fuses elements of the British soap opera/melodrama and documentary tradition is maintained. Football emerges as a rekindled core theme in *Purely Belter* and *Goal!*, perhaps due to the success and popularity of Newcastle United FC (nicknamed 'The Entertainers' due to their attacking style of football) under Kevin Keegan in the late 1990s. Police procedurals *55 Degrees North* and *Vera* maintain the theme of crime and policing established in the region's twentieth-century output. *The Duke*'s sixties heist caper narrative also preserves this central theme of crime and theft established in the region's canon. *Hebburn*, meanwhile, recycled the sitcom formula brewed up in *Gavin and Stacey* and *The Royle Family* (which might be seen to further reinforce regional caricatures for consumption outside of the region).

Geordie Shore (2011-present), a reality television series which follows the daily lives of eight to twelve 'housemates' (in the tradition of Channel 4's *Big Brother*) has become the dominant force in marketing Newcastle as 'Party City' – a destination for weekend stag dos and hen parties. Although this modern image of Newcastle as the region's (social, hedonist) capital – established in the 1990s amid what Colls and Lancaster called 'a national fascination with the 'toon'' (ix) – might be said to break with the past, arguably, it goes back to the nineteenth century. Lancaster writes that Newcastle's Bigg Market – typically

[25] Nostalgia is not a contemporary phenomenon in the region, however. Vall writes, for instance, that the revival of 'regional culture' in the 1960s can be considered sometimes nostalgic, which included 'the Blaydon Races centenary celebrations, the creation of Beamish open-air museum, the Morden Tower poetry scene and dialect revival in the context of Frank Graham's publishing initiatives' (64). Vall also notes that much 'of the material at the core of the north east revival was nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century songs celebrating male work' (64), which adds further credence to the criticism of the 'maleness' of the North East's regional identity project previously highlighted by Lanigan (112).

[26] The phrase 'Tinseltoon' (and sometimes 'Hollywood-on-Tyne') was used in the early 2000s to describe the region's bourgeoning film industry and increasing representation on screen (BBC).

presented as the epicentre of the Geordie big night out – 'was as noisy in the 1890s as it is in the 1990s' (59). 'Paradoxically,' Lancaster writes, 'the failure of the nineteenth-century advocates of "rational recreation" has given rise to the city's two most important modern characteristics: a carnivalesque atmosphere and a strong sense of classlessness' (59). *Geordie Shore* therefore represents more of an 'updating' of Newcastle's status as a party city for the Instagram and TikTok age of 'hype houses' in which 'influencers' live together in dorms.

Two images of the North East therefore come into conflict: one of financial hardship and humble community, and one of raucous celebration and gregariousness. Worth pointing out here is that while depictions of the North East as poor and working-class acknowledge important economic realities in the region, there is also a risk that they present the region's hardship as natural and unchangeable (simply an 'unfortunate' or 'tragic' region). In flattening complexity, these depictions also overlook the many groups which have fared well or hold a significant amount of capital, whether that be Newcastle's two universities; private investors in the city such as the Reuben brothers; corporations; or the major landowners of Northumberland. There is undoubtedly a history of public disinvestment in the region's arts sectors, which evidences the managed decline of the North East.[27] Yet, Live Theatre, for instance, has fared relatively well by adopting a range of neoliberal practices. There is wealth in the region, but where and by whom is it owned?

While film and television dominate here, theatre is a looming presence in the development and delivery of these works. Mike Hodges, who directed and wrote the screenplay for *Get Carter* in 1971, is also an established playwright. Many of the actors in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* have appeared on stage, whether in the early days of Live Theatre such as Tim Healy and Kevin Whately or in terms of their regular appearance in the *Sunday for Sammy* live charity concerts in Newcastle. Even *Our Friends in the North*, which tends to be known principally as a television series, was originally a play by Peter Flannery, which was notably revived for the first time in a production by Northern Stage in 2007. *Billy Elliot*'s writer, Lee Hall, is also an established playwright, whose script unsurprisingly displays a metatheatrical

[27] In 2016, for instance, Tom Watson MP published figures which revealed that spending on culture, heritage and the arts in the North East between 2010 and 2016 fell by £13m, which 'comes to more than £5 per person, a bigger cut per head than anywhere else' (Walker 2016). In 2013, Newcastle City Council passed its annual budget which delivered a 100% cut to all arts spending, mitigated in part by an emergency fund of £600,000 created by the local authority and managed by the Community Foundation (Clark-Jenkins 2013). Landmark policy papers such as *The RoCC Report* (2013), *The PLACE Report* (2014), and *Hard Facts to Swallow* (2014) also evidence a history of disinvestment in the North East's arts activities between the 1980s and 2010s and propose strategies for addressing wider regional funding imbalances in England.

preoccupation with theatre and performance. The region is in many respects highly theatrical, which further supports the case for a study of its theatre culture.

Sunday for Sammy warrants inclusion here – a series of biennial charity concerts held in aid of the Sammy Johnson Memorial Fund, which benefits young performers. The fund was established in memorial to Sammy Johnson, an actor from North East England, who died suddenly in 1998. The concerts feature many local contemporary artists and performers, but notably include popular local 'legends' as headline acts, such as Denise Welch, Charlie Hardwick, Jimmy Nail, and Tim Healy. While the concerts are a local affair, they are highly popular and well-known nationally. Due to the demand for tickets in 2018, the event was held at the Metro Radio Arena (qtd. in Dunn). Many of the concerts' sketches can be seen as important in maintaining an interest in nostalgia and vernacular culture as well as the specific brand of self-deprecating humour typically associated with the region.

2.2.2 Conclusion

Interest in the white male figure (usually a Geordie) is largely consistent throughout the region's twentieth and twenty-first century popular output. There is a clear concern with working-class forms of masculinity, whether in the figure of the 'hardman' such as in *Get Carter* or in terms of fatherhood, sexuality, and class in *Billy Elliot*. Up to and including Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), which depicts the plight of the titular Geordie caught up in Britain's cruel and Kafkaesque benefits system, there is an enduring interest in the figure of the poor north-eastern everyman, which might be classified in terms of theme and genre as ballads of 'ordinary' male heroes (the 'authenticity' of which Loach typically seeks to ensure by casting local people who are untrained actors). These figures are made into representatives of the region at large – underdogs for whom we are meant to root (the same is true of Jim Broadbent's character in *The Duke*) – which in turn frames the North East as itself a kind of underdog – a unifying trait which is thought to connect and bind its people.

2.3 The North East's Disappearance from the National Theatre Record

I now move to a discussion of the region's theatre and performance history. To date, no major study of the North East's theatre industry has been undertaken. What is more, there is no sustained analysis of North East theatre in literature on the history of regional theatre in Britain nor wider literature on British theatre as a whole – a striking double omission which I explore in this section. While the region's theatre industry features in pockets – such as in Lanigan's work in 2001; Russell's work in 2004; an article on a 2003 Northern Stage

production by Radosavljević in 2007; half a chapter on the history of Live Theatre by Vall in 2011; and an emerging body of work on Live Theatre by Rosalind Haslett – there appears to be only a handful of established milestones, theatre texts, institutions, and central figures documented in an even fewer number of valuable publications and journal articles. In what follows, I piece together the region's theatre history – from the mid-twentieth to twenty-first centuries – based on these publications and articles.

To begin at the broadest level, no analysis of any theatre company or writer from/based in North East England can be found in a wide range of contemporary theatre and performance studies texts. The region does not feature in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (2008); *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* (2011); *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (2013); *British Theatre and Performance 1900-1950* (2015); Bloomsbury Methuen Drama's *British Theatre Companies: From Fringe to Mainstream* series covering 1965-2014, published in 2015 and 2016; *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now* (2016); *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain* (2017); *Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre Since the Second World War* (2020); or *Affair of the Heart: British Theatre from 1992 to 2020* (2021). The result of the region's disappearance suggests that nothing (or, at least, nothing deemed to be of national significance) goes on in North East England – a region whose exclusion therefore frames it as theatrically unremarkable or, potentially, a barren cultural wasteland.

Discussion of work made in the North East, or written by North East playwrights, is often limited. Where it does exist, it tends to appear briefly under the more minor category of 'regional' work. For instance, Newcastle-born playwright Peter Terson is mentioned in Kate Dorney's *The Changing Language of Modern English Drama 1945–2005* (2009). In a chapter covering '1964-1975: Revolution On and Off Stage,' under a subheading titled 'regional voices,' Dorney notes that Terson 'was an early beneficiary of the Arts Council's playwright's bursary scheme and wrote a number of plays exploring life in the Midlands and North East for the Victoria Theatre [Stoke-on-Trent]' (154). Terson's plays *The Mighty Reservoy* and *A Night to Make the Angels Weep* (both 1964) are mentioned by Dorney in relation to an amusing series of cuts that were demanded by the Lord Chamberlain's office to the liberal use of profanity in Terson's scripts. Dorney's reference to Terson highlights him as a notable British playwright with ties to the North East, but he remains a marginal figure in that he is filed under the minor heading of 'regional voices' and appears only briefly.

In *Rewriting the Nation* (2011), which chronicles the history of new writing in Britain, Aleks Sierz calls Live Theatre in Newcastle one of Britain's 'big six' alongside the Royal Court, Bush, Hampstead, and Soho theatres (all in London), and the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh (28). However, no analysis of Live's theatrical output is made – it is not included in Sierz's 'key plays and playwrights' (back cover). Sierz writes that 'Newcastle's Live Theatre is that rare beast: a specialist new writing theatre outside London. Under Max Roberts, it has enjoyed relationships with local writers such as Peter Flannery, Michael Wilcox, Peter Straughan and Julia Darling' (31). While acknowledging Live Theatre's 'rare' position and namechecking four of its writers, they remain 'local' (other), suggesting that they possess little status in and influence on national theatre culture. Sierz also notes that '[i]n 2003, local playwright Lee Hall described the theatre space as classless: 'There are no neat rows, there is no proscenium to hide behind, no them and us'.' (31). No further detail is provided.

Moving from contemporary British theatre scholarship to the more specialist area of regional theatre in Britain, there is also, perhaps more surprisingly, no sustained analysis of North East theatre. No analysis of theatre in the region appears in Cecil Chisholm's early *Repertory: An Outline of the Modern Theatre Movement* (1934) or John Elsom's *Theatre Outside London* (1971). Two brief references to the North East can be found in Rowell and Jackson's *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (1984). The first is to Newcastle's 'University Theatre' (now Northern Stage), 'which housed first the Tyneside Theatre Company from 1968 and subsequently the Tyne Wear Theatre Company' (106). The second is to Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968). Plater's *Coalhouse* is cited by Rowell and Jackson as a notable exception to a 1969 Arts Council survey (published as a report on 'The Audience for Subsidised Drama in Scotland and the North of England' in 1975), which revealed that 'whereas the proportion of people from skilled and unskilled manual working backgrounds in the population was a little over seventy percent, the proportion of people from this background in the average theatre audience was usually less than ten per cent' (129). Twenty-two percent of audiences who attended *Coalhouse*, however, were reported to come from working-class backgrounds – which was 'no doubt,' argue Rowell and Jackson, because *Coalhouse* was a 'semi-documentar[y] concerned with the history of working-class struggle and drew upon popular entertainment forms in [its] presentation style' (129).

Given *Coalhouse*'s celebrated position in North East theatre history on the basis of its working-class credentials (which I examine below), twenty-two per cent still seems quite low. As I will discuss, the way that *Coalhouse* is often talked about paints a picture that

practically *all* of its original audience was working-class. But the 1969 survey suggests that seventy-eight per cent of the audience came from non-working-class backgrounds. This also raises questions about the original survey, which I was not able to trace. Did the Arts Council decide who was working-class and who was not? In effect, how rigorous was the definition of class and to what extent was the agency of audiences represented in the final report? Rowell and Jackson's description of *Coalhouse* as a 'history of working-class struggle' which 'drew upon popular entertainment forms' (129) also depicts the show as highly ambitious, which therefore makes its lack of analysis more surprising. These questions and issues notwithstanding, Rowell and Jackson highlight *Coalhouse* as notable in national history.

Newcastle's 'University Theatre' is likewise mentioned in Turnbull's *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres* (2008) – which covers 1979-1997 during which over a quarter of Britain's regional theatres closed down – in an overview of the twenty-one new regional theatres which had opened by 1970 (50). However, no analysis of any North East company or production is made. The North East also does not feature in Dorney and Merkin's *The Glory of the Garden: Regional Theatre and the Arts Council 1984-2009* (2010). The North East's absence is perhaps more surprising here, as Dorney and Merkin sought to move the debate regarding regional theatre forwards – a subject then dominated by themes of crisis, disinvestment, and decline – by examining the politics and policy of making performance outside London. *Glory* also expanded the coverage of regional theatre in Britain beyond the industry's purely professional building-based theatres in urban centres by including touring companies and presenting first-hand accounts by theatre practitioners, thus opening up the discipline. Despite this, the North East remains absent.

Dorney and Merkin's *Glory* in 2010 signals a diversifying picture of regional theatre in Britain. While their text maintains a focus on professional building-based theatre in urban centres and the (undoubtedly important) themes of funding, finance, and policy-making which preceded their work, *Glory* also challenged the tendency of scholarship to frame regional theatre in Britain as synonymous with narratives of crisis and decline (they write how the metropolitan centre often called for regional theatre to 'evolve or die' (207), which indicates the paternalism of the centre). Notable, however, is amateur theatre's absence from scholarship on regional theatre, which reinforces the image of theatre as a *professional* discipline and indicates that scholars' criteria of value have tended not to include amateur activity as an area of research. This signals the potential gaps still evident in the discipline.

No further historical assessment of regional theatre in Britain has been made since *Glory* in 2010, which also suggests that the subject is in need of updating for the 2020s.[28]

What is more, there appears to be little work on specific *regions* and on actual performances. Consequently, the 'region(al)' and 'theatre' components of 'regional theatre' are sometimes, ironically, left out, and the day-to-day business of running a regional theatre company takes precedence. The lack of a specific region-based focus means that the phrase regional theatre tends to be used as a sweeping term for 'non-metropolitan' – all theatre made outside London (literally the title of Elsom's *Theatre Outside London* in 1971) – which means that regional theatre appears potentially amorphous, as it lacks nuance, specificity, and a sense of place. There appears to be collective understanding of what regional theatre refers to (it is *not-London*), but not what theatre in a specific region looks like. When critics say regional theatre, then, the image their research conjures up is heavily bureaucratic, dominated by urban buildings struggling to make ends meet (although often in creative ways), rather than depicted as a complex (or thriving) eco-system.

Arguably, lack of engagement with regional theatre *productions* also maintains their position below metropolitan theatre in the cultural hierarchy (to which this thesis might be also considered a corrective). Historically, regional theatre has been undoubtedly ghettoised by metropolitan policy-makers, such as Arts Council of Great Britain's Drama Director, John Moody, who Taryn Storey notes wrote in 1949 that theatre 'is essentially an artificial and sophisticated product which flourishes in cities' (qtd. in Storey 87). Storey writes, citing Moody, that he 'stressed the need to educate civic authorities on how to run the theatres "professionally" warning that "Civic Theatres will grow up with an entirely amateur mentality in which it is heart-breaking and impossible for a professional director to work"' (87). While such views may appear narrow and archaic, they persist in British theatre culture, evidenced in *Telegraph* theatre critic Dominic Cavendish's side swipe at 'well-meaning'

[28] This is especially the case when theatre companies increasingly co-produce shows to share costs. What does it mean for definitions of regional theatre, for instance, when metropolitan and non-metropolitan companies collaborate, such as in Northern Stage, Oxford Playhouse and Improbable's co-production of *The Tempest* in 2015; or theatres from across England and Scotland, such as in Northern Stage, Nottingham Playhouse and Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh's production of *Red Ellen* in 2022?

regional 'arts centres.'[29] Clearly, regional theatre is not thought to exist on the same level as metropolitan theatre, where the 'real' work and 'leading' innovation is thought to happen. While lack of analysis of regional theatre productions arguably indicates the difficulty of writing about productions which are now past, it also contributes to the ghettoisation of regional artistry and craft.

2.4 A Historiography of North East Theatre

I now move away from the gaps, omissions, and obvious limitations of the North East's absence in a number of core texts in academic scholarship to a discussion of what does exist, and how these publications create a particular portrait of theatrical work made in the North East. The first (and only) dedicated history of North East theatre can be found in Colls and Lancaster's landmark study of regional culture, *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism* (1992). Here, the 'drama of the North East' from the 1960s to the early 1990s is recounted in a fourteen-page chapter by leading dramatist Plater. He cites his own *Close the Coalhouse Door* in 1968 as a point of origin – indeed, a now canonical working-class history of the mining industry in the North East from stories by his friend and mentor Sid Chaplin and with music by Alex Glasgow. *Coalhouse* premiered at the then Flora Robson Playhouse in Jesmond, Newcastle, 1968 before touring to London's Fortune Theatre. The play featured on BBC Television in 1969 in what Plater notes 'must have been one of the first networked plays written and played in full-blooded North East accents' (Plater 76). When casting for *Coalhouse*, Plater notes that 'we had to find not one actor, but an entire company capable of handling the accent' (75) – a sign of limited representation of North East actors but also of the specialism of North East vernacular, which requires great skill for non-natives to perfect.

An often-cited anecdote about the original production of *Coalhouse* in 1968 is that it was so popular among the region's miners, who flocked to Newcastle from the pit villages of County Durham and Northumberland, that the play's run was extended five times (Sykes 2012). This depicts an image of *Coalhouse*'s audience as overwhelmingly working-class, which jars with the 1969 Arts Council survey I cited above (which revealed that twenty-two percent of *Coalhouse*'s audiences were working-class). Vall writes that *Coalhouse*'s 'enduring appeal in

[29] On October 29, 2019, Cavendish shared a link to his three-star review of the Royal Court's production of Welsh playwright Ed Thomas' *On Bear Ridge*. Cavendish tweeted, 'another so-so night at the royal court [sic] which increasingly feels like a well-meaning regional arts centre' (Twitter). *Observer* theatre critic Clare Brennan replied, 'happy to differ about the play - but why the snide swipe at regional arts centres?' (Twitter). Indeed, Cavendish's tweet seems to uphold the idea that 'regional' companies make artistic work that is of a lower artistic standard, to which the esteemed Royal Court is at risk of debasing itself.

the North East was confirmed by the successful revival by Live Theatre on the Newcastle Quayside in 1994' (199). This enduring appeal is reinforced by a further successful revival in a rare co-production in 2012 between Newcastle's two main producing theatres, Northern Stage and Live Theatre (qtd. in Hickling). Here, *Coalhouse* was 'updated' by playwright Lee Hall following the death of Plater in 2010 to include references to the miners' strike of 1984-85 (qtd. in Sykes). *Coalhouse* might be seen as central in establishing *and* maintaining a popular, alternative, left-wing theatre tradition in North East England, which for Plater possessed above all a 'subversive energy' (12) underpinning the region's self-image.

Plater's wistful requiem over thirty years after *Coalhouse* premiered captures the admixture of political energy and heavy sentiment that might be said to also underpin the dominant external perception and internal self-image of the North East. In the Bloodaxe Books edition of *Coalhouse* published in 2000, for instance, Plater wrote that '[t]he soul of the piece is unchanging. We originally described it as 'a hymn of unqualified praise to the miners – who created a revolutionary weapon without having a revolutionary intent'. If, today, the hymn is more in the nature of an elegy, it is a strain that haunts the dreams of everyone with roots in the North-East' (back cover). Such language echoes Plater's earlier views about the region's theatre. He argued previously in *Geordies*, for instance, that for him the 'common factor' among the region's playwrights was 'a memory of tales told, figuratively anyway, in the back yard' (83), which he notes for Sid Chaplin were stories once told at the coalface. This image of humble storytelling, vernacular tradition, and collective working-class struggle underpins the valorisation of 'authentic' orality, song, and humour in *Coalhouse*.

Yet, as Vall notes, critical responses to *Coalhouse*'s use of music and its sense of humour outside of the region were less favourable. Vall cites one television reviewer in *The Times* who found the 1969 BBC version's 'combination of 'music hall ditty' and historical reconstruction contrived: 'there were periods when the whole thing became an unpersuasive charade'' (199), the critic wrote. While underlining what Vall calls the 'difficulties of realising the nuances of vernacular humour on television,' *Coalhouse* 'reinforced the enduring interest in mining, heightened during the 1970s in the context of the 1973-74 miners' strikes' (199). A similar sentiment had been previously reported in theatre critic Simon Trussler's review of *Coalhouse* at London's Fortune Theatre in *The Times* on 23 October 1968. Russell cites Trussler's review in which he noted that the play 'was well-received at London's Fortune Theatre but left a number of critics feeling that the audience's relative ignorance about the play's context limited both its appeal and impact' (153).

In *Geordies*, Plater also moves to highlight Live Theatre as significant. Plater notes that Live has 'provided a springboard for the plays of Cecil Taylor, Tom Hadaway, Leonard Barras, Phil Woods, Michael Chaplin' (81), and Plater himself, as well as actors such as Tim Healy and Kevin Whately. However, Plater does not present an account of Live Theatre's artistic output, while his history seems to contribute to the mystification of the North East. There is no explanation, for instance, of where writers such as Hadaway or Chaplin came from, or how they worked as practitioners, which presents an image of the region's theatre culture as springing from nowhere. While this on one hand points to the less formalised or institutionalised nature of the theatre industry in the late 1960s (it is simply assumed, it would appear, that those reading Plater's account are considered to be already vested in some way and therefore already aware of the likes of Hadaway and Chaplin), it also depicts North East theatre as something of a cottage industry or old boys' network.

Plater writes on the three camps that he believes the North East's dramatists – who were clustered at Live Theatre and who played a part in 'the evolution of a recognisable North East drama' (76) – fall into: the 'natives' who stay in the region, such as Hadaway, Barras, and Chaplin; the 'wanderers who pitch camp somewhere else and find it impossible to leave' (76) such as Woods and Taylor; and those who leave the region but 'continue to be haunted by it' (76) such as Plater himself, Peter Terson, and Ian La Frenais. From surveying Plater's account, this group of (notably white, all-male) writers clustered at Live Theatre are presented as pioneers of the region's theatrical canon. Yet, their theatre work is unexamined in Plater's account, further emphasising North East theatre's presentation as tight-knit.

Elsewhere in *Geordies*, Lancaster also highlights Live Theatre as significant. For him:

> [o]ne of the most enjoyable venues is the Live Theatre on the Quayside. Here, the typical format is the audience seated around the [cabaret-style] tables, with drinks from the bar, watching productions by the region's burgeoning group of playwrights. This is Geordie high culture, but a world away from the velvet plush and the dulcet tones of conventional theatre (64).

Lancaster's description of theatregoing at Live as part of 'Geordie high culture' can be seen to point to the complexities lying at the heart of a region (more specifically Newcastle as a city) that is often considered classless. Lancaster writes that Newcastle is classless not in the sense that everyone is part of a single (working) class, but rather that its myths and symbols are almost entirely working-class, which renders the city's middle- and upper-classes invisible. In particular, Lancaster's reference to Live Theatre's cabaret-style seating is used as evidence of the social mixing that goes on in the venue. He writes that audiences attend plays

at Live about 'North Shields fisherfolk and Bigg Market nights out which are invariably of a high dramatic standard and which at the same time celebrate, probe and affirm the power of regional cultural identity' (64). Live Theatre is seen to fuse high culture with vernacular culture: it is 'a world away from the velvet plush' as Lancaster writes (64) – framing it as less pretentious than 'conventional theatre' – but part of 'Geordie high culture.'

Ending with a forecast of the future in 1992, Plater concluded that:

> there seems to be a growing awareness that talking to ourselves about ourselves is no longer enough. In the 1960s, an onstage character saying 'Howay' was enough of a novelty to get a laugh without further embellishment. 'Howay' is no longer enough, and it's interesting to note that Tom Hadaway's most recent play, *Long Shadows*, succeeded brilliantly in taking on the mind-shredding complexities of the Middle-East situation with a company of six actors on the tiny stage at Live Theatre – but it did so from a North East perspective (84).

Plater signalled a de-provincialising of the region's drama toward the end of the twentieth century. He cites Hadaway's *Long Shadows* as evidence of a theatre culture that increasingly looked outwards but still prioritised what he calls a 'North East perspective.' This constitutes the direction of travel in which Plater believed the theatre culture to be heading (or ought to be heading). For Plater, *Long Shadows* signalled a potential shift toward examining 'global' issues beyond the region from the perspective of life in the North East, which is to say that Plater believed that North East theatre would (or should) remain popular in the sense of directly connected to audiences' lives but in effect bring the wider world *to* the region and find connections between here and there.

Following Plater's forecast in 1992, the region's theatre industry appeared briefly in Tomaney and Ward's *A Region in Transition: North East England at the millennium* (2001), which I discussed earlier with regards to Lanigan's view that '[d]rama, disaster and distress are remembered and celebrated' (124) in the region. Lanigan also cites a review of Plater's *Shooting the Legend* (1995) in local arts and culture magazine, *The Crack*, which he notes 'applauded the play but said that the crowd singalong section was cringeworthy and embarrassing' (113). Though Plater's position as a leading playwright is maintained here, Lanigan takes issue with the singalong, which constitutes evidence of a diversifying picture as Lanigan critiqued aspects of the region's dominant theatre culture (I also explore the singalong in Chapter Six on *HEATON!*).

Further diversification can be found in *Looking North: Northern England and the national imagination* (2004). Russell effectively contests the origins of North East theatre, which

Plater suggested lie with his own *Coalhouse*. Russell cites Gateshead-born Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (1912) and Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968) as 'the only plays of national significance set within the north-east' (155). Sowerby's critically acclaimed *Rutherford and Son* is a piece of feminist theatre set on Tyneside. During the 1880s, Sowerby Glassworks was the largest producer of pressed glass in the world and is the fictionalised setting for *Rutherford and Son*'s examination of patriarchy and capitalism. The play was only staged in London and then New York, however, and did not receive its professional debut in the North East until, perhaps surprisingly, 2009, which might be seen to threaten its position as part of 'true' North East theatre history.[30] While Sowerby's omission from the history until Russell's account in 2004 might appear to be a straightforward case of erasure, it speaks to the problem of determining what or who counts as a North East text or 'voice.'

On one hand, *Rutherford and Son*'s 1912 publication predates the North East's professional repertory and producing theatres such as Live Theatre; Northern Stage (originally Newcastle's University Theatre); and the Flora Robson Playhouse in Jesmond – the venue for *Coalhouse*'s original production in 1968. *Rutherford and Son*'s 1912 date could mean that Sowerby was therefore a victim of history, as the region's theatre culture was still nascent at the time. However, Sowerby was born into a wealthy industrial family. As such, her play might be also thought of as metropolitan or elite. This is perhaps one reason why Plater's *Coalhouse* is considered formative over Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (in addition to the fact that revivals of *Coalhouse* maintain its cultural position). Nonetheless, Sowerby's birth in Gateshead, as well as *Rutherford and Son*'s setting on Tyneside, underpin efforts to reinstate her position as one of the region's (and indeed nation's) twentieth-century pioneers. On this basis, Russell's inclusion of Sowerby can be seen to correct the record.

Overall, however, Russell's summation frames the North East as theatrically barren. It implies that the North East only has two notable texts to its name – one in 1912 and one in 1968. But this reveals a valorisation of plays that must tour to London before they are considered nationally and historically significant. This in turn raises regional theatre's fraught

[30] *Rutherford and Son* made its professional debut in Newcastle in a co-production between Northern Stage and Threshold Theatre. Northern Stage, then led by Erica Whyman, noted in its 2009 autumn-winter brochure that through 'a series of events, we plan to put [Sowerby] back on the Tyneside map including: the launch of her official biography; new commissions by local women writers; and an exhibition of Sowerby glass at Northern Stage' (Northern Stage). The play has also been revived numerous times in the UK since 1980, including at the National Theatre in 2019. Director Polly Findlay noted that the creative team's feeling had 'always been that if she'd been a man that you would know [Sowerby's] name in the same way that you know Ibsen or Chekhov' (National Theatre).

relationship with the metropolitan centre. Russell notes elsewhere, for instance, that while 'increased opportunity combined with a sense of obligation to their native region has allowed many recent writers to remain faithful to various provincial locations, even as an avowedly "northern" figure as Jarrow-born, Hull-based Alan Plater eventually found himself in London in the 1980s' (149). There is no doubt that the pull of London continues in the present due to its ongoing centralisation of resources, the attractive glamour of working with major institutions, and the desire among practitioners to find wider audiences for their work.

Vall's *Cultural region: North east England, 1945-2000* (2011) features a major re-evaluation of North East theatre. Vall presents the first historical assessment of English regional cultural policy, revealing the impact of the new cultural institutions that emerged after 1945 upon a region with deeply rooted vernacular traditions. As part of her broader discussion of regional cultural policy, Vall's chapter on 'artists and impresarios' between 1959-79 features a sustained discussion of Live Theatre, further cementing its position in the history. However, Vall argues that Live in fact started life as a women-led alternative theatre company (86) working in non-traditional theatre settings such as schools, community centres, and working men's clubs. Drawing upon her interview with one of Live's founders, Val McLane, in 2009, Vall notes that fellow co-founder Geoff Gillham's initial proposal to McLane (who provided fifty percent of the funding for the venture) was for a theatre that was 'completely non-bureaucratic, it's against the bourgeoisie, it's for working-class people, […] working-class actors and we are going to perform to the working classes' (qtd. in Vall 85).

This utopic vision, however, was by no means straightforward. McLane notes that 'it was a wonderful idea to work for a working-class audience but of course they had no interest particularly in theatre and we were just sort of going in there and forcing it on them in the pubs' (qtd. in Vall 86). Vall presents Live Theatre's subsequent history as one of gradual alienation from its radical socialist roots. Some of this process has been internally driven, such as by Gillham's departure from the group in 1975 after joining the Workers' Revolutionary Party and what McLane describes as his belief that the rest of the group should abandon the theatre and join the revolution (qtd. in Vall 87), and some externally driven such as by funding cuts during the Thatcher era. Vall argues that in 1984, Live 'was forced to relinquish its status as a partnership, a move that resulted in McLane's partial removal from the theatre and a time that she recalls as increasingly difficult for regional representatives of

the cultural left' (89).[31] As such, Vall notes that 'Live's transition from a collective run by individual activists during the 1970s to a 'writers' factory' has not been straightforward' (89).

Vall's account is a telling corrective to Plater's account. For one thing, it is vital for the recovery of Live Theatre's often-unacknowledged feminist origins. This can be read as part of a broader feminist tradition in the region, as Vall also highlights the work of Heather Ging as Tyne Tees producer and writer; Rosemary Allan, a long-serving curator of Beamish Museum; and Connie Pickard in contributing to the success and reputation of the Tyneside poetry scene (91). 'Equally,' Vall writes, 'Val McLane's role in Live Theatre was pivotal and would often challenge the dominant gender stereotype of the masculine north east, with theatre content that was influenced both by socialist and feminist principles' (91). Vall's account further resonates in the context of Sowerby's earlier omission from Plater's account. Other omissions now appear troubling, too. When Plater ended with his forecast of the future in 1992, for instance, he cited Hadaway's *Long Shadows* as a shining example of the direction in which he felt the culture was (or should be) headed. But *Shadows* was in fact co-written with Pauline Hadaway in 1991, who is omitted from Plater's account.

Vall's account also presents a far more nuanced assessment and complex portrait of Live Theatre's history and contemporary position in the region's theatre culture. Vall notes, for instance, that while 'Live Theatre's performances in the north east often pointed to the mistaken assumption that working-class audiences would be responsive to, and appreciative of, socialist or radical scripts, by the late 1970s the theatre was achieving acclaim beyond the region' (89). Vall therefore highlights a potential disconnect between local acceptance of 'radical' scripts and the theatre's cultivation of a positive reputation on this exact basis outside of the region. 'In many respects,' Vall writes, Live's 'transition from a peripatetic company with a strong political agenda to a building-based company is a story that is often neglected in official and broadcast narratives' (89). Indeed, the previous brief appearances of Live Theatre in Sierz's (2011) and Plater's (1992) accounts depict the theatre as an indisputable beacon for socialist and working-class theatre, which might be how the theatre is known beyond the region but does not necessarily tell the whole story.

[31] Vall notes that by the 1980s, 'Live had retreated from its outright opposition to 'legitimate culture' and had accepted Arts Council sponsorship. Shortly afterwards the shifting political climate was felt in terms of money that was available for such explicit representatives of the cultural left. Following a series of cuts a number of independent theatre groups, including McLane's independent feminist theatre, Major Division, Wearabout in Sunderland and Michael Mould's Bruvvers in Newcastle, experienced funding cuts or the threat of closure' (89).

Live Theatre is also the subject of two articles by Haslett in 2019 and 2020 (again, further confirming its cultural position). In the former, which is one of the few academic articles published on Live Theatre's twenty-first century performance output, Haslett establishes the use of anecdote in the company's *Live Witness* project in 2013, evidence of what she terms an 'amateur aesthetic' (277). Haslett builds upon this article in 2020, arguing that Live Theatre 'developed an amateur aesthetic as a self-conscious strategy to engage working-class audiences,' which Haslett suggests 'was useful to the company in its early years (1973–8) because it allowed for a radical reimagining of the performer–audience relationship that was both politically purposeful as a form of participatory democracy and also sensitive to issues of class' (63). Haslett's recent articles on Live Theatre can be considered as part of an emerging body of work on the history of the company and its performance output.[32]

This growing body of work on Live Theatre is complicated, however. On one hand, Vall and Haslett's work can be seen as part of a corrective to the dominant history produced by Plater. They retrieve North East theatre's feminist origins and expand and add depth to its theatre practices. Haslett's work in particular complicates the relationship between professional and amateur theatre forms with regards to the *Live Witness* project, which I would argue is also an important and knotty issue in the North East as a whole (overlap, frictions and blurred borderlines between its amateur and professional theatre sectors). Yet, on the other hand, Live Theatre is itself a dominant institution, unavoidably framed as a leading regional theatre and in some respects the headquarters of the North East's theatrical output. Vall and Haslett's work might be therefore seen to revise yet sustain the dominant narrative of North East theatre, with Live Theatre and professional, urban, literary drama at the centre.

In a notable counter to the dominance of Live Theatre in scholarship, Northern Stage appears in Radosavljević's 2007 article, 'Translating the City: A Community Theatre Version of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* in Newcastle-upon-Tyne'. Radosavljević was Northern Stage's resident dramaturg in the early 2000s and her reflections underpin an essay which explores how Northern Stage's production functioned as an exercise in 'translating a city' (57). Radosavljević also offers insights into Northern Stage's emergence as a major European touring theatre company under Alan Lyddiard (at least until his departure in 2005), which is

[32] This work is led by Haslett herself. She notes that she has 'been working with Live Theatre since 2012 on the preservation of this organisation's rich cultural heritage. We are currently mapping the theatre's extensive archive and using oral history to access the tacit knowledge associated with this. I am in the process of writing a monograph on the theatre's history as a working-class theatre' (Haslett).

often unacknowledged in British theatre history. This also presents a counter-narrative to Live Theatre's position in the region as a pioneer. Radosavljević also offers context regarding the extent to which 'Newcastle-upon-Tyne started to reinvent itself as a cultural centre at the turn of the twenty-first century' (59). I cited symbols of this reinvention above such as the *Angel of the North*; the Millennium Bridge; the Baltic; Sage Gateshead; and Newcastle-Gateshead's joint bid for European City of Culture in 2008.

The complex interplay and tensions between amateur and professional theatre practice highlighted in Haslett's articles also map onto scholarship. In *Cultural region*, Vall discusses the important role of the People's Theatre (an amateur repertory company founded in 1911) in 'bringing together the first wave of cultural policy makers in the north east' (112), which spanned from Arthur Blenkinsop in the 1930s (101) to Peter Stark in the 1960s, who later became director of (the then) Northern Arts in 1984 (122-3). Both Blenkinsop and Stark were members of the People's Theatre, which frames the company as an important civic space for amateur work, but which enables professional networking. This also serves to counter Plater's narrative and expand the region's theatre culture beyond Live Theatre and Northern Stage. Yet, it also points to a surprising situation in which amateur theatre can be considered more dominant than the region's professional theatres.

As I have encountered in writing this thesis, the North East's larger amateur theatre companies tend to be far more diligent in preserving their own histories than its professional companies. The People's Theatre is particularly savvy in this regard. It has its own archive and archivist (Martin Collins). Co-founder Norman Veitch's *The People's* (1950) offers an invaluable account of the early tensions regarding the company's socialist origins and assessments of its early productions of European plays, later extended by Chris Goulding's *The Story of the People's* (1991). Important to the self-image of the People's Theatre in this regard is its self-appointed role as the company which leads the way in bringing classic plays to the region (i.e., it considers itself a pioneer and major literary resource within the North East). In the company's self-published pamphlet, the *People's Theatre Arts Group* (1963), the group writes that 'Thornton Wilder has described the list of plays produced by the People's Theatre over the past fifty years as a "living library of the theatre"' (4) – indicative of the extent to which the People's uses quotes of esteemed writers as validation.

Likewise, Darlington Hippodrome (formerly the Civic) has Timmie Morrison's *A Theatre for the People* (1983) and Chris Lloyd's *Of Fish and Actors: 100 Years of Darlington Civic*

Theatre (2007). Even Darlington Operatic Society, a company with no mention in wider theatre history, has Julia M. Lloyd's *Something Exciting, Something Inviting: The Story of Darlington Operatic Society* (1995). This points to tensions between academic scholarship ('professional history') and what might be called 'unauthorised history' in which companies self-publish their own accounts or local authorities fund journalists and historians to research companies' histories. This might be said to flag up tensions between 'local historians' working on the ground and 'national historians' who tend to be based elsewhere yet are positioned higher up in the cultural hierarchy. In other words, while there might be a dearth of material in professional academic scholarship on the region's theatre culture, there is also a clear tradition of companies doing it themselves and taking their history into their own hands, which reflects the agency and ownership (amateur) companies have over their own representation. Such companies upstage many of the region's professional theatres in this respect.

In addition to amateur companies preserving their own histories, amateur theatre is also increasingly represented in academic scholarship. The People's Theatre, for instance, has received recent academic attention in Helen Nicholson, Jane Milling, and Nadine Holdsworth's *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018), and Michael Coveney's *Questors, Jesters and Renegades: The Story of Britain's Amateur Theatre* (2020). Notably, Coveney refers to the People's Theatre as 'still one of our leading amateur companies' (53), which frames the People's as something of a major national institution rather than a 'just' a regional amateur theatre company. Milling, who spent a day with the People's Theatre in May 2016 as part of her research into the company's work, writes that:

> At its inception, The People's was primarily part of the progressive, socialist movement, as People's historians Norman Veitch (1950) and Chris Goulding (1991) have detailed. In 1911, the group staged Norman McKinnel's *The Bishop's Candlesticks* (adapted from Hugo's *Les Miserables*) and Gertrude Robins' village comedy *Pot Luck*, to raise money for the socialist cause. People's Theatre archivist Martin Collins comments, 'they were just a bunch of local socialists trying to make a few bob' (34).

In addition to highlighting the People's socialist roots, and its role in bringing European drama to the North East in staging the plays of Shaw, Synge, Ibsen, and Galsworthy, Milling's account of the People's early history is also crucial in evidencing tensions among the theatre's membership about 'whether they should be a socialist organisation that does plays or a drama organisation that supports socialism' (36). This story of alienation from its socialist roots echoes Vall's account of a similar situation Live Theatre experienced decades

later (raising the question of how many companies in the region start out as socialist, then 'adapt' their plans). This growing body of research into amateur theatre serves to recognise and reinstate a major form of national culture which has gone largely unexamined in academic scholarship. It can be also seen as part of a wider interest in the subject as evidenced in Jenny Landreth's *Break a Leg: A Memoir, Manifesto and Celebration of Amateur Theatre* (2020) and the work of David Coates, who in April 2022 began a five-year European Research Council funded project on amateur theatre in Europe between 1780-1850.

Worthy of note is an exhibition held at Newcastle's Discovery Museum in 2012, which showcased the histories of Newcastle's Theatre Royal, Tyne Theatre, Live Theatre, Northern Stage, and People's Theatre. Arts journalist David Whetstone observed that 'by including the People's Theatre the exhibition also acknowledges the contribution of amateur drama companies' (The Free Library). While the People's Theatre received official recognition and was brought into the fold so to speak, the company is arguably more well-known than Newcastle's professional producing theatres. Also worthy of note is the accession of the Live Theatre Archive to Newcastle University in 2017 (made available in November 2020), which includes material from 1986-2017 such as play scripts, photographs, correspondence, and papers related to the development of Live Theatre; and an exhibition at the University in 2022 called 'Newcastle on Stage: Theatre in the North East,' which showcased the history of theatre in Newcastle through the archives of Northern Stage, Live Theatre and Open Clasp – the latter of which is a new entry into North East theatre history.[33]

Open Clasp – founded in 1998 by Catrina McHugh (who was awarded an MBE for services to disadvantaged women through theatre in 2017) – write that the company's aim 'is to Change the World, One Play at a Time by placing theatre at the heart of transforming the lives of disadvantaged women and girls' (2022). The company collaborates with marginalised women and young women in society, typically using a devising process, for 'personal, social and political change' (2022). The company's work is regularly performed in theatres, prisons, schools, conferences, and community centres. In recent years, Open Clasp has staged productions made with those from minority communities and women affected by the criminal justice system, and created pieces based on real-life stories of women who have faced and

[33] Haslett is also a central figure in this work. She writes that as 'part of a small team drawn from Open Clasp theatre and the University, including my colleague Kate Chedgzoy and Catrina McHugh MBE, I have been working to find ways of engaging with Open Clasp theatre's archive which reflect this organisation's democratic and ethos-driven processes' (Haslett).

survived coercive controlling domestic abuse, such as *Key Change* (2015); *Don't Forget the Birds* (2018); *Rattle Snake* (2018); and *Sugar* (2020), some of which have been streamed online. *Key Change* won the Carol Tambor 'Best of Edinburgh' Award 2015 after performing at Summerhall during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which led to an off-Broadway run.

Open Clasp also often performs at, and works in association with, Live Theatre, evidence of its strong relationship with the company (and, in a sense, its proximity to the region's theatrical headquarters). Its success with *Key Change* in New York also illustrates the company's international acclaim. Interest in its work among staff at Newcastle University constitutes the bringing of Open Clasp into academic scholarship and thus enshrining its position in North East theatre history. Also worth noting is that Open Clasp's founder, McHugh, was nominated by Charlotte Bennett, who directed the company's production of *Rattle Snake* in 2018, for *Put Her Forward* – an artwork by 'non zero one' that 'recognises living women who have done remarkable things to positively impact the people around them' (Open Clasp 2018) – selected after a public vote. A small sandstone figure of McHugh was unveiled at a ceremony at Newcastle Castle in September 2018 and later included in the 'Newcastle on Stage: Theatre in the North East,' exhibition at Newcastle University in 2022, which was co-curated by Haslett, Chedgzoy, and Amelia Joicey.

2.5 Agency, Authorship, Authority

From this survey, it is apparent that efforts have been made to move beyond the dominant Plater/Live model, as evidenced above in Radosavljević's work on Northern Stage; the increasing representation of amateur theatre in academic scholarship; the recovery and inclusion of Sowerby; the work of Vall in highlighting women's contribution to Live Theatre (which is also important in providing a corrective to a regional theatre history dominated by a handful of white male playwrights and authors); Haslett's engagement with Live's 'amateur aesthetic' which complicates the amateur/professional binary; and increasing interest in the work of Open Clasp. That being said, Live Theatre continues to be a dominant figure, which also means that professional, urban, literary drama still tends to be considered most worthy of academic attention. Paradoxically, however, little scholarship on Live's actual productions exists, to which in some respects Haslett's work on *Live Witness* can be considered a corrective. Only since 2007 has Northern Stage featured on the academic scene, while Open Clasp is an even more recent addition.

As such, if little is known about Live Theatre's performance work – the region's foremost producing institution – it is hardly surprising that the smaller or lesser-known artists and companies lack representation. Based on the academic scholarship, one could be led to think that North East theatre is constituted almost entirely of the People's Theatre and three of Newcastle's professional theatres (Live Theatre, Northern Stage, and, only recently, Open Clasp). While Newcastle's Theatre Royal features on occasion, less is written about it, potentially because it is predominantly a receiving house (though it remains a local producer in terms of its actor training programme, 'Project A,' and its studio space, which is often used to stage North East productions). The exhibition held at Newcastle's Discovery Museum in 2012, which showcased the histories of Newcastle's Royal, Tyne Theatre, Live Theatre, Northern Stage, and People's Theatre, brought more companies into the fold, but still prioritised the city's building-based theatres. As such, the idea of a North East theatre *ecology* appears in question, as a handful of companies in Newcastle dominate the story.

There also appears to be a vexed relationship between professional academic scholarship and 'local' history. This might be seen to reflect a broader tension between the vernacular and the official (i.e., what is officially recognised as legitimate scholarship). While academic scholarship on theatre in the region still tends to be heavily geared towards Live Theatre, regional theatre history is also increasingly pluralist, adding to a diversifying picture. Indeed, amateur theatre is increasingly prominent in scholarship, while its diligence in preserving its own history frames the North East's amateur theatre culture as in fact more dominant than professional theatre. Yet, this constitutes an anxiety regarding the extent to which the North East might be considered an 'amateur' region, which is to say a region that is thought of as *unskilled*. But this is arguably a consequence of both a historical lack of engagement with the North East's theatre culture in academic scholarship and the North East's professional theatres' own lack of stable archiving practices.

The North East's absence from national theatre history is not necessarily surprising given the region's distance from London, which possesses, as Vall noted, its own vernacular traditions. But the North East's absence from *regional* theatre history, whose focus is, after all, on the regions, is perhaps more striking. It is difficult to provide a definite answer for why this is the case (which may be impossible to know if we think of the North East as a blind spot). But I would suggest that a fundamental reason for the North East's absence is that there is assumed to be no audience for it, which becomes self-perpetuating. I would also suggest that a lack of academic scholarship on North East theatre leads to anxieties regarding representation i.e.,

outsiders to the region might not feel authorised to speak on its behalf. In other words, I do not think that there is a grand conspiracy or sinister plot to exclude the North East, but I do think that the North East as an intellectual terrain is considered either daunting, distant, or obscure and is therefore largely left to its own devices.

The North East has played its part in maintaining its own marginalisation, however, as cited above with Dobson's formative 'A light hearted guide to Geordieland' in 1973. While this idea of the North East being its own land or nation intends to be affirmational in terms of promoting a sense of regional individuality and agency, arguably it contributes to the ongoing mystification of the North East, repeatedly framing it as a *foreign* land, which eschews the connections it might share with other places or regions (and which also flattens the internal divisions and complexities within it). Not only does this keep the region in a suspended position in which it remains quirky and enigmatic, but when the time comes to shed light on what goes on within the region, its presentation and acceptance as 'other' means that its only legitimate authors are required to come *from* the region. The danger is that this makes North East history a somewhat guarded, exclusive topic that only 'authentic' regional insiders are authorised to write about.

Tensions regarding authenticity and authority are also apparent within the North East itself, however, regarding who is considered a representative voice of the region. As it stands, the only macro narrative of North East theatre has been told by Plater. While this macro history is limited to a fourteen-page chapter (i.e., it cannot be considered a comprehensive account of the North East's theatre history), it is the only history so far presented as a collective examination (the title of Plater's chapter is literally 'the drama of the North East'). As such, the region's theatre history begins with *Coalhouse* and, at the time of Plater's writing in 1992, ended with his forecast of the future. Plater is seemingly both designer and prophet, blessed with omniscience and foresight, whose authority appears to be difficult to contest. While Plater is undeniably central, and in a position to talk from experience and insider knowledge, it is still problematic that he is the leading author of the region's theatre *and* its history. A major rereading only came in 2011 by Vall.

The four case studies that follow indicate the range of ways in which theatrical work made in the region goes beyond the preoccupations of *Coalhouse* and offer a significant expansion of the existing scholarship. In terms of the contribution to knowledge that the following analyses make, then, there is undoubtedly a 'myth-busting' element to the research, whose findings

reveal a vibrant and multi-layered theatre culture which challenges external perceptions of the region as culturally barren, outdated, or theatrically unremarkable. But there is also a correcting of several assumptions and unsettling of dominant representations of the region in popular culture and scholarship. As a result, the following chapters and their analyses prioritise regional agency; contribute to the updating of the North East's contemporary theatre history; and demonstrate the extent to which the productions are useful in interrogating numerous live debates in theatre and performance studies.

Chapter 3. November Club: *Beyond the End of the Road*

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse November Club's 2017 production of *Beyond the End of the Road* – a contemporary musical which depicts rural farming life in Northumberland. *Beyond* was written by Laura Lindow (who was commissioned by November Club); directed by November Club's Artistic Director Cinzia Hardy; music composed and directed by November Club Associate Artist Katie Doherty; and performed by a professional cast of seven accompanied by a house band. The show toured throughout the summer of 2017 to marts and village halls in Kirknewton; Thropton; Felton; Norham; Shilbottle; Bardon Mill; and Whalton, as well as Holy Island and Hexham Auction Mart. It concluded with a one-off 'celebration' performance at Sage Gateshead. I saw the productions during June 2017 at Hexham Auction Mart, Bardon Mill Village Hall, and Sage Gateshead. My analysis is supported by interviews with Lindow; Hardy; Doherty; actor Michael Blair; and Participation Producer Sarah Hudson, who was responsible for organising a programme of participatory and community engagement work on the tour.

I use *Beyond* to explore the implications and significance of the use of the term 'authentic' as a descriptor for November Club's work.[34] Artistic Director Cinzia Hardy used the word in an interview I undertook with her prior to the production, noting:

> I think the work that we make is driven by my own personal vision, which has always been to make artistic activity – and I use that very broadly – by making the performance work that we make relevant. And to me, relevance is about being authentic. And being authentic is obviously about not ignoring where it is you decide to situate yourself (Hardy).

In other words, responding to place and working site-specifically underpin Hardy's belief in the authenticity of the company. With regards to *Beyond*, I argue that authenticity derives from its representation of a Northumbrian 'way of life,' exploring culturally and geographically specific traditions and themes of ancestry, land, work, family, community, and belonging. I also consider the extent to which November Club validates the claim for its work as authentic. I argue that in *Beyond*, this included gathering the testimony of local audiences as well as representing 'real people' (i.e., individuals without a professional stake in the work) in both the creative process and final production. This signals the extent to

[34] I consider the term to be 'under erasure' throughout the chapter. In this regard, I express a view that authenticity is always a discursive construct, and therefore elect not to put it in scare quotes throughout.

which November Club prioritises the agency of its audiences, which in turn validates Hardy's claim for the authenticity of the company.

I begin by summarising the considerable body of scholarship on the concept of authenticity, which provides context for my analysis. I then provide an account of Hardy's professional background, which is instructive in understanding how community-based artistic work in Northumberland became central to her artistic practice (and thus the extent to which rural life came to inflect her understanding of authenticity) and how that work informs her belief in the authenticity of the company. I link this discussion of Hardy's background to November Club's artistic practice, which is underpinned by several principles such as responding to place and site, gathering the testimony of audiences, involving them in the creative process and final production, and strengthening social bonds and thus a sense of community cohesion. I then present my performance analysis of *Beyond*, which works through a range of ideas (and anxieties) evident in the concept of rural authenticity.

The performance analysis which follows below offers a striking alternative to the dominant Geordierama tradition outlined in the thesis introduction. The fact that *Beyond* focuses on present-day rural (and evidently middle-class) farming life in Northumberland challenges Geordierama's romanticisation of the industrial working-class and expands the image of the North East beyond Tyneside and the Geordie everyman (though I explore the extent to which roots, tradition, and the past nonetheless impinge upon the concept of rural authenticity constructed in the show). *Beyond* can be additionally thought of as evidence of what might be called the hidden or unglamorous work in the rural periphery, which often goes unacknowledged in contrast to the more celebrated work of urban, building-based theatre. *Beyond* is situated on the periphery of the periphery (i.e., beyond the regional centre of Newcastle, which is itself nationally peripheral), raising wider questions regarding centre/margins, borders and belonging, insiders and outsiders, and community cohesion.

3.2 A Brief History of Authenticity

The late eighteenth century conception of authenticity emerged in line with individualism, which promoted the notion of the autonomous individual or agent acting according to their own free will. This early idea of authenticity prioritises self-mastery; to live an authentic life in the sense of being attuned to one's inner-truths; an individual capable of moral self-governance; what E. Doyle McCarthy calls 'a self-determining freedom (cf. Rousseau), a

listening to one's inner voice and urges' (242).[35] In the nineteenth century, authenticity mutated and more commonly denoted personal integrity in response to mechanisation, the seeping of reason into all facets of life, and the material effects of capitalism on social relations. McCarthy observes that:

> [i]n works of social philosophy of the same period (e.g. Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), humankind was believed to have lost its way, the world was found to have been emptied of meaning and human lives devoid of passion and intensity. Consequently, in works of literature of the late-nineteenth century, authenticity is represented as a heroic struggle against the (inauthentic) forces of bourgeois society. Flaubert's Emma Bovary is, perhaps, the earliest portrait of a conventional and sentimental woman who is the epitome of inauthenticity (243).

In the twentieth century, perceptions of authenticity changed dramatically. In this period, the term was increasingly deemed a marker of shallowness and fraudulency – as in Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity* (1964) or Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Authenticity is subject to derision in this regard, through to the work of contemporary critics alike such as Imber (2004) and Illouz (2008). McCarthy summarises such critics' views of authenticity as 'a surrender to the dictates of popular culture, mass psychology, and their promises of pleasure and self-actualization' (243). McCarthy goes on to argue, '[a]uthenticity-as-jargon, today's "psychobabble," is a kind of authenticity worn on one's sleeve or in one's buttonhole; it listens not to itself but to the dictates of a material civilization held in place by its therapeutic culture of self-aggrandizement' (243). These repeated accounts of authenticity as either vacuous jargon or similarly vacuous self-obsession threaten to consign the concept to the dustbin of history. Yet, as Helen Freshwater notes, 'its theoretical disrepute has—unsurprisingly—had no discernible impact upon its popular use. If anything, it is employed even more widely in the twenty-first century' (156). [36]

While the idea of authenticity as a marker of shallowness and fraudulency endures, hunger for authenticity is just as commonly thought of in the twenty-first century as what Peetz and Weiner call 'a now predominant structure of feeling, emanating from the desire to replace postmodern scepticism with something more tangible, real, and post-postmodern' (5-6).

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[35] McCarthy's reference to Rousseau refers to his *Social Contract* (1792), which Frederick Neuhouser calls 'the founding text in the now centuries-long tradition of philosophical reflection on the nature of personal autonomy' (478).

[36] Daniel Schulze argues, for instance, that '[t]he real, truth and the authentic are prevalent categories and whether they are taken for real or as discursively constructed only makes a difference in an ontological approach; for audiences it frequently does not make a difference' (252).

Schulze describes this post-postmodern development as metamodernism, arguing that authenticity 'is not a primal phenomenon itself, but it springs from a culture that is felt to lack depth and first-hand experience' (254). In a world that is thought of as 'fake' – whether that be coldly profit-driven, hyper-mediated, politically corrupt, or vacuously 'performative' – audiences seemingly crave *real* experiences, predicated on mediations of liveness and truth. The ever-increasing inauthenticity of authenticity, from deceitful politicians to an increasingly mediatised world, paradoxically inspires an even greater search for the real and a social desire to connect.[37]

This rejection of postmodern scepticism, doubt, and irony itself constitutes a major tension within contemporary scholarship on authenticity. In *Acts and Apparitions*, Liz Tomlin takes a dim view of authenticity, characterising its expression as mere postmodern nostalgia and simple sentimentality. Tomlin sees authenticity in this sense as a largely neoliberal construction, which tends to highlight stories based on interpersonal relationships, eschewing the social and political dynamics which underpin these relationships (192) and thus distracting critics from the more fundamental political structures which govern social relations. Schulze notes, however, that while Tomlin's conclusions are instructive, many of her examples are taken from the 1990s, which may require further revision and updating for the present century (252). It is also worth cautioning against overstating the case that authenticity is an entirely neoliberal product. While guarding against essentialist concepts and neoliberal distortions is important, the endurance (and ongoing transformation) of authenticity reflects a cultural response to a view that postmodern scepticism, doubt, irony, and parody are not enough. Deconstructing the world is no longer deemed sufficient on its own.

In relation to interest in metamodern developments pertaining to authenticity and discourses of the real, recent reassessments of the New Sincerity have been made (initially theorised by contemporary American fiction scholars via Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) and David Foster Wallace's essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993)). In "Spectatorship and the New Critical Sincerity: The Case of Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties*" (2016), Siân Adiseshiah coins the term 'critical sincerity' (180), which 'describes the knowingness that certain theatre pieces – like

[37] Phillip Vannini and J. Patrick Williams note that '[d]iscussions of authenticity and inauthenticity are legion within the ever-expanding field of cultural studies, and especially within the interdisciplinary subfield of subculture studies' (5).

Tomorrow's Parties – exhibit of the inherent insincerity of performance, while simultaneously striving for a sincere encounter' (180). In doing so, Adiseshiah considers the trans-disciplinary shift from fiction to theatre studies as New Sincerity emerged in the 2010s.

Another dimension to authenticity in contemporary culture relevant to my analysis is the valorisation of origins and originals. This can be thought of in terms of what Heike Roms, citing Amelia Jones and Derrida, refers to as a yearning for the '[l]ive, without mediation and without delay […] encouraging us to efface the "laborious deciphering of the archive" in a desire to return to an unmediated point of origin' (177). But it can also be thought of in terms of a cultural obsession with original objects, notably described by Walter Benjamin (originally in 1935) in terms of their 'aura' (2008) – a special quality to an object which derives from its authenticity (uniqueness) and locale (physical and cultural). This cultural obsession with originals can be observed in the view which sees adaptations as poor facsimilia; the desirability of first editions; and in the idea of supporting a musician before they 'make it.' Vannini and Patrick argue that authenticity can be in this regard 'something strategically invoked as a marker of status or method of social control' (3). It is not that the original is truly thought to be authentic, but that the individual presents *themselves* as authentic (authoritative) because they own or have knowledge *of* the original.

3.3 From Metropolis to Margins: The Road to Authenticity

Before moving into a performance analysis of *Beyond*, an account of Hardy's own background reveals how community-based artistic work in Northumberland became central to her artistic practice, and how that work came to inform her belief in the authenticity of the company. Hardy, who trained as an actor and dancer, set up the legal framework for November Club circa 1992. At that time, the company was called European Players, and Hardy was living in London.[38] European Players went dormant in the late 1990s as Hardy prioritised a demanding job at the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT). In 1999, Hardy's partner moved to the North East 'for the job of a lifetime' (Hardy). Hardy explains that she 'reluctantly followed,' saying to her partner, 'three years and I'm out of here!' (Hardy). The pair settled in Morpeth, Northumberland in what was, at least for Hardy, a

[38] Hardy, who is half-Italian, explains that the company's 'special branded thing was […] taking short one-act plays in English to Italy, working with the British Council. It was all about language learning skills. And then in the evenings we'd do the show to a paying audience; quite a big expat audience' (Hardy).

seemingly temporary move, and one that she did not expect to have a lasting impact on her artistic practice, career, or long-term plans.

Hardy explains that it 'felt too hard' to relaunch European Players in the North East as she 'didn't know anybody' in the region (Hardy). Instead, she took a job working for Northern Arts – a regional arts board from 1990-2002 succeeded by Arts Council North East – to manage the Year of the Artist programme across the North East and Cumbria. Hardy explains that:

> My role was to go out and meet artists and theatre companies and creative organisations throughout the region and help create these artist residencies. […] As soon as that programme was over, I left the Arts Council [Northern Arts as it was known at the time], and I was perfectly placed […] to get the company alive again because I knew people (Hardy).

Before officially relaunching European Players, Hardy began working with Newcastle's Lit & Phil – founded in 1793 and whose purpose-built library opened in 1825 on Westgate Road. In 2007, Hardy presented The Novocastrian Philosophers' Club at the library and neighbouring Mining Institute: a site-specific promenade performance in the form of a guided tour, which responded to material found in both organisations' archives and to the buildings themselves. Hardy later recalled that the 'audience became members of a fictitious Club (the Novocastrians of the title) and were introduced to a world where books came to life, paintings seemed to speak, and an explorer re-emerged from a forgotten century to fall in love with a librarian' (Hardy). Hardy noted that the success of the show – marked by two Journal Culture awards – indicated to her that 'there was an appetite in the North East for performances outside of the usual theatre buildings' (Hardy). In this respect, Hardy developed and honed an interest in archives and collections, literary history, English heritage, historical re-enactment, and making performances in non-traditional theatrical settings.

Around this time, Hardy also started volunteering in her local village hall in Morpeth, which included putting on community plays. Hardy notes that what struck her about putting on these community plays 'was the enthusiasm of people in being part of a process; not just coming to see the show, which was always tremendous fun […] but it was being involved in something that was bigger than just the final product' (Hardy). In particular, Hardy notes that putting on these plays 'brought people together in a different way to which I had ever experienced when living in a city like London. Now that's not to say it doesn't happen in a city like London, but I had no experience of that' (Hardy). Crucial to this experience for Hardy was seeing

‘ordinary’ people (non-professionals, or more accurately, people without a professional stake in the work) develop their confidence and bond.

Hardy’s journey tells a recognisable story of rural authenticity, which I will discuss at length in my performance analysis below. Hardy is a professionally trained actor who moved from ‘the big city’ to ‘the regions,’ which ‘felt like the middle of nowhere having come from the thrusting metropolis that is London’ (Hardy). She did not intend to stay, but through a combination of building her network of contacts and participating in village hall work, found a sense of fulfilment, belonging and value in community-based work in non-traditional theatrical settings. As such, ‘the regional,’ ‘the non-professional,’ and ‘the rural’ all underpin authenticity in a way that is framed against the ‘the metropolitan,’ ‘the professional’ and ‘the urban.’ In one sense, this describes a ‘backwards’ journey (the typical direction of travel is often thought to be from the regions to London). But it also evokes a narrative of discovery in which metropolitan or city-based artists find a sense of community in the rural periphery. While it is therefore possible to read this story as one of the professional artist’s inner-journey, who, in discovering a meaningful, authentic life, shows residents how to do it ‘right’ (like a pro), it also evidences the reverse impact the community can have on the professional artist.

To further clarify her belief in the authenticity of November Club, Hardy recalls a conversation she had with John Fox, former Artistic Director of touring company Welfare State International, which later settled in Ulverston, Cumbria. Hardy explains that after touring the world, ‘not only did they want to root themselves but actually they felt it was really important – in order to develop the work that they were making – to start a conversation with a group of people that they could then together go on a journey with. And you couldn’t do that, of course, if you were moving around from city to city or country to country’ (Hardy). For Hardy, then, the authenticity of the company also derives from making a long-term commitment to working in Northumberland (and occasionally locations across the wider North East) with whose populations November Club makes a variety of artistic activity, including craftwork, performances, school projects, and a range of other events.

This long-term commitment to Northumberland underpins November Club’s typical practice of working site-specifically and its artistic mission to make a range of activity by, with, for,

and about local audiences.[39] Examples of November Club's past artistic work include a re-enactment of traditional Northumbrian dances in *Traces and Graces* (2009); ropemaking in *The Great Performing Rope* (2015), inspired by Berwick's history of ropemaking and tradition of rope walks, which culminated in a procession through the streets of Berwick; and *Foods and Feuds: Two Cooks of Hexham* (2019) inspired by the life of eighteenth century writer Hannah Glasse, author of *The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy* (1747), born in London to a Northumberland landowner and his mistress (November Club). While site-specificity and community participation in both the creative process and the final product underpin the company's sense of authenticity, staging historically 'accurate' re-enactments of local traditions is also crucial to November Club's sense of authenticity.

Hardy explains, however, that working site-specifically limited the company to working in one place at a time, and she wanted to reach more people in Northumberland, which required making something that could be toured (Hardy). This informed her interest in making *Beyond* – the company's first piece of conventional theatre and first piece of rural touring work. To maintain site-specificity (and thus a sense of authenticity), November Club embarked upon a considerable programme of participation and community engagement work. In addition to casting local people in *Beyond* itself, the company interviewed local people about rural life in Northumberland, which informed parts of the show, while residents also made bunting and baked cakes for the village hall venues. November Club teamed up with the Highlights Rural Touring scheme to deliver this programme of work.[40] November Club therefore sought to construct a collective notion of rural farming life in Northumberland by gathering the testimony of local audiences and representing residents in the final show and the creative process. In this respect, the agency of audiences in the specific locations to which *Beyond* toured underpins the authenticity claim made for the final show.

Hardy's discussion of her personal and professional journey suggests a vision of authenticity that is co-produced and reciprocal. November Club seeks to work within community settings

[39] 'By, with, for and about' also describes a wider strategic approach in rural touring theatre. Pentabus, for instance, claims to make work that is 'by, with, for and about rural communities' (Pentabus Theatre).

[40] Highlights was set up to tour a range of artistic activity to village halls throughout Northumberland, Cumbria, and North Yorkshire. Highlights offer a 'menu' of this artistic activity to community promoters who then programme it for audiences in community venues such as village halls. Hardy explains that the 'difference with us is that [Highlights] were having to buy into a different thinking about why they might have a show, because they were going to have to engage with us in terms of gathering stories, making bunting, making a cake, being in it' (Hardy). Indeed, November Club sought to retain site-specificity through an ambitious programme of participatory and community engagement work which surrounded the theatre production.

to help bring about positive change in the form of strengthening social bonds, widening access to the arts, celebrating local heritage, building confidence and, of course, putting on an enjoyable show, but with a sense of care not to preach to the community or extract elements of the local culture for their own financial or reputational gain. At the same time, this presents an idea of authenticity as doing what might be called unglamorous work. Far from the (comparatively) affluent, easily accessible, eminent world of professional theatre in cities, whether in regional centres such as Newcastle or the national centre in London, there exists the village hall work, which must overcome a range of unique material challenges in working in so-called 'hard to reach' places.[41] This work tends to go unacknowledged, thus hidden from view, and must also often overcome negative associations of remoteness – namely that the work is deemed to be of a lower artistic standard or worth.

The association of remoteness with lower artistic standards has a long history, partly traced in Taryn Storey's ''Village Hall Work Can Never Be "Theatre"': Amateur Theatre and the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1945–56' (2017). In 1949, the Arts Council of Great Britain's Drama Director, John Moody, set out his vision for Arts Council-funded theatre in the regions in his *Programme for Drama*. Moody wrote that '[t]he theatre is a social event and that must have some glamour as well as high intentions. [...] Village Hall work can never be 'Theatre', it can only be 'Entertainment'. [...] Theatre is essentially an artificial and sophisticated product which flourishes in cities' (qtd. in Storey 87). Storey writes that Moody 'stressed the need to educate civic authorities on how to run the theatres "professionally" warning that "Civic Theatres will grow up with an entirely amateur mentality in which it is heart-breaking and impossible for a professional director to work"' (87). While such views may appear archaic, they persist in British theatre culture, as cited above with regards to a tweet by Cavendish. Indeed, they indicate the endurance of stubborn binaries between amateur/professional, theatre/entertainment, cities/towns, and rural/urban imposed upon on artistic work made in the English regions.

There is another illuminating detail regarding the extent to which community-based work – i.e., non-professional voluntary work based on strengthening social bonds rather than

[41] Hardy notes that 'usually you're starting from absolute scratch, from bringing the toilets in sometimes to figuring out where can you sell a ticket. […] But, most importantly, if you're working with participants – and theatres do that now, they work with non-professional performers and they've got an arm of their departments that are about developing that work – it is harder when you're heading out into the streets of the villages to try and encourage people to take part' (Hardy).

financial reward or return – became central to Hardy's understanding of authenticity. After moving to Morpeth, Hardy worked on a 'very large community play on a voluntary basis, so it wasn't professional' (Hardy), around the millennium. The play was performed in promenade around the village and included a variety of community groups and what Hardy refers to as scratch bands. Hardy was then diagnosed with a serious, potentially life-threatening illness. Following her diagnosis, the scratch bands showed up outside Hardy's home one night in November (which later inspired the November Club company name) and played the music they had learned as part of the show. For Hardy, this poignant gesture:

> …was the proof of that collective shared experience that we'd shared for the millennium on that project. Nothing like that had happened in that village before. And it absolutely cemented to me the power that the arts have as a catalyst for change, for bringing people together, to transform people. That's not to say it doesn't happen when you go to the theatre and experience a fantastic Chekhov play or a more contemporary play. But […] it motivates me on the days when it's hard to get out of bed because maybe the funding hasn't come through for a project or something has gone wrong (Hardy).

While Hardy's above quote emphasises the importance of having a non-professional stake in the work to her understanding of authenticity, it is also instructive in reading authenticity as a stripping away of artifice, labels, and division. Here, authenticity can be evidenced in the act of doing something for another, performing an act of care or compassion. While this gesture must be completely self-directed (i.e., if Hardy had asked the scratch bands to play for her, then it would not have been authentic), it can be also thought of as the residue of a shared project: the evidence of its success or impact. The scratch bands performed a genuine (authentic) act of kindness for Hardy in a way which was both spontaneous and directly connected to the artistic work they had made together. This is itself important in terms of evidencing authenticity. This form of proof is difficult to measure; it might only ever be glimpsed as a product of serendipity (in this instance, by Hardy's illness); and retrieved qualitatively, recollected in a story of emotional connection.

Hardy's discussion of her memories of this collective display of compassion highlights the values of empathy and kindness which are sometimes associated with understandings of the authentic, especially in relation to theatre and performance. In this regard, authenticity reaches for the utopic, driven by broader visions of a mended world of kindness and peace, underpinned by conceptions of cooperation and care, among others. As Jill Dolan's work indicates, theatre can create an opening through which such a world can be brought about and provide a template for how it might be achieved. Dolan suggests that:

> …moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection, spring from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a different, putatively better future (168).

While these moments of 'communitas' may be only temporary, occurring during a particular project, a great many theatre-makers share hope that the arts can play a part in remaking social relations at a wider and sustained level – the arts as 'a catalyst for change' as Hardy describes above. In experiencing acts of care, compassion, empathy and kindness, the hope is that enough people change – the product of a Levinasian face to face relation in which people are responsible to each other in the encounter, which is embodied by the pursuit of authenticity (acceptance of the Other).[42]

But there is always a need to be mindful of the extent to which kindness and empathy can be curtailed by a variety of factors and forces, limiting to whom these qualities are extended. Perceived threats to 'our' (authentic) 'way of life' can rely on not only preserving, for instance, a white ethno-state, where non-white others represent a foreign danger, it speaks to broader formulations such as Fortress Europe, which is maintained by imposing and policing hostile borders designed to repel and detain, without regard to the artificiality of borders; the economic necessity of migration; ethical or legal imperatives to offer residency or sanctuary; or conditions that the 'domestic' nation/entity might play in forced migration. These ideas underpin numerous critiques of authenticity, which argue that the concept has been used not only to sell products (as Adorno noted in *Jargon*), but that it is susceptible to deployment as part of the assertion of nativist or nationalistic discourse (Lubbers), which hijacks nostalgia and pride. These risks suggest that authenticity is hard to get 'right,' is perhaps only fleeting, highly susceptible to weaponisation, and limited in its radical potential.

These potential problems with authenticity point to the numerous ethical tensions generated by the concept. For Hardy, the ethical considerations of what it means to settle in a place and start participating in community life are fundamental. This reflects not only Hardy's personal sense of ethical responsibility in being what is known colloquially in Northumberland as an 'incomer' to a rural community – an anxiety which was to some extent allayed by the scratch

[42] Levinas wrote that '[o]ur relation with him [sic] certainly consists in wanting to understand him, but this relation exceeds the confines of understanding. Not only because, besides curiosity, knowledge of the other also demands sympathy or love, ways of being that are different from impassive contemplation, but also because in our relation to the other, the latter does not affect us by means of a concept. The other is a being and counts as such' (5). In *Theatre and Ethics*, Nicholas Ridout points out the obvious appeal for theatre scholars in Levinas' concept of the encounter with the *face* (51-3), though he also highlights the dangers of easy appropriation (55). For further discussion of Levinas' *face*, see Cochrane and Robinson (15-16).

bands performing outside her home, which doubled as a ceremonial acceptance of Hardy into the community – but it extends to 'good' artistic practice more broadly. A major tension in contemporary arts derives from companies parachuting into communities. Indeed, national companies can and do (unintentionally or not) displace or overlook local groups which have been working on the ground for a long time, which is itself a question of authenticity (who has experience and/or put down roots in a place). In this regard, authenticity arises in part from a defensive position, to hold one's ground, when one feels forced into proving one's legitimacy, which until that moment is simply expressed in the work.

In summary of this section, I have traced authenticity's evolution from that of the individual agent following one's inner truths; its self-styled heroic struggle against the inauthentic forces of bourgeois society; its dismissal as vacuous jargon and shallow self-obsession, and, later, postmodern pastiche; through to its re-emergence as an emotion, a structure of feeling, which seeks to move beyond postmodern scepticism. Contemporary authenticity unavoidably contains all of its past iterations, which reflects the cumulative nature of history. Such is the breadth and difficulty of the term, at once a discursive tool of corporations to sell products, governments to push hostile agendas, and an affect or structure of feeling which many people value. I have also highlighted the extent to which site-specificity, rurality, and place play a part in November Club's understanding of authenticity, which frames my subsequent performance analysis. I now move to consider how the production itself can be read as embodying the issues arising from the use of the term authentic.

3.4 Authenticity… and *Beyond*

Beyond tells the stories of residents of a fictional village in Northumberland called Place. The action unfolds over the course of one midsummer night, interspersed with original folk songs, performed by the cast and a live band. Lighting designer Sula Clark (Christina Berriman-Dawson) flees the travails of the city following the breakdown of a relationship to visit her half-sister Evie (Alice Blundell), a local schoolteacher and 'community powerhouse' on the organising committee for a ceilidh (in which audiences can in fact take part following the show). While visiting Evie, Sula encounters members of a musical farming family, the

Lockarts, who swap songs and stories of rural and urban life.[43] We meet Grandmother Grace (Jane Holman), who is showing early signs of dementia. Feuding brothers Alec (Micky Cochrane) and Bobby (Michael Blair) have gone off in opposite directions: Alec stayed in the village to lead a life as a humble sheep farmer while taking care of Grace. Bobby is the more 'successful' farmer, who left the village to make his fortune. Alec's son Thomas (Lawrence Neale) is torn between staying in the village and going to university. The piece is tied together by Zac (Peter Peverley), who doubles as a local labourer and narrator.

Running throughout *Beyond* is the desire to 'accurately' (i.e., mimetically) depict contemporary farming life in Northumberland, which is key to the show's authenticity claim. While this pertains to details such as characters' costumes, which are meant to look 'real,' it is also about representing rural life as expressed by local people themselves. For instance, Katie Doherty interviewed her husband, and her father-in-law – both farmers – who explained that there is often tension between brothers from the same family, as land is divided up to create space for sons to farm (Doherty). This informed the relationship of feuding brothers Alec and Bobby. Doherty also observed generational customs: the older members of the family often authorise payments and as such are typically perceived to be those with the greatest power in terms of running the business, which contributed to the presentation of Grace as a matriarch. Another example can be found in November Club's interviews in which numerous people cited the starry night skies as a benefit of living in the countryside. This informed part of a scene between Sula and Alec in which they both reflect on the beauty of the unpolluted night sky. Authenticity derives here from mimesis.

Doherty's further research into her husband's family also informed the show's content and tour venues, adding more layers of legitimacy (authenticity) drawn directly from residents' testimonies. For instance, Doherty notes that the opinions of her husband and father-in-law informed the company's decision to portray a farming family. Not only is farming a leading form of work in Northumberland, but it is also considered to be more than that to many people: a vocation or way of life. Their opinions also informed November Club's decision to tour to marts and village halls, as Doherty's husband and father-in-law felt that these were

[43] Sula is based in part on Associate Artist Katie Doherty, who married a sheep farmer and moved from urban Newcastle to rural Northumberland, while the Lockarts are based in part on Doherty's husband's family. It is also possible to see Evie, the self-styled 'community powerhouse,' as an avatar for Hardy, an incomer to Northumberland who took up a position as a community organiser. Doherty explains that 'just about every place we went, we met an Evie; a community powerhouse […] [T]hey were generally an incomer; they were generally someone who had come to a rural community because they felt like it was more likely to have that kind of village community feel. But that doesn't happen unless someone's keeping it going.' (Doherty).

venues with which farmers felt at home.[44] Even the title of the show was inspired by Doherty's husband, who Hardy explains would ask Doherty upon her return from the city, 'What's the news beyond the end of the road?' (Hardy). Not only do these details emphasise the extent to which mimesis and relevance to daily life feature as markers of authenticity, but the comment by Doherty's husband frames the urban as distant and hard to reach (thus decentring the urban, from which the rural is typically perceived as remote).

In the case of the show's performance at Hexham Auction Mart (see *Fig. 1* below), authenticity derives explicitly from the site. Not only is the show performed in a 'real' venue (a site which audiences recognise and feel at home in), it is also blocked and tailored to it. Some of this tailoring relates to the staging, which at Hexham Auction Mart was in-the-round, but other aspects derive from responding to the nuances and limitations of a non-traditional theatrical venue. Indeed, there is no lighting rig, no raised stage, no sound system – no frills available in a traditional theatre – and as such the 'unplugged' nature of the performance inflects its self-image as authentic, both in its presentation as a folksy 'humble' story and through the creation of intimacy. Natural light floods the stage from the open roof above, which brings in the 'real world,' but also exposes the venue to the elements, and thus places the show in the hands of nature, reminding audiences of the risks of performing in such venues. At one point, a pigeon flies in through the roof, which simultaneously interrupts and augments the performance, revealing its artificiality while adding to its authenticity.

[44] Doherty also explains that there is a strong tradition in farming communities of amateur dramatics. Her husband is involved with am-dram and her father-in-law has directed farming community pantomimes for the past forty years (Doherty 2017). As such, they are authoritative and experienced in performing within their own community – an embeddedness and expertise to which November Club in part deferred in seeking advice and guidance on what type of story to tell. Interestingly, because there is such a strong tradition of amateur dramatics, this meant that audiences simply assumed that *Beyond* was itself a piece of amateur theatre. Doherty notes how many audiences commented on how 'professional' they found the show (2017).

Figure 1: Production shot from Hexham Auction Mart. Courtesy of The Image Farm 2017.

The vision of calm, clear night skies taken from local residents' testimonies reinforces the beauty of the natural world, a common image conjured in representations of the rural and a key factor in *Beyond*'s representation of an authentic life.[45] Indeed, *Beyond* opens with a familiar vision of the English pastoral idyll. The cast present themselves as a troupe of seven players, here to respectfully tell the stories of Place's residents. Zac invites audiences to picture the fictional village: 'a river nearby which cuts its way into the hills and on. Farms stud the landscape, nailing the greenery to a sense of purpose.' Zac tells us that 'a bus passes through once a week bound for the town, which is 25 miles and a lifetime away,' again framing the urban as distant and inaccessible. 'The old railway line is now covered and reclaimed by the land,' he continues. 'Footprints of those who have gone before lie all around,' introducing central themes of ancestry and roots (*the past*), the material traces of which are recorded in the landscape. 'But make no mistake,' Zac warns. 'Here. There. Is. Life.' While Place is an authentically 'real' village recognisable to audiences, it is explicitly set up as a literary creation, teeming with conceptions of peace, nature, agriculture, and local activity.

A vision of the English pastoral idyll is also maintained tonally in the piece, which speaks to the paradox of rural authenticity. In *Beyond*'s opening, narrator Zac's description of a restful,

[45] While the rural has been depicted as distant and backwards in contrast to the accessible and progressive city (Pearson), it is also dominated by desirable pastoral scenes. Williams noted that what he termed 'the rural' in *The Country and the City* (1973 and reprinted in 2016) 'has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue' alongside 'backwardness, ignorance, limitation,' despite the fact that 'the real history, throughout, has been astonishingly varied' (1). Narratives of getting back to nature remain popular in contemporary theatre, from Jez Butterworth's 2009 play *Jerusalem* to contemporary 'eco-dramas' such as Paul Hart's 2021 production of *As You Like It*.

quiet village is mirrored in his delivery, which is softly spoken, as if courteously observing a painterly land that is real and recognisable and yet something of a mythical world into which we might escape the chaotic present. On one hand, the rural is presented as a 'real' (recognisable) landscape, yet on the other hand an idealised place into which fantasies of peace can be smuggled. There is also something polite and disarming about the actual feel of Zac's narration. This story about rural life seems to set itself up as a vehicle of relaxation and recuperation, where audiences can feel at home, which is achieved both in the sense of November Club travelling out to rural communities and performing in 'their' venues, but also by presenting audiences with an unthreatening story.

In this regard, feeling at home is underpinned by feeling safe, in which an authentic 'way of life' is protected and preserved. In one sense, this idea of safety is produced in deferring to the local population, respecting that the theatre company is venturing into 'their' community spaces. But in another sense, feeling safe requires the disappearance of conflict, which indicates the extent to which a 'simpler' authentic way of life is fraught with a number of fantasies and exclusions regarding the sanctity of home. The rural is sometimes considered a more 'real' form of community: more like a family – not without its feuds but a place where everyone knows each other – reinforced in *Beyond* through the portrayal of a farming family. Following this logic, the notion of an authentic life is conditional on the 'tightness' of a community, an idea which also underpins perceptions of the North East as a whole. But the idea of the tight-knit community (friendly and supportive but insular and clannish) can rely on imposing a border: admission becomes subject to strict criteria, typically conditional on class and race. The safety of rural life hinges on the desirability of the 'open' countryside which is also a closed gated community: accessible, but only to the 'right' people.

Consequently, indigeneity becomes a marker of authenticity. While negotiating the question of who has more of a legitimate claim to live in a place is sometimes regulated by forms of social, cultural and economic capital, it can equally come down to who has 'roots' going back the furthest.[46] Outsiders can be colonising forces intent on displacing the indigenous population, which casts insiders as authentically real, simply living their lives in sovereign peace. Yet, outsiders can be considered unwelcome foreigners, revealing the xenophobia of a place (or nation). When settling in a place, outsiders must often then dutifully 'serve' the

[46] Which Samuel argues is premised on 'a *necessary* falsification of the past. […] We all have half a dozen possible ancestries to choose from, and fantasy and projection can furnish us with a dozen more' (272).

community to prove their value and earn their place before they are accepted.[47] But even this is sometimes not enough. During the creative process, November Club interviewed many local people to understand the relationship between natives and incomers. Doherty recalls talking to people 'who had basically lived in these villages since they were six years old and they were now 80, and they still considered themselves to be incomers' (Doherty), indicating that time spent living in a place may not be considered sufficient proof of insiderness, emphasising the currency of origins and connection to the homeland.

The rural as authentic is elsewhere reinforced by Evie's valorisation of heritage, which encourages us to take a similar perspective. While showing Sula around her home, Evie points out that she has 'exposed the original features. There's the *original* fireplace (someone had covered it over –criminal!), *original* beams,' her emphasis on 'original' underlining the idea of authenticity. This recalls Walter Benjamin's discussion of the 'aura,' a special quality to an object which derives from its authenticity (uniqueness) and locale (physical and cultural). While the idea of 'uncovering' original features performs a wider cultural yearning for originals, it also demonstrates an aesthetic trend within contemporary capitalism which presents an idealised rural life (now known as cottagecore) into which we might escape. As part of this, buildings are 'returned' to their original state – a narrative of recovery which is arguably highly inauthentic – while doubling as cosy retreats for the wealthy. In the city, restoring buildings to their 'former glory' is common, usually in the form of post-industrial nostalgia and postmodern pastiche, when former industrial buildings are aesthetically preserved (a 'nod' to the past) but repurposed into luxury flats or cultural venues.

The trope of the travelling troupe used in *Beyond* is also used to frame authenticity in relation to folkloric tradition. While maintaining a discursive division between the city and the countryside, the use of a travelling troupe valorises orality and the universality of myths and legends, emphasised by the 'anywhereness' of the village itself, simply called Place. The use of narration throughout *Beyond* further expresses the importance of storytelling. Folklore and oral tradition are in this sense deployed as markers of the piece's authenticity, harking back both to a 'simpler' time and escaping into an England that is forever ancient, furtive, and enigmatic. This show could be *anywhere,* in one sense not site-specific or tied to a particular time – 'universal' – yet paradoxically is cast within a distinct folkloric heritage which prioritises notions of vernacular tradition and orality, stories that are passed down not in

[47] As explored in *The Good Immigrant* (2016), edited by Nikesh Shukla.

books or other modes of 'elite' production, but 'directly' from generation to generation – from *within* a family or community – who in another sense 'own' the stories they tell.

Beyond's valorisation of vernacular tradition, which is central to its authenticity claim and a tentpole of north-eastern drama, is also aligned with people's theatre. Zac describes the performance as 'an evening of entertainment.' We are promised raucous music, 'sex and violence, betrayal and intrigue, deaths, births, marriages.' This recalls the idea of John McGrath's good night out, which has itself gained in currency in the twenty-first century. But it also disrupts the quiet, peaceful image so far presented to us. In turn, we are directed away from 'elite' (or, alternatively, bourgeois) performance forms and towards the boisterous forms of people's theatre.[48] Indeed, Zac tells us to 'feel free to laugh and/or cry; to applaud and/or cheer and/or shout for more, and of course to sing along in any joining-in bits (we'll tell you when–no pressure).' As such, the idea of 'ordinary' stories passed down between generations twinned with the raucous performance traditions of popular theatre combine to reinforce the play's self-presentation as an authentic performance. The breaking down of division between audience and spectator is crucial to authenticity here: we are not required to sit in quiet receptivity and deference but rather participate as equals or co-owners of the piece.

In turn, *Beyond*'s valorisation of people's theatre and vernacular/oral tradition serves a double purpose. On one hand, it performs the show's regional 'roots,' which acknowledges and sustains vernacular tradition and popular theatre in North East England. But on the other hand, it also frames *Beyond* as a piece of contemporary theatre because it reflects a wider trend in British theatre culture in which popular forms are increasingly prevalent. This speaks to a fundamental interplay between the preservation of vernacular tradition and the embracing of contemporary trends, which in many ways characterises a strand of contemporary theatre in North East England. Put differently, *Beyond* functions as a piece which is able to take up a dual position as a piece of 'authentic' storytelling, which hinges on its valorisation of

[48] I believe there is a separate history to be written of the reappearance of John McGrath's *A Good Night Out* (1981) in twenty-first century British theatre. For instance, providing audiences with a 'good night out' forms the bedrock of The Six Twenty's work in Newcastle and Middle Child in Hull. In Exeunt magazine, Maddy Costa has written about the formation of the A Good Night Out Reading Group (AGNO) in 2019, a non-hierarchical socialist reading group. McGrath's text has also served as inspiration for practitioners such as Natalie Ibu, former CEO/Artistic Director of tiata fahodzi and current Artistic Director of Northern Stage; and Joe Douglas, former Artistic Director of Live Theatre. Aleks Sierz also released a book in 2020 called *Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre 1940-2015*, which partly refutes McGrath's socialist principles.

vernacular tradition and thus proof of its regional roots, yet is equally performed, perhaps somewhat serendipitously, at a time when such ideas are highly popular and fashionable in contemporary theatre more broadly. This enables *Beyond* to appear both traditional and modern; to be situated within a regional past and national present.

While mimesis pertains to authenticity, the production of authenticity also derives from communicating the realities of rural farming life in a way which complicates the vision of an idyllic life. We hear of power cuts, problems with machinery, threats from the Land Registry to increase the rent, and the increasing encroachment of a nearby bypass being built on the outskirts of the village. *Beyond* therefore appears contemporary and relevant, but representing the realities of rural life also connects the production to the mystery play some five hundred years hence – in particular, the Corpus Christi cycles where, as Robinson writes, 'before the performance of Annunciation to the shepherds, the actors playing those characters reminded their spectators of the practicalities of working life in the countryside […] livestock disease, physical hardship, enclosure and unhappy marriages which – they made clear – existed just as much in the country as in the city' (5). As such, authenticity derives from capturing the truth of rural life (in all its beauty and ugliness).

With further regards to representing the realities of rural farming life, *Beyond* includes a scene set in a cattle mart, which, at Hexham Auction Mart, underlines the link between authenticity and site-specificity. Zac welcomes us to the mart, 'where once every six weeks interested parties come to buy and to sell their livestock.' He takes up a role as auctioneer, showcasing '100 super Suffolk cross ewes, 45 Blackface Gimmers, 100 mule ewes (mixed ages), 8 crop borders (ex Cheviot mules).' While authenticity derives from vernacular and site-specificity, the scene also doubles as a means of opening up the relationship between feuding brothers Alec and Bobby (see *Fig. 2* below). The pair engage in a bidding war over a tup, before fetching their instruments and launching into a musical duel. Alec, the 'humbler' farmer who stayed in the village, triumphs in the bidding war over his flashy brother (with echoes of *War Horse*'s Ted Narracott), as Bobby lambasts him for being provincial. Alec argues back that he cares for Grace, and calls Bobby 'an opportunist, a chancer.' Authenticity features in terms of who leads the more virtuous life – modesty versus wealth.[49]

[49] In a particularly explosive part of the argument, Bobby attacks Alec for stifling his son Thomas who Bobby says wants to get away from home. Bobby argues, 'He [Thomas] doesn't want to be like you. Waiting here to die. Like you made his mam do, your Jen, he doesn't want to be like that. Can you blame him?!' Bobby's claim that Alec also stifled his late wife forms the crux of the argument, foreshadowing the show's finale.

Figure 2: Feuding brothers Bobby and Alec in Beyond*. Courtesy of The Image Farm 2017.*

Bobby returns in a subsequent scene set in the local pub, launching into a case for 'diversification,' which exposes rural authenticity to cynical promotion and 'development.' He argues that the village needs to move with the times and think of ways of marketing itself. 'Tourism counts for 11% of agricultural income in Northumberland,' he claims. 'Guess how much more that is than the rest of England? You won't guess. 2%!' In a somewhat grim forecast looking back on the show, Bobby adds, 'who knows what'll happen when Brexit bites?' When a cast member cites the picturesque hills as a selling point, Bobby markets it as 'beautiful Northumbrian landscape.' When another character argues that Northumberland is merely full of farms, Bobby reframes them as 'working properties. The authentic rural experience.' 'But we're the middle of nowhere,' a resident cries. 'Then you call it 'a retreat',' argues Bobby, a place that is full of 'potential,' deploying the neoliberal language of development. The pub also functions as a site of community debate and conflict, which expresses a sense of authenticity ('real' places) while reinforcing *Beyond*'s espousal of pub theatre, which performs its own sense of authenticity (theatre that is performed away from 'traditional' venues).

Beyond's decision to factor in the construction of a bypass on the outskirts of the village also serves to reinforce the threat of enclosure, and thus a threat to rural authenticity, which as Robinson noted is prevalent in rural storytelling traditions more widely. In one sense, the bypass is framed as a welcome and necessary addition to alleviate traffic which congests the village bridge, while connecting the village to other places. But in another sense, it threatens the village with pollution and thus imperils it: the urban is expanding its territorial control. This idea of jeopardy from both external and 'modernising' forces is itself a familiar trope in

representations of the rural, which again imagines the rural as untouched (natural, authentic) but also stubbornly resistant to forms of 'progress' such as industrialisation and globalisation. This tension is brought out elsewhere in the relationship between Alec and Bobby, who stand in for provincial-authentic and metropolitan-inauthentic. Consequently, the threat of enclosure, whether that be from capitalists such as Bobby or urban territorial land grabs, presents a threat to a perceived authentic, rural way of life.

In a broader sense, external threats such as the bypass present an authentic, rural way of life as frequently at risk of disappearing, a rural ideal that might soon be swallowed up by officialdom or corporate ownership.[50] Autonomy of rural communities is in this regard a prevalent theme in relation to authenticity, which is itself a popular trope in representations of the rural regarding who has local control.[51] Robinson notes how the green and pleasant land embodied by Rooster in *Jerusalem* is 'threatened by the bureaucracy of Kennet and Avon Council' (7). In *Beyond*, a similar disdain for the authorities is expressed, through the Lockarts' anger towards the Land Registry who threaten their livelihood with rent increases and fear of interference from the local council. When Sula visits Grace, the pair discuss the sound of a mysterious hum, which is keeping Sula awake. Sula pleads with Grace, 'Can't you call the council?' Grace snaps back, 'No, the council won't help. Bunch of half-wits there. We need to do something about it ourselves.' As such, the notion of an authentic life also hinges on the community being rid of meddlesome official bodies or authorities.

While authenticity derives from accurately representing the breadth of rural life in Northumberland, it is also, in doing so, about presenting a vision of farming life which unsettles dominant portrayals. Doherty notes that in the process of interviewing farmers across Northumberland, several pleaded with her not to portray farming life as it is portrayed in *The Archers* and in *Countryfile* (a general frustration shared by farmers in Northumberland about 'that generic West Country farmer type accent' (Doherty), which they felt dominated popular representations of farming life). Doherty explains that electing to represent people's lives made her feel duty-bound to 'get it right,' which, for her, was 'very much about the audience owning the show, feeling part of it, and seeing themselves in it, but also connecting

[50] See Lisa J. Kiser's '"Mak's Heirs": Sheep and Humans in the Pastoral Ecology of the Towneley *First* and *Second Shepherds' Plays*' for a broader discussion of these issues.

[51] See David Rabey's *The Theatre and Films of Jez Butterworth* (108-9) for a wider discussion.

with the characters in that way' (Doherty).[52] In this regard, authenticity is a product of balancing agencies and eliciting an emotional response to characters that appear both 'real' (identifiable) and 'believable' (well-written). Authenticity therefore derives from spending time with/in communities to understand the particularities of what goes on in a place, which is then expected to result in the sympathetic representation of a distinctive (geographically specific) life in which the theatre-makers prove that they 'get' their subjects.

Staging the lives of local people also raises ethical dilemmas, which set limits on authenticity. There were times when Doherty felt the need to be inauthentic i.e., to self-censor. Doherty explains that:

> In the R&D especially, there were bits where I said to Laura [Lindow], 'You can't do that because my family will never speak to me again!' Things like, she was going to be quite vocal about the farmer's widow having passed away… dying of breast cancer. And my mother-in-law has had breast cancer, and I was like, 'You can't do that.' I didn't want it to look like I was just telling their story (Doherty).

In the same way that Doherty felt 'duty-bound' to accurately portray farming life, duty figures once again in terms of what to omit from the show. Authenticity is in this sense subject to a series of ethical judgements and parameters. Fictionalisation is not only unavoidable in any artistic creation, it becomes necessary and important when telling the (whole) truth is deemed irresponsible or when concealing the truth is vital in protecting identity or respecting privacy. This relates to the trust that artists will be sensitive in their decision-making, not 'misrepresent' the lives of audiences but are also only authorised to represent what audiences have made explicit (which is a matter of consent).

Consequently, it is worth cautioning against the idea that authenticity is intrinsically 'good.' In practice, authenticity can mean real as in genuine, but also morally correct: a person who makes the 'right' decisions. But what are the 'right' decisions? Dennis Waskul presents a compelling argument for inauthenticity in this respect. Waskul takes the reader through what Vannini and Patrick call 'a contrived autoethnographic exploration […] As he tries to stay true to himself and others for a full day Waskul finds himself incapacitated by the continuous struggles to define what is authentic and morally honest versus what is inauthentic and

[52] Heike Roms argues that '[t]here is a strong affective dimension to such an ethical scenario, as the vulnerability that ensues when we hand our story to another to be realised requires reciprocation within an ethics of care' (168). In this regard, care is underpinned by processes of trust-building. The 'truth' of what is represented on stage is a product of the trust between artist and subject. Authentic portrayals are thus not simply mimetic, as they are also made possible by a relationship between artist and subject.

socially right (5). Waskul concludes that 'not only is inauthenticity necessary, it is often desirable' (5). There is a form of redundancy, even futility, in such an idea of living a fully authentic life: living authentically would require a person to have all the 'right' answers – surely impossible feat not only in the practical sense but in the sense that there can be, and often are, numerous legitimate answers, methods, and co-existing positions.

While the matter of authenticity was for Doherty about deciding what to include and what not to include, it was also bound up in Doherty's own desire to prove herself (as authentic) to the local community into which she had recently moved. Doherty explains that her own attempts to articulate what she does for a living to her extended family and circle of friends in rural Northumberland are often met with misunderstanding or even distrust, and thus *Beyond* became a vehicle through which she could express to farming families – some of whom were her neighbours – her feelings of outsiderness as well as to demonstrate her skill as a musician. As Doherty explains:

> …I think in the farming community, understandably, I've been viewed with lots of suspicion in terms of, 'She's a folk singer? She's a *what*?' There's that view of, 'Well has she done *X Factor*? Well I've never heard of her.' So, they sort of go, 'No, she must have a proper job. That's her hobby.' You know? There's nobody like me in our circle of friends and family in Stephen's [Doherty's husband's] world. So, for me… I sort of felt like I proved myself a little bit. Because they all went, 'OK, that's what you do! Alright, OK. That was really good!'

Doherty's own representation is particularly complex in *Beyond*, as her life is represented in the character of Sula, but Doherty is also present as a member of the house band and as the musical director of a choir. Doherty is therefore proving herself in two ways: through her 'story,' which is articulated through Sula, and through her performance as a musician in the show. Thus, *Beyond* becomes a vehicle through which Doherty is able to make a case for her acceptance into the community. Such a case is then subject to arbitration by audiences who negotiate the extent to which Doherty is honest/dishonest, skilled/unskilled and thus authentic/inauthentic, which leads to acceptance/rejection. Authenticity constitutes here a request to be understood and accepted. This request is not simply one for audiences to validate accuracy, but to accept vulnerability as a condition of accuracy. This process also underlines the notions of co-production and reciprocity that go into the understanding of authenticity which underpins November Club's artistic practice – that it is made on both sides of the performer/audience (and professional/non-professional) divide.

Returning to the notion of capturing the truth without mimetically reproducing every detail of life, another dimension of authenticity relates to an attempt to capture the ineffable. For Lindow, this meant capturing people's *energy*. She explains that interviewing rural audiences was:

> …as much about watching them and listening to them as it was about those questions. It was like trying to get the energy of what it is that people love and that drives them mad, and what makes them feel inside and what makes them feel outside. I think those aren't dealt with in the plot. But they are reflected in the rhythm of the piece and in the celebration of the piece and in the poeticism mixed with the very robust humour, the bawdiness, but the carefulness. That's all reflected, I think. The farming stuff is much more the plot that reflects the fact (Lindow).

This statement indicates a range of interpretive acts that underpinned Lindow's approach to translating orality and the body into text. Lindow's attentiveness to people's energy demonstrates a sensitivity to the nuances of identity, which are encoded into the 'rhythm' of the piece. In this regard, authenticity pertains less to mimetic representation and more to staging the ineffable – people's sense of humour, their joy, their anger, their own cautiousness around how they narrate their lives. The energy of interviewees becomes both a trace of audiences' identities and of November Club's methodology. Authenticity is in this regard not about simply including everything a person might say, but about choosing what to represent in a way which still captures a collective sense of their views, personality, identity and energy – or, returning to Benjamin, their aura. In doing so, questions regarding what constitutes a sympathetic but true portrayal constantly inflect the decisions made by the artist in electing to tell the life stories of real people on stage.

3.4.1 Honouring Tradition or Embracing Modernity?

Doherty explains that she felt uneasy about the grouping of the words 'Northumberland' and 'musical' in *Beyond*'s marketing material, as some audiences to whom the traditional music of Northumberland is authentic may expect to see this music in the final show. *Beyond* instead contains original contemporary songs written by Doherty which are inspired by wider folk music traditions. Doherty explains that she feels this reflects the contemporary music of Northumberland, which has expanded as a consequence of new people moving into the area ('incomers'). As she observes:

> …if you go to a 'session' in Northumberland nowadays, you will get someone singing Johnny Cash, someone playing the fiddle and playing a traditional Northumbrian tune, playing the pipes, or then you'll get someone playing a Beatles song or whatever. So, it's a melting pot of stuff, which I think reflects the communities themselves anyway. There's all kind of influences coming in nowadays. So, I wanted to

> honour the tradition of music making without being prescriptive and going, 'This is Northumbrian' (Doherty).

In this regard, an authentic performance about contemporary Northumberland reflects this 'melting pot' of tastes and influences. Rather than observing a tension between traditional forms of Northumbrian folk music and wider contemporary musical influences, *Beyond* depicts the co-existence of the two: Northumberland's folk heritage sitting alongside 'outside' influence(r)s. In this respect, the show's music stages the interplay between the preservation of tradition and the disruption of tradition. To further explicate this negotiation, Doherty explains that:

> …the traditional music in Northumberland is not dying but it's not what it used to be. And the people who live in these rural communities, it's not *their* music, there's so many people from elsewhere now live in Northumberland. I think if we'd made a Northumbrian music piece, it would have, in some ways, considering the subject matter, alienated those people because that's very much rooted to Northumberland and the Northumbrian shepherds and all that kind of thing (Doherty).

Equally, then, claims to ownership of Northumbrian music raise questions about authenticity: who is allowed to claim a cultural tradition as *theirs*? Doherty includes herself within this:

> …Northumberland has a massive musical tradition, and I'm very familiar with that. But at the same time, I'm not from Northumberland. I have played Northumbrian music but I'm not an Alistair Anderson or a Kathryn Tickell. I'm very influenced by that but it would be crass of me to just put a load of Northumbrian songs into it. I was wrestling with that all along. I don't want to be trying to reproduce traditional Northumbrian music or by the same token put traditional Northumbrian music in it just for the sake of it because it's based in Northumberland. So, I wanted it to have a genuine kind of traditional type feel but that it was something else, it could be anywhere. It wasn't necessarily a 'Northumbrian' piece. In the R&D… I was very strongly against having Northumbrian pipes; not because I don't like them but just because I felt like it should have that anywhere-type feel (Doherty).

This demonstrates an impulse to satisfy audiences on either side of the insider/outsider divide. Doherty did not wish to perform traditional Northumbrian music because of the risk that it might portray a claim to ownership that she felt unable to make, but also because to perform traditional Northumbrian music presents an 'inauthentic' portrayal of the outsider influence(r)s that actually make up contemporary culture in Northumberland. Thus, the valorisation of tradition risks preserving a static conception of Northumbrianness, which alienates audiences who do not share this understanding. This process also writes Doherty into the history of Northumbrian performance, which is itself an ongoing arbitration between the preservation of past traditions and their transformation in the present. The songs in

Beyond become part of the musical tradition. Doherty's uneasiness about how to represent this writing-in is ultimately reflected in her decision to include songs that have a 'traditional type feel' but at the same time have an 'anywhere-type feel.'

Doherty's observations indicate the tensions inherent in attempting to create work which is both understood as authentic by those whose lives they represent, and yet are designed to appeal to a much broader audience. Here, the problematic concept of universality, or universal appeal – which is particularly instructive in understanding North East theatre – requires discussion. In one sense, there is undoubtedly a desire among theatre-makers in the region to avoid pigeon-holing themselves as 'just' regional theatre-makers. This is also about the career of some theatre-makers in which they seek to maintain their professional roots (reputation in a place) but seek opportunities further afield, balancing their status as local and national. This is then further complicated by the fact that many theatre-makers are not 'from' the region, and so feel a sense of anxiety regarding their own authenticity i.e., a tension between their own artistic independence/integrity and a sense of duty to respect regional storytelling conventions. But within this, there is a further tension even for artists who *are* from the region. In Doherty's case, for instance, she is a 'north-easterner,' but does not consider herself 'Northumbrian,' and is thus cautious about what identity claims she can make in performing for rural audiences in Northumberland.

To avoid speaking on behalf of a population of which they do not feel representative, or to try to preserve the future life of a show, theatre-makers may attempt to tell a 'universal' story, which is still set in a specific place, about a specific community, but which deals with themes that we 'all' experience – in the case of *Beyond*, themes such as love, ageing, family, bereavement, and leading a 'good' life. In another sense, this valorisation of universal stories seems to be about wanting to avoid 'alienating' anybody and thus to make a show which 'everyone' will like. But I would argue that this is not only an impossible pursuit (one cannot satisfy everyone) but it is more a question of accessibility than universality. I follow John McGrath here who argued that there is no such thing as a universal story, only a particular story which is universalised (2), which has elsewhere been shown to favour the dominant social group whose oftentimes privileged experiences stand in for all experience. While *Beyond* in one sense depicts an underrepresented way of life (farming in Northumberland), it still tends to present the concerns of the county's white middle-class.

While the ethnicity and class status of performers and audiences is outside the scope of this chapter, the presentation of characters in *Beyond* remains instructive in understanding how class and race figure heavily (in unspoken ways) in constructing authenticity. The cast is constituted entirely of white actors and performers, and from my own observations at the village hall shows, the audience appeared exclusively white. The fact that race does not figure at all in the show does not mean it is not relevant. Indeed, its absence indicates how there is no threat to white social cohesion, no hint of an/other. Farming life in Northumberland is presented as white, which might be true (authentic) in terms of the dominant social group, but which also reinforces the position of this group *as* dominant. Such is the form of enclosure represented in the pursuit of authenticity in this regard. In expressing 'the community' as white, authenticity *makes* farming life in Northumberland white, an intactness which cannot avoid articulating, and in some senses preserving, a white way of life.

Characters also appear predominantly middle-class. In this sense, an authentic way of life in Northumberland appears to be the 'property' of this group. Sula is a lighting designer in the city, whose class status is unclear, but whose connection to the country frames her as possessing access to a certain amount of capital (in that she can 'escape' the city whenever she feels the need). Evie is a schoolteacher, situated in a traditional middle-class profession. Grace, Bobby, and Thomas do not seem to be struggling financially but they do live under the threat of rent increases (i.e., they are not landowners – a topic which itself goes unexplored in the show). But Thomas is considering leaving for university (i.e., money is not a barrier; it is simply a matter of what he wants in life). Bobby, meanwhile, is clearly wealthy, having left the village to make his fortune. While the Lockarts are in one sense presented as 'humble,' they are not poor. Consequently, the 'ordinariness' of characters is undermined by the fact that they are drawn from the dominant social group. *Beyond* prioritises the lives of the middle-class, thus maintaining their cultural status as authentic (authoritative).

There is a related issue here too regarding the idea of who can 'pass' as authentic. The regional insider might only need to turn on the 'Geordie charm' in order to prove their authenticity. Such an individual 'speaks the language,' is 'one of us,' and is therefore considered 'real' (valid). The regional outsider, however, must learn how to gain entry to the club i.e., to earn/win the trust of, and gain acceptance into, the region (which can be observed when people refer to themselves as 'adopted Geordies'). This expresses both the idea that they can never be a 'natural' Geordie and deference to the power of established insiders to confer honorary status, as well as the idea that anyone can be a Geordie once they have

proved themselves. This process of arbitration and negotiation in which outsiders earn adopted status, and their successful assimilation, can also apply to theatre companies working within a particular place or community who seek to act ethically in integrating themselves within an area. Indeed, November Club seeks to continually prove that it genuinely (authentically) wants to empower and represent the community and is not simply doing it for tick-box or tokenistic reasons; or, alternatively, that it cares about local people.[53]

3.4.2 Voicing the Past: Letting Go

As I have shown so far, questions of ancestry, roots, orality, and vernacular tradition all figure heavily in the content and form of *Beyond*. While these themes underpin authenticity in terms of who possesses legitimacy and the popular performance traditions of the region, they might also be classified under the banner of *the past* more broadly, which bears heavily on the present. Thus, authenticity is, in large part, determined by relationships to the past and demonstrated by acknowledging and recalling a past (which, in the case of *Beyond*, tends to emerge in the form of individual lineages of characters and thus their 'connection' to Place). But at the same time, this omnipresent past also contributes to a sense that the past haunts characters. This is expressed in the form of the mysterious and sinister hum, which grows in volume, as if demanding that characters attend to it. In this regard, the past is not always something that is necessarily benign or positive, not always a comforting ideal to which we might return. There is a sense that the past is something to be feared, which may return to trouble us, or impede successful development in the present – a force to be reckoned with.

Grace's superstition underlines interwoven themes of ancestry and hauntings introduced during the show's opening in which Zac cited the footprints of ancestors imprinted in the landscape. During Sula and Grace's scene in which Sula complains about the hum, Grace asks whether Sula has earplugs. 'No, I didn't think I'd need them out here,' Sula replies. 'Usually, I listen to me podcasts through the night but…' Grace interrupts, 'You listen to what?' Assuming Grace does not know what podcasts are, Sula replies, 'the radio.' 'Oh, I like the radio,' says Grace. 'I thought you said podcasts,' poking fun at Sula's perception that all country dwellers are rubes. As the pair share some whiskey, Grace admits to being able to hear the hum. 'We need to do something about it ourselves,' she says, 'before the old songs rise up and take us down with them.' Sula asks what Grace means. 'The old songs. That's what it is. The noise. (whispers) The forgotten.' This idea of actively burying the past, now

[53] The issue of credentialisation itself remains central to authenticity. Joe Kennedy's *Authentocrats* (2018) explores the more cynical ways in which members of the political class perform their working-class credentials.

threating to rise up, indicates the extent to which failure to remember (i.e., acknowledge who came before) becomes an impediment to living an authentic life.

This idea of acknowledging who came before might in one sense have political connotations in terms of the politics of citation, in which critics not only credit trailblazers (of a concept or project) but reflect on how systems of citation can uphold structural biases. But *Beyond* frames the idea of recollecting the past more along familial lines, which serves to reinforce the theme of ancestry and thus a sense of belonging or, alternatively, a hereditary right to live in a place based on one's own lineage. Grace fetches a photograph as the pair exchange tales of family life:

> This is my mam and dad. They lived here before me and their parents before that. I remember the night this was taken, the night of the 1955 village dance. My mam in her sea green dress and necklace of pearls, ready to go out and play. I remember her perfume and all. Cote de Monde. I thought I'd never seen anyone as beautiful. My dad in his best proud as you like. I'm older now than they were when they died. Time moves us all' (Lindow).

Grace's retrieval of a family photograph, which prioritises the idea of the family archive – records of the past held in what might be called 'private collections' rather than official institutions – also serves to underline the theme of family roots. While the photograph evokes a material past and triggers sensorial memories – her mother's sea green dress and the smell of her perfume, which serve to express the idea of a 'real' past – Grace also evidences her connection (i.e., right) to Place.[54] *Beyond* performs a wistful reminiscence here: not necessarily expressing a desire to return to an imagined past, but sentimentality for what has passed. The pair then sing 'I'm not the woman [I thought I would be]' (see *Fig. 3* below) – a song of regret and life not turning out how they had expected, which laments lives that never came to be, another form of longing, but also suggests that life is out of our individual control and more a product of things happening *to* us. Authenticity here derives from eschewing our autonomy and egos, letting go of a desire to be in full control.

[54] Samuel argued that this form of ancestor worship 'invites us to take a sentimental view of our weaknesses and a heroic view of our strengths. It is also a bounty on what Marxists call 'false consciousness,' offering us a retrospective sense of belonging – what used to be called 'lineage' and today is known as 'roots' – to compensate for the uncertainties of the here and now. It gratifies our need for household gods, offering us a source of symbolic gratification and a transcendence of, or escape from, ourselves' (272).

Figure 3: Sula and Grace in Beyond*. Courtesy of The Image Farm 2017.*

Grace's prophesy regarding the explosion of songs – the emergent past – then comes to fruition. Zac re-enters, informing us that the hum is getting louder, causing the local wildlife and residents to start acting strange. A plant in the audience (a local person from each village) stands and delivers a short monologue describing strange happenings in the village. A different monologue is written for each village. One man tells a story in which he went fishing and caught an otter – Billy Waller – as it leapt from the river into his arms. A woman tells a story of her ordinarily docile dog – Steven Bailey – losing control next to the shooting range and jumping into a tree. We hear of a fountain suddenly spouting with water; an oversized rabbit winking at passers-by; marauding sheep who escape their pen and walk to the local pub for a pint. Local people are used to legitimise *Beyond*'s authenticity claim in this regard; they are literally represented in the show. Hearing stories told directly by residents emphasises authenticity – 'the forgotten,' whom Grace references, which constitute indigenous people, come to be embodied by the present residents of Northumberland.

When Evie and Sula decide to follow the hum, they pinpoint its origin to a patch of farmland, which signals a connection between folklore and authenticity. Evie lights a fire in order to mark the beginning of midsummer – she explains that the 'tradition was to light it, a bonfire, on the night of midsummer; to celebrate the power of nature and that sort of thing; it symbolised renewal' – in the hope that it will 'speak to the hum,' which invokes a spiritual notion of rebirth.[55] The flames spread and set fire to Alec's tool-shed, which Grace reveals to

[55] In the playscript, Lindow cites *The Tomb* (1922), a short story by H.P. Lovecraft, underlining the importance of the 'natural' landscape to authenticity: 'Mid-summer [...] when the alchemy of Nature transmutes the sylvan landscape to one vivid and almost homogeneous mass of green; when the senses are well-nigh intoxicated with the surging seas of moist verdure and the subtly indefinable odours of the soil and the vegetation. In such surroundings the mind loses its perspective; time and space become trivial and unreal, and echoes of a forgotten prehistoric past beat insistently upon the enthralled consciousness.' (qtd. in Lindow). There is something to the idea that England appears frequently ancient: drunk on its own lore.

be the place where the ashes of his late wife are stored, which transforms the shed into both an archive and a shrine. As the flames engulf the shed, Thomas cries out that he can see the silhouette of his mother (Alec's wife) in the window. Attempting to enter the shed, Alec holds him back, as Grace says that it is 'time to let it be.' Indeed, Alec remains haunted by the death of his wife. The fire symbolises a cleansing act of public mourning which might offer closure and facilitate Alec's ability to let go of the past and move on.

The public nature of this act is crucial to *Beyond*'s construction of authenticity in the sense of a collective release. The inner, private lives of residents are brought out into the open farmland, made public, as characters finally deal collectively with what has been literally and figuratively buried. After the fire dies out, members of a community choir stand from within the audience and sing 'We Burn', a hymn written by Doherty, which Lindow and Doherty explain constitutes the embodiment of a ceremonial 'release' of buried memories and stories (Doherty). Again, real people from the community are invoked. In the song's refrain, the choir sings, 'let go of all your woe and care,' as Alec nods in agreement. From this release, a healing is meant to take place. The performance of grief, as characters watch the shed burn, emphasises social cohesion – the community coming together, which is key to November Club's artistic practice and belief in the authenticity of its work. In this act of coming together, empathy is produced. Alec poignantly states, 'I just… miss her.'

The hum becomes evidence of absence; it suggests a negation, of things unspoken or secreted, but also of a longing. Releasing the hum constitutes a filling of absence with memory. That the hum grows increasingly loud throughout the show demands the memories' excavation from the soil. Indeed, this soil is the terrain envisioned in the show, but is also the sedimentary evidence of the art product itself. The fire triggers the initial release from the soil, while the performance of the choir constitutes a public memorial. This interrelation of release (by fire) and celebration (by song) occurs in the same moment, in an act of corresponding loss and invention. As the shed is destroyed by the fire, Alec professes that 'there's nothing left,' to which Bobby replies 'there's everything left.' An act of destruction and feeling of loss are replaced by an act of bonding and feeling of connection. The refrain, 'We burn with grief / we burn with love / we raise our voice to the sky above / with joyful song we fill the air / let go of all your woe and care' emphasises a sense of collective spiritual joy.

This sense of collective spiritual joy also attests to an idea of authenticity which transcends the human. There is a kind of saintliness expressed at the end of the piece: the choir, the hymn, the image of 'the sky above' practically invoking a vision of a celestial ascent to Heaven – in one sense performing the cremation of Alec's wife, while in another articulating a community spirit that seeks to move beyond individual social relations. In connection to authenticity, in this moment, it is as if we have entered the realm of the super-authentic – located on the spiritual plane. But it is a secular notion of spirituality which derives directly from the public act of congregating and caring. There is no invocation of God's word or verse, but *Beyond*'s adoption of religious motifs and imagery, from the hymn to the fire to a kind of exorcism of the past, all work together to produce authenticity through divinity as a form of therapy. Indeed, this notion of going 'beyond,' of constantly seeking something 'more,' is central to the emotional crux and evidenced in the show's title.

The idea that the past cannot be buried forever might also serve a political function (that which is repressed will always find a way out). However, *Beyond* conceives of repression as emotional, emphasising mourning for loved ones, and thus in some regards lamenting the break-up of a marriage and the family unit. In this regard, the past is framed as something of which we must let go to move forward. This might in one sense reflect Tomlin's concerns (192) regarding the extent to which authenticity veers into simple sentimentality in a way which reinforces neoliberal logics (stories which direct our attention away from social, economic, and political conditions and onto our interior lives). At the same time, this focus on human interiority is cast in tension with the idea that we must always 'honour' the past, remember our roots, which expresses a knotty imperative to both break away from and yet constantly hold onto the past.

Lindow's discussion of the development of the hum further underlines the extent to which testimony and oral tradition underpin authenticity. Lindow recalls that her inspiration for the hum emerged while gathering stories from people across Northumberland. When asking residents to articulate details of what made where they lived 'special,' many people cited that during World War Two a number of spitfire planes crashed over Otterburn and remain buried in the Cheviot Hills (Lindow). These historical events were narrated by residents from older generations who could remember what happened. Otterburn's retention of war machines firstly morphs the site into a physical archive of the past in which the land itself preserves objects but is also transfigured by those objects i.e., by the charring of the earth or the decomposition of the shell. The literal distortion of the land is mirrored in *Beyond* as the fire

scorches the earth. These artifacts constitute a historical residue by their conversion into stories 'about' Northumberland that are passed down between generations, again emphasising the centrality of oral tradition and inheritance to authenticity.

In order to reference this tradition due to its significance to audiences, Lindow initially intended to reveal that the hum emanated from an old spitfire engine that still whirred with life. However, Lindow and Doherty decided that there was a broader artistic and methodological function for the hum: it would symbolise the variety of concealments and dispossessions of the characters. Lindow explains that this decision satisfied her own artistic interest in magic realism without sacrificing the importance of oral tradition. The hum may be thought of as not only symbolic of various repressions or sorrows, which serves a narrative function, but also as a trace of November Club's methodological process of interviewing people, which cherishes orality. As such, this particular negotiation demonstrates a balance of agencies, prompted by the idea that, for Lindow and Doherty, meaning is contained and constructed in the practice of telling and listening to stories more so than an exact reproduction of those stories on stage. Faithfulness to memory can often transcend words.

Lindow and Doherty's negotiation is itself characteristic of many theatrical interpretations of oral history. For instance, Rivka Syd Eisner explains that while developing a performance on the 'life-narratives' of a Vietnamese woman, she sought 'respectful fidelity, although not mimetic accuracy, in re-presentations of her stories' (105). Doherty explains that:

> In my head, and I think Laura's head as well, [the hum] was kind of all the things that were not being addressed in the main characters, all these things that had been swept under the rug. And everything comes to a head at some point, and we weren't sure how that was going to happen, whether it was going to be a fire or whether the women were going to dig up whatever this hum was and uncover some sort of secret. Anyway, something was going to happen, something catastrophic we thought it might be, and the hum would be released. So, we decided that the community choir would be the hum released (Doherty).

In this regard, for November Club, the presence of audiences in the show makes *Beyond* authentic. This produces a relational understanding of authenticity: the performance of the choir is 'their' performance, however the performance by November Club is also 'theirs'. As such, there is a negotiation in which both November Club and the community contributors are meant to feel a shared sense of ownership of the show. In this regard, authenticity is a collaborative act which produces a vision of the commons, the creation of something which can be jointly owned.

The emergence of the choir from the audience also produces a rupture in the theatrical encounter through which authenticity emerges. As members of the choir stand, there is a displacement of the audience's gaze from the stage onto the audience, as indeed the choir suddenly become performers. The division between performer and spectator vanishes, as the stage suddenly spills out into the audience and 'we' (members of the community) take up active roles within the event. Consequently, there is a dis/appearance of the theatrical event, as the show reveals its own artificiality and at the same time continues its performance. Authenticity is expressed in the collapse of separation: there is no 'them' or 'us' (performers and spectators; but in a broader sense, people with more or less authority/legitimacy). 'We' are all 'together' in the theatrical event, which emphasises horizontality and equivalence; we have taken over the space, which was previously organised around the division between professional performers and passive observers. But arguably, November Club is also testing something more fundamental: the blurring of divides suggests that 'we' are all part of the same 'community' by virtue of collectively taking part in an event. Again, there is a suggested stripping away of artifice, borders and division, central to the show's conception of authenticity.

But there were also instances where the local villages to which the show toured did not have a choir, and so November Club's Learning and Participation Producer, Hudson, established one. In one sense, this reveals a type of manufacture where the use of the choir is not truly authentic (in the sense of involving a community group which is already organically in existence in a village). In such instances where there was no choir, rural places in fact become somewhat inconvenient; they seem to contradict outsiders' assumptions regarding the implicit existence of local community groups. Setting up a choir purely for the purposes of performing in the show can therefore appear somewhat inauthentic, dressed up to create an illusion of community, which becomes useful in advancing November Club's desire to depict rural life as tight-knit and culturally dynamic.

Yet, this is not to say that establishing a choir invalidates November Club's ethical credentials. Indeed, it is worth underlining the theatrical labour that actually went into including choirs in the final show, which adds to November Club's commitment (authenticity). As Doherty explains:

> Sarah worked really closely with all the communities and identified if it wasn't a choir, which there wasn't in some of the communities, they would have to put together a group of singers. So, the song had to be totally accessible to anyone in terms of its technical difficulty. It had to be able to be sung by all

> generations and by a complete mix. You wouldn't necessarily have SATB – Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass – in these places. So, it needed to be able to be sung without harmony, or with harmony because some of them did have proper community choirs. And also, I knew because of the budget and because of the time that we had with the communities, I would only probably have an hour with these people before they then came to the rehearsal the night before with people that I'd never met. Some of them had never met each other! It was such a pivotal part of the show as well. So, that was tricky (Doherty).

In one sense, using community performers at such a pivotal part of the show might appear risky. Yet equally, this demonstrates that community performers were not merely used in a tokenistic way; their performance is crucial to the success of the show's finale and emotional crux. As such, the authenticity of the show hinges on the participation of community performers while equally serving to evidence November Club's own authenticity in centring the choirs.

The cleansing ritual of the fire in turn elicits a series of rapid resolutions in the epilogue. Following the fire, characters reflect on everything that has preceded them and share what they plan to do with their lives. Thomas decides he will leave the farm and go to university; brothers Alec and Bobby make peace; and Sula reunites with her daughter who has travelled from the city. As such, the village is transformed into a *lieu de memoire*, 'a site both literal and metaphorical,' as Alison Jeffers explains in reference to Pierre Nora's concept (157). The presence of an audience becomes evidentiary, as witnesses of the release, but also as active participants in sustaining a performative tradition. In that performative tradition, the oral practice that first inspired the idea of the hum is maintained. The theatrical encounter thus protects orality – the space to speak and be heard. Theatre offering this type of space enables a story to be told and received: it preserves an intactness.

Yet, the rapid resolutions prompted by the fire also raise questions regarding the extent to which magical endings might be inauthentic. This speaks to a common tension in theatre regarding the happy ending – a desire to tie up the 'loose ends,' but which in doing so risks closing down the opening that has just been made. Sula's twelve-year-old daughter appears, having 'braved 3 buses and a cold dark night to get to her mum,' a further act of reconciliation and reuniting (of the family). Thomas then releases a pigeon to signal a further freeing, as he turns to the audience and says, 'People arriving and leaving, that's what makes the world. That's what makes life. We're all on a journey, even I know that. I'm forever stained by my roots – like whisky on my bones.' While migration is here presented as a natural (authentic) part of life, which serves to express a political point regarding open

borders, *Beyond* also acknowledges the importance of roots, which are thought to inflect our identity and thus the question of who we are (as authentic individuals).

To reinforce the theme of roots, *Beyond* then returns to its own 'humble' origins, re-presenting itself as a tale of rural life. We learn that Sula ended up staying in the village and set up her own artist studio. The local school closed, and Evie ended up moving to the city to teach. Sula and Evie's trading places also serves to collapse the distinction between the rural and the urban, emphasising migration and exchange between the two. Thomas left to study to be a vet and plans to set up in the next town 'so he can get back easy,' reinforcing the constant call home. Alec and Grace reduced their land and stock to continue on as authentic farmers. The pigeon released by Thomas 'flies over from time to time, just to check in,' while Zac and 'the rabble' move on to the next 'Place on the map' to tell a new story. In a broader sense, the show's ending signals a return to sentimentality, which hinges once again on the preservation of a safe rural home, protected under the watchful eye of the bird flying overhead. Everything has 'worked out' (the rural has survived).

3.4.3 A Border Community

Following *Beyond*, audiences are invited to take part in a ceilidh in each village hall, 'organised' by Evie throughout the course of the show. The ceilidh is designed to cement the good night out, reinforcing popular tradition while emphasising the social nature of the event (which might also therefore strengthen social ties in each village). But there is also something geographically and culturally specific about the ceilidh, too. It signals Northumberland's – and the wider North East's – close connection with Scottish heritage, a sometimes blurring of borderlines between two neighbouring nations. Perhaps more importantly, therefore, aligning Northumberland with Scotland in this way is about distancing the region from England, depicting 'us' as more Scottish than English, which is to say more authentically 'real' than a nation so heavily dominated and controlled by London. While the ceilidh therefore serves a quite straightforward function in the sense of a fun activity in which audiences can participate, it serves an ideological purpose too in maintaining a division between the North East and England (but perhaps more specifically metropolitan life).

Reflecting on the show after its tour, Lindow commented that she:

> …would like it to be less naturalistic than it was. I'd like it to remain in the foot-stamping, storytelling… I want more pub theatre. I want more of a sense of conversation with what's happening, and less a sense of the staging. […] I think I compromised the plot. I flattened out the plot, which I'm not so happy with

> […] There was a bloodiness about the ideas in the first draft, which was… that tup that was bought at the auction was killed. Blood all over the place. I want more of that! (Lindow).

Lindow's own interest in pub theatre – which recalls the site-specific work of David Greig's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* and the work of site-specific company Grid Iron – also relates to the tradition of border ballads that are prevalent in Scottish theatrical culture (and which were embraced by the likes of Northern Stage in *The Bloody Great Border Ballad Project* during their programme of work at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2013). While in one sense further underlining the synergy between Scottish and North East identity and heritage, there is also something highly relevant about Lindow's own roots as a Scottish theatre-maker and storyteller. It is fitting that Lindow has found a home in the North East, which functions as a site in which Scottish heritage and theatrical customs remain popular and familiar among regional audiences in England, and which demonstrates the ongoing cultural exchange taking place between Scotland and the North East.[56] There is also, I would argue, within Lindow, a call to the homeland, which is expressed through her work and significantly inflects the contemporary theatrical landscape of North East England.

Lindow's aversion to naturalism also points to an assemblage of tensions in *Beyond* regarding its status as a piece of theatre and a piece of entertainment. Naturalism, while in one sense 'authentic' in that it seeks to create an illusion of reality, is framed as the terrain of city-based, bourgeois theatre, and thus inauthentic. Eschewing naturalism is also important to Lindow in terms of her own inner sense of authenticity (following her own artistic convictions). But it also speaks to questions of authenticity in the region. The North East is typically caught between melodrama, which is highly naturalistic, and forms of 'entertainment' performed in non-traditional theatrical settings such as pubs and village halls. This constitutes a struggle regarding which theatrical forms are considered most real (valid). Lindow's desire to make more pub theatre also valorises work outside of theatre buildings. Working in community venues is not only considered a marker of authenticity, but it signals a particular return (Live Theatre, for instance, initially started out touring work to working men's clubs, but is now based on the affluent Quayside). In this regard, authenticity derives from working outside the walls of professional theatres which monopolise cultural production.

[56] Further evidenced in the appointment of Scottish director Lorne Campbell, who was the Artistic Director of Northern Stage from 2013 to 2019/20, and Joe Douglas, who moved from Scotland to take up a position as Artistic Director of Live Theatre from 2018 to 2020.

3.5 Conclusion

From the show's ending, it is possible to observe the idea that authenticity is always at risk of tipping into outright sentimentality, which can reinforce ideas of rural safety and social harmony. This can serve as a warning for any pursuit of authenticity, which can be used as a powerful rhetorical tool for justifying the 'return' to an idealised past or to manufacture a stable sense of home, which necessitates the formulation of insiders and outsiders. While *Beyond* attempts to break down otherness by emphasising that migration to and from a place is a 'natural' part of life, and indeed central to the regional diaspora, there is relatively nominal examination of borders and their potential hostility in the main thrust of the piece. As I have shown, authenticity is conditional on a wide range of assumptions and dynamics, with an equally wide range of utilities: a feeling of vulnerability predicated on conceptions of empathy and kindness; a shared feeling of care and compassion produced by a group of people working together towards a common goal; a utopic impulse which seeks to transform social relations; a matter of personal taste (i.e., one person's authenticity is another's sentimentality); and a wider public feeling, which can bring people together yet be weaponised to sell products or advance an ideology.

Beyond also raises a number of considerations regarding authority and authenticity. This is reflected both in the sense of who has control within a rural community – the people or the authorities – which forms part of the plot, but also in terms of anxieties shared by the creative team. Doherty felt unable to represent herself as authentically Northumbrian, but also felt that incorporating broader music traditions accurately reflected the diversity of musical influences and tastes in Northumberland. Lindow, meanwhile, felt a pull towards border ballad traditions, which were important to her own sense of authenticity (artistic integrity) but which also – intentionally or not –further acknowledge the vernacular traditions of North East England while at the same time expressing a sense of affinity between Scotland and the theatrical traditions of the region.

Chapter 4. Live Theatre: *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes*

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Live Theatre's 2017 Christmas production of *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes* – the full theatrical debut of Newcastle-based playwright Nina Berry. Described by Live Theatre's then Artistic Director, Max Roberts, as 'delightful alternative Christmas entertainment' (qtd. in Hardwick), the play is a festive coming-of-age story which depicts the relationship of young adults Rosie and Charlie – the titular snowflakes.[57] The play is simultaneously set in present-day Newcastle – against a backdrop of economic austerity, precarity, and anxiety – and the quantum multiverse, an infinite web of interlocking realities between which characters zip. It draws direct inspiration from Nick Payne's 2012 play, *Constellations*, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London.[58] I saw *Snowflakes* on three occasions during its Christmas run, and my performance analysis is supplemented by interviews with writer Nina Berry and director Graeme Thompson.[59]

Below, I explore the implications and significance of the use of the term 'contemporary' as a descriptor for *Snowflakes*. My interest in the term derives from Thompson's director's note in the play's programme, stating that Berry's 'distinctive and contemporary voice gives us a festive play for our time' (Thompson). I argue that *Snowflakes* can be thought of as contemporary in the sense that it stages the national zeitgeist of the mid-2010s, characterised by postmodern flux and the period of neoliberal fallout after the so-called global financial crisis in 2008. Rosie and Charlie are at once trapped in a local here and now (present-day Newcastle) and a global-virtual capitalist continuum in which they are placeless, nomadic, alienated, and impotent – orphaned, in some respects, by the post-2008 era of British austerity and caught within the contemporary's dizzying interlocking of times, (re)semblances and forms. I demonstrate how these ideas are reflected in *Snowflakes*' staging

[57] The play's title is not a conscious reference to liberal 'snowflakes' which emerged as part of culture war discourse in the period leading up to the play's debut in 2016. Nonetheless, it resonates in this wider context.

[58] Berry comments that '[o]ne of my favourite writers is Nick Payne, and having read *Constellations* a few years earlier, I was like, "I love this." Obviously, that's to do with multiverse theory, which is something that really interests me, and how science can shape the structure of plays' (Berry).

[59] Worth clarifying is that in September 2017, Live Theatre announced that Live Theatre's Artistic Director, Roberts, would be stepping down after thirty years in the role (Snow). In January 2018 (a month after *Snowflakes* finished), Live Theatre appointed Joe Douglas who took up the role in April 2018. I make reference in this chapter to both Roberts and Douglas, who Thompson mentioned during our interview in May 2018.

of the multiverse, which internalises neoliberal logics of social atomisation. In this respect, I consider *Snowflakes* to be an example of what Fisher called Young Adult Dystopia (228).[60]

At the wider discursive level, I argue that 'contemporary' when applied to *Snowflakes* essentially means 'metropolitan.' In taking inspiration from Payne's *Constellations*, *Snowflakes* dresses itself in metropolitan clothes, which frames London as the de facto trend setter. Importing the art styles and tastes of the metropolitan centre raises the possibility of wooing the metropolitan press, the local press, and Live Theatre's patrons all at once, achieving an apparent utopia of critical and commercial (and local and national) success. However, I consider this to be a strategy which risks reinforcing Live Theatre's position as a satellite of London. I suggest that aligning with *Constellations* reinforces Newcastle's own entrapment and deference to the metropolitan centre, as well as the idea that national trends and tastes emanate from London and ripple out to the regions, with several implications for Live Theatre's power and position in regional and national theatre culture.

To explore these ideas, this chapter is divided into five sections. In section 4.2, I consider what it might mean to call an artwork contemporary, drawing on art historian Terry Smith's theorisations of contemporaneity and the provincial-metropolitan bind. In section 4.3, I consider the contemporary in relation to Live Theatre and what it understands *Snowflakes* as doing within regional and national contexts, drawing on Sierz's work on British new writing. In section 4.4, I present my performance analysis of *Snowflakes*, which is supplemented by Vicky Angelaki and Liliane Campos' scholarship on Payne's *Constellations*. In section 4.4.1, I complicate this reading by evidencing how *Snowflakes* remains, at heart, a piece of Christmas theatre, which conflicts with its contemporary register. I outline the popular festive tropes *Snowflakes* deploys, drawing on Susan Mackey-Kallis' work on hero-quest narratives. In section 4.4.2, I analyse the play's ending in relation to hope, which extends to a discussion about Live Theatre's position in British theatre culture.

4.2 Defining Contemporary Art

The most common understanding of contemporary art is that it is 'of' (not simply 'in' or 'about') the historical present. Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund argue that contemporary art 'is an

[60] Fisher argues that 'Young Adult Dystopia is not so much a literary genre as a way of life for the generation cast adrift and sold out after 2008. Capital – now using nihiliberal rather than neoliberal modes of governance – doesn't have any solution except to load the young with debt and precarity. The rosy promises of neoliberalism are gone, but capitalist realism continues: there's no alternative, sorry. We had it but you can't, and that's just how things are, OK?' (228).

art of the present, that it somehow addresses and expresses the present' (9). However, the nature of our shared present (and thus of totalising concepts such as 'the zeitgeist,' 'our time,' 'collective life' and 'shared culture') is unstable. The contemporary refers to the present age in which we all live – a global historical period. In this regard, we share the same time, coexisting as contemporaries of each other. Yet, the contemporary paradoxically resists periodisation: it is not a 'time' in the sense of a definable period, but, as Smith argues, 'perpetual advent' (9). This gives contemporary life a locomotive quality – a relentless, ever-unfolding present, which can be thought of as, paradoxically, infinite, and time*less*. In addition, we do not all necessarily share the same time in the sense that the contemporary tends to be thought of more as an interlocking of many experiences *of* time.[61]

This notion of interlocking experiences of time underpins what Smith calls contemporaneity – the condition of our shared historical present. Smith summarises that:

> *contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them* (8).

Shared interest in this condition is itself a feature of the contemporary. Boris Groys writes, for instance, that '[t]he Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past, modernity was interested in the future. Our epoch is interested primarily in itself' (110). Evidence of Groys' observation can be found in a fourteen-part series on 'The Contemporary Condition' published by Sternberg Press in the mid-to-late 2010s. This contributes to a meta-discourse of contemporaneity, where the kaleidoscope becomes increasingly self-referential.

In art parlance, 'fresh' (which has largely replaced 'avant-garde' as a synonym for contemporary) indicates that contemporary art is thought to express something 'different' or 'alternative' to what currently exists in the market. Contemporary adaptations are often said to 'reimagine' or 'breathe new life' into old texts. As such, contemporary art is often framed as the segment of the art market where innovation and experimentation take place; which

[61] Smith argues that '[n]o longer does it feel like ''our time,'' because ''our'' cannot stretch to encompass its contrariness' (8), expressing the idea that while we all share the same time in the sense of living together, now, experiences of the present are also highly particular and diverse, context-based, and cannot, therefore, speak on behalf of others' experiences of time (or stand in for a 'universal' experience).

breaks new ground; invigorates or re-energises the field; proposes new avenues of inquiry or ways of thinking. Supporters of contemporary art tend to position it (and thus themselves) at the forefront or cutting-edge of culture – leading the way. Yet, what is deemed contemporary is often determined by a small group of 'leading' national institutions and individuals: gatekeepers predominantly clustered in metropolitan centres which choose what to support or exhibit and therefore determine the direction of travel (and what or who is considered contemporary). Contemporary art is therefore both non-mainstream and yet represents a highly professionalised and institutionalised arm of corporate business, whose self-image is one of cultural authority, sophistication, and innovation.[62]

In this regard, it is worth reflecting on how much has materially changed since the 1970s. Writing about the international art world in 1974, Smith argued in relation to New York that:

> [t]here is a structural hierarchy in the operation of the international art world that centers on the bright stars in the constellation, the few artists, galleries, etc., who are 'on top' this decade. [T]hey remain the ones who define what currently defines art in the culture. In so doing, they become the only artists with the chance to project their work into the long-term history of art. What gives them these powers is their exemplification of one simple, fundamental law within the rule-governed activity which art-making is: whereas most artists are rule-following, these are both rule-following and *rule-generating* creators. They propose ways of making art that 'falsify' given ways, they satisfy doubts about these given ways, and they generate new problem areas for other artists to explore. Above all, they are in a situation which is culturally privileged for making their moves count (9).

On one hand, little seems to have changed. Contemporary art remains intensely centralised in metropolitan centres. Leading writers, institutions, and critics determine the direction of travel and the rules of engagement. On the other hand, a lot has changed since 1975. Numerous binaries between categories of art, such as popular/elite, highbrow/lowbrow, and avant-garde/mainstream, have been broken down. Ostensibly, any piece of art (by any maker in any location) now has the potential to be contemporary.[63] This signals a form of democratisation of art markets as well as an opening up of professional disciplines. Indeed,

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[62] Smith notes that 'in many artworlds today, the concept of "the contemporary" is a mindless vacuity, a mystification about the contemporary condition as somehow at once absolutely up to date and beyond historical time,' which is 'prompted by neoliberalism's annexation of the upper reaches of the market for art, and by its relentless consumption of public goods, assets, and domains' (67).

[63] In her 2013 article on the term contemporary, for instance, Maggie Gale argues that '[w]hen John McGrath wrote *A Good Night Out* in the early 1980s, he saw a far more binary set of choices in terms of theatre and performance than we might perceive on a horizontal plane in our contemporary moment. A play in the West End might offer us as much critique of the social as a short performance made by ex-offenders produced in a small studio theatre in a Northern city: the critique just depends on the frame of reference' (18).

theatre and performance studies specifically has continued to expand what it considers worthy of academic study and the frames of reference for analysing art (and thus what qualifies as 'art') – in effect de-provincialising the discipline and addressing elitism within the field. Yet, increasing academic specialisation also breeds competition in which old hierarchies and rivalries are reformed. The utopia of anyone or any piece of art being able to take up (equal) positions as contemporary or innovative is therefore far from guaranteed.

In terms of the local-global hierarchy, hyper-local has emerged as contemporary. Local and global have fused into 'glocal.' Scholars increasingly seek post-national solutions, which are arguably no longer even global but planetary, evidenced in Smith's 'Defining Contemporaneity: Imagining Planetarity' (2015). In a counter-move, the nation has sought to reassert itself in response to threats to its legitimacy. In a further counter-move, regional has emerged as particularly productive terrain, referring at once to, for instance, North East England, Europe, and the Middle East, indicating its potential resilience to national and centre/margins hegemony. Numerous adaptations and reterritorialisations have therefore occurred in response to artificial binaries and hierarchies – a messy struggle of gains and losses which characterises the contemporary period.

Also worth highlighting is that representing the zeitgeist underpins opposing views of contemporary art's value. On one hand, contemporary art is considered valuable because it engages with live topics. In particular, the contemporary artist is increasingly one whose own life is fundamental in/to their work, using their own experiences and backgrounds as subjects of inquiry, which are then connected to wider culture, sometimes referred to in discourse as a fusion of 'the personal and the political.' On the other hand, contemporary art is considered superficial and opportunistic, cynically jumping on the bandwagon of the latest hot topics and trends, either to make money and/or maintain the artist/institutions' 'relevance' in the culture, which also underpins the contemporary's perceived lack of worth in examining and understanding wider historical developments. This is itself fraught, however, as contemporary artists find themselves caught up in wider culture war discourse in which emphasis on 'identity' is met with criticism and confrontation by dominant groups.

In summary, then, a variety of tensions and paradoxes lurk at the heart of the contemporary. Ostensibly, all an artwork need do to be considered contemporary is engage with the conditions of life in the here and now, whether that be at the hyper-local level or the global level. Yet, the here and now is itself diffuse and contested. In addition, the contemporary

artwork must also be perceived to do something 'different' or 'alternative,' typically in both its content and form, which underpins its self-image as innovative, but also raises questions of the particular contexts in which 'alternative' art emerges and who gets to arbitrate its value. In this respect, the contemporary art world is hierarchical and centralised, with the metropolitan centres historically empowered to position themselves as progressive, leading, and thus as arbiters of what is contemporary.

I now move to explore these issues in relation to Live Theatre.

4.3 Live Theatre: A Contemporary Institution?

Live Theatre was founded in Gateshead, 1973 as a working-class theatre company, which performed to audiences in non-theatrical locations such as working men's clubs, schools, and other community venues (Newcastle University). Since 1982, however, it has been based in a set of converted almshouses and warehouses on Newcastle's affluent Quayside – a stone's throw away from Sage Gateshead and Baltic CCA. Live Theatre claims that it has 'an international reputation as a new writing theatre. As well as producing and presenting new plays, it seeks out and nurtures creative talent' (Live Theatre). Its status as a new writing theatre therefore underpins the primary way in which Live positions itself as contemporary (a producer of original plays).[64]

However, Live Theatre's contemporary status is vexed in this regard. In *Rewriting the Nation* (2011) discussed above, which chronicles the history of new writing in Britain, Sierz calls Live Theatre one of Britain's 'big six' alongside the Royal Court, Bush, Hampstead, and Soho theatres (all in London), and the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh (28). Despite characterising Live Theatre as one of Britain's big six new writing theatres, however, no analysis of its theatrical output is made, suggesting that Sierz does not consider Live Theatre to play a role in 'national' theatre culture. While acknowledging Live Theatre's 'rare' position, for Sierz, its writers remain 'local' (i.e., other), suggesting that they possess little relevance beyond Newcastle.

Undoubtedly, this lack of engagement with Live Theatre's work maintains its position as marginal/other. It is acknowledged as being part of the new writing scene, but its position

[64] For Sierz, 'new writing is not about history plays, adaptations of novels or films, or old-fashioned genre pieces (like courtroom dramas), or devised work produced by a group of writers, or verbatim theatre, or musicals. It is not Lite. No, what makes new writing special is that it is written in a distinctive and original voice that speaks of the here and now. And that it does hold a mirror up to the nation' (65).

'out there' in Newcastle undermines its claim to be contemporary. It might make 'contemporary' work, but it is not *real* contemporary theatre – rather viewed as a ghettoised (regional) variant – which characterises a patronising external perception of Live Theatre as quaint and provincial. Indeed, *Snowflakes*' director and Live Theatre Creative Producer, Thompson, argues that:

> …there is an assumption that Live does a lot of plays about shipbuilding and coalmining. Someone said to me once, 'Canny Geordie stories,' which was a bit [mildly offended] *okay*… But even when you look at the plays that have been on that Max [Roberts] has directed or we've done co-productions of, in the four and a half years I've been here, they've been very varied and not one of the shows we've produced has been about any kind of industry here in the North East… But I think there is a part of Live and Live's character [which] is that it does tell stories about the North East of England and the people of the North East of England.

As such, Live Theatre is arguably a victim of productions such as *Billy Elliot* and *The Last Ship*, which reinforce the dominant image of the region as fixated on its industrial heritage.[65] Meanwhile, Thompson feels that external perceptions of Live Theatre as 'canny' (well-meaning but trivial or old-fashioned) are unjustified in terms of the work it has produced in recent years. Indeed, a survey of Live Theatre's modern catalogue seems to support Thompson's argument.[66] Live finds itself in a difficult bind, however. The value of its work often derives precisely from its local focus – popular stories that are relevant to the lives of local people – but the external assumption is that, as such, the North East lives in a bubble. Regional dialect plays a part here (because it so clearly roots the work to the region), but I would argue that, again, this external assumption is more indicative of a lack of genuine engagement with theatrical work in the region. Undoubtedly, there are elements of Live's

[65] *The Last Ship* (2018) is a musical set in Wallsend on Tyneside during the Thatcher era, starring Joe McGann, Charlie Hardwick, Richard Fleeshman and Frances McNamee, produced by Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which set sail on a tour of Northern England and North America. The production is inspired by the music of Sting (himself born in Wallsend) and deals with the closure of the town's shipyard and the effect on the local community.

[66] See Fiona Evans' *Geoff Dead: Disco For Sale* (2008); Michael Chaplin and Tom Chaplin's *You Couldn't Make It Up* (2009); Alan Plater's *Looking for Buddy* (2009); Shelagh Stephenson's *A Northern Odyssey* (2010); Michael Chaplin's *A Walk On Part* (2011); Lee Mattinson's *Donna Disco* (2012 and 2015 – premiered in 2011 at the Fringe); Zoe Cooper's *Nativities* (2012); Fiona Evans' *Geordie Sinatra* (2012); Paddy Campbell's *Wet House* (2013 and 2014); Kate Craddock and Steve Gilroy's *The GB Project* (2014); Paddy Campbell's *Day of the Flymo* (2015 and 2016); and *Rendezvous* (2015), five short plays celebrating the life and work of Julia Darling.

work which appear to position it 'behind' new writing companies in London (such as the prevailing whiteness of its output), but many falsehoods about the region seem to endure.[67]

Thompson's comment that Live Theatre fundamentally tells stories about the North East and its population (i.e., a desire to be local, but not marginal) is part of a wider history of what Smith calls the provincial-metropolitan bind. Building on the work of Robert Hughes, Smith argues that it is:

> inescapably obvious that most artists the world over live in art communities that are formed by a relentless provincialism. Their worlds are replete with tensions between two antithetical terms: a defiant urge to localism (a claim for the possibility and validity of 'making good, original art right here') and a reluctant recognition that the generative innovations in art, and the criteria for standards of 'quality,' 'originality,' 'interest,' 'forcefulness,' etc., are determined externally. Far from encouraging innocent art of naive purity, untainted by 'too much history and too much thinking,' provincialism, in fact, produces highly self-conscious art 'obsessed with the problem of what its identity ought to be.' (3)

This idea of self-conscious art preoccupied with what its identity *ought* to be can be also observed in the kinds of Live Theatre productions which have broken through nationally (such as *Wet House* and *Cooking with Elvis*). The former focuses on alcohol addiction and recovery, which, while nuanced and rooted in a valuable social realist tradition in the region, also contributes to the dominant image of the region as poor and destitute. The latter tells the story of George 'Geordie' Carson – an ex-cabaret singer and Frank Sinatra impersonator suffering from a form of dementia marked by hallucinations that cause him to believe he really is Sinatra – which reinforces the image of the region as longing for a return to a golden past. Both shows also maintain the figure of the white Geordie everyman as a central protagonist.[68] As such, the region understands what will appeal to external audiences but appears to be 'well-behaved' as such, giving audiences outside of the region what they *expect* of the North East – stories that confirm pre-existing regional stereotypes.

Related to this, Live can be also considered a victim of its own success with *The Pitmen Painters* (2007), which tells the story of the Ashington Group of artists, composed largely of

[67] Signs of change are evident in the form of Kema Sikazwe's *Shine* (2019), which traces three-year-old Kema's move from Zambia to Newcastle's West End, and Olivia Hannah's *Braids* (2021), which represents the experiences of two young black women from Northern England.

[68] This image is backed up in Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), which won the Palme d'Or at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), both set in post-2008 Newcastle. While preserving a left-wing, social realist tradition in the region and telling necessary stories of poverty and hardship (which often take aim at the cruelty of the London-oriented British State), they also maintain the centrality of the poor, white, Geordie everyman (and thus maintain the image of the region as a struggling underdog).

miners, between 1934 and 1983. Writer Hall felt that the play faced no issues of 'translation' in transferring to the National Theatre and then Broadway because the play was, ultimately, 'universal,' as it dealt with questions of working-class identity and 'who owns art' (qtd. in Manhattan Theatre Club). In other words, its cultural specificity in Ashington is framed by Hall as secondary, indicating the extent to which North East drama often has to deal in broad brush, so-called 'universal' stories in order to achieve wider success. Crucially, however, *The Pitmen Painters* remains legible for audiences and critics beyond the region because it affirms a preconceived, dominant idea of the North East, which is 'traditionally' white, male, and industrial working-class (which might be seen as a positive as it preserves the image of the North East as 'authentic' but which might also limit alternative identities, experiences, images, and artistic work from expanding the image and conception of the region).

On this point, *Billy Elliot*, the North East's twenty-first century mega-hit, which ran on the West End from 2005 to 2016 after achieving widespread recognition as a film, maintains an operative fiction beneficial to London. Not only does it perpetuate a variety of regional stereotypes which maintain the image of the region as white, male, poor, 'traditionally' working-class, and as belonging *to* the twentieth century (all of which confirm the centre's perception of the region and thus its own self-image as superior and more contemporary), but crucially, the centre (London) offers a 'way out.' London is depicted as welcoming and magnanimous: it literally saves Billy. Thus, *Billy Elliot* is important in preserving the self-image of London as sophisticated, hospitable, and altruistic – a promised land – empowered to 'talent spot' and graciously 'reward' the 'lucky' few who 'deserve' it, which amounts to plucking gems from the regional chorus (and inducting them into the national chorus). This is one potential reason for *Billy Elliot*'s notable success and status in London.

I would also argue that Live's monopoly of the contemporary is contestable within the North East itself. In Newcastle alone, the emergence of Alphabetti Theatre in 2012 has galvanised market competition in the city. Arguably, Alphabetti has usurped Live Theatre and Northern Stage as contemporary – the more alternative, fringe theatre of the three. Yet, even Alphabetti's contemporary status is in question. On one hand, the Gateshead International Festival of Theatre (GIFT), which commissions contemporary theatre and live art practitioners from within the region and across Europe, might be considered more contemporary still. On the other hand, the flood of new theatre companies on Tyneside since the mid-2010s has expanded the market considerably. This reveals stratification of the contemporary simply within the Newcastle-Gateshead area.

There is no doubt, then, that Live is battling against dominant representations of the region, whose images and narratives are difficult to shift, especially for theatre which does not have the same reach as television and cinema. Thompson explains with regards to *Snowflakes* that:

> …there was something really nice about hearing the voices of two young Geordie characters in a world that wasn't really what I think we'd seen before here at Live or you see in British culture generally. I think we still have the ghosts of things like *Byker Grove* and *Geordie Shore*. You know, the Daily Mail comes to Newcastle on Bank Holiday weekends to take pictures of drunk people to shock people in the home counties… [*Snowflakes*] just spoke about the lives and concerns of young people living in the North East of England in a way that I think that was true and honest and respected young people.

Thompson thus enlists *Snowflakes* as a corrective to stubborn, dominant portrayals of the North East that have stuck in the national imagination. There is also an irony here, however, in that Live Theatre is based on Newcastle's affluent, 'regenerated' Quayside, the former centre of the region's shipbuilding industry and now itself a hub of nightlife. The theatre has benefited from the cultural 'rebirth' of the city's Quayside alongside Sage Gateshead and Baltic CCA, which also signals its position as a beneficiary of gentrification. As of 2018, Live Theatre owns a range of financial assets including property developments which generate rental income; bar and café ventures which generate commercial income; and Beaplaywright.com, an online training business. Live can be therefore considered an exemplar contemporary (neoliberal) institution. The theatre has adapted to pressures from the metropolitan centre to become contemporary – financially self-reliant – yet at the same time has internalised neoliberal logics from the centre to achieve such self-reliance.[69]

4.3.1 Snowflakes*: A Gateway Drug*

Prior to *Snowflakes*, Live tended to programme 'alternative' Christmas activity in the form of music and stand-up comedy. Thompson, however, felt that a theatre variety night would work well, which manifested in Live Lab's Christmas Adventures, a Christmas-themed cabaret night in December 2015. *Snowflakes* was first presented here as a short play. Berry responded to a brief set by Thompson, which called for 'a play that is set in Newcastle; set at around Christmas or winter – it doesn't have to be about Christmas but has to have some kind of

[69] Live is one of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations, thus receiving core funding from the centre. Newcastle City Council loaned Live Theatre £6.1m in 2015, which the company used to buy land and existing buildings adjacent to the theatre. The land and buildings represent significant financial assets and are used to generate rental income. As Live Theatre explains in its 2018-22 NPO funding application, 'Newcastle City Council's revenue investment in the cultural sector has decreased significantly, however, we are fortunate to enjoy the city's confidence through a loan in our capital development' (Beirne 36). In this regard, Live Theatre is something of a 'chosen' institution in a wider context of neoliberal disinvestment.

connection to it; probably has two actors; quite minimal staging' (Thompson). As such, Live created an event which capitalised on the profitable Christmas market but remained in-keeping with the company's contemporary brand.

Following positive audience reaction, Live commissioned Berry to turn the piece into a full-length play, which premiered in the venue's sixty-seat studio theatre in November 2016. Thompson explains that 'we just thought we'll try it for a week and a half; what's the worst that can happen? […] It was sold out before the opening night, which proved, obviously, there was a desire and there was something missing from that theatre offer, I guess, in Newcastle at Christmas.' Following a sell-out run and a five-star review in *The Guardian*, Live recommissioned *Snowflakes* for 2017. *Snowflakes* therefore represented a 'win-win' for Live Theatre: at once able to share in the profitable Christmas quarter, filling what Thompson calls a gap in the market, while maintaining the theatre's ambition and reputation for making contemporary work, which is different to that of the more mainstream work, principally offered by Newcastle's Theatre Royal.

Thompson explains that what made Berry's writing first appear contemporary to him was:

> …something about the use of first-person narrative and direct address and that kind of inner monologue as a centre point to the structure of the piece, and how the characters […] came across to the audience. I guess in London you have certain trends and there had been quite a long period of this kind of monologue play, or microphone plays as they used to call them. But there was something about the way Nina could take that model but then also just flip it very quickly into naturalistic exchanges that I felt was really accessible. It really drew people in.

Thompson's comment regarding Berry's ability to switch between 'direct address' and 'naturalistic exchanges' in a way that is 'accessible' is instructive in framing *Snowflakes*' dual mainstream/contemporary appeal. Mainstream audiences are offered traditional dramatic scenes (melodrama), while the more 'seasoned' theatregoers are offered some postdramatic metatheatre (direct address; experimentation with narrative structure). *Snowflakes* therefore nimbly straddles the traditional/contemporary (i.e., dramatic/postdramatic) divide, which also means that the play functions as a gateway drug to even more experimental theatre at Live in the future. This speaks to Live Theatre's own straddling of the traditional/contemporary divide, which characterises the divide between its taste publics who are framed as seeking a synthesis of the old and the new.

Meanwhile, Thompson's above reference to monologue or microphone plays in London indicates the extent to which London determines what is considered contemporary.[70] The fact that these plays have already existed in London for a 'long period' suggests that they are no longer contemporary, but, as such, are now deemed ready for audiences in Newcastle. Seemingly, the time has come to market these trends to a non-metropolitan audience with the idea of expanding audiences' horizons and that of the local theatre culture (bringing it up to date with London but in fact maintaining its position behind it). This can appear productive in terms of local access to the latest trends yet equally offensive (the idea that the provinces feed on the scraps of the centre). Consequently, Live itself appears to act as a kind of satellite, taxiing and delivering the latest art styles from the centre, which maintains its colonising presence and contributes to Newcastle's imitation of London.

With that, I now move to a discussion of how these ideas play out in *Snowflakes*.

4.4 *Snowflakes*: Love in the Quantum Multiverse

Snowflakes sets itself up as a boy-meets-girl story. The play focuses on the relationship of Rosie and Charlie, two young adults played by Heather Carroll and Daniel Watson, in present-day Newcastle. The play is organised into six scenes which focus on six pivotal encounters in Rosie and Charlie's lives, an organisational strategy which Berry explains is based on the hexagonal structure of a snowflake (Berry). The pair first encounter each other in their own version of a meet-cute as young children aged seven and nine in a snowy Heaton Park (see *Fig. 4* below), a real-world park situated in a 'trendy' suburb of Newcastle, popular among the city's university students.

[70] 'Microphone play' is slang for a category of contemporary performance in which performers address the audience directly through a microphone – a popular postdramatic technique. Examples include Kieran Hurley's *Beats* (2013); Christopher Brett Bailey's *This is How We Die* (2014); and Barrel Organ's *Some People Talk About Violence* (2015).

Figure 4: First love: Rosie and Charlie narrate their first impressions of each other to audiences after meeting in Heaton Park as young children. Courtesy of Live Theatre 2017.

It is clear that Rosie and Charlie live in the contemporary moment. They literally narrate their lives (a popular trope in postdramatic theatre), inhabiting a permanent present that they are simultaneously experiencing and describing. Rosie is 'standing by the gate outside Heaton Park. I'm wearing a yellow raincoat and I'm looking across to the other side of the road at my Mum,' while Charlie is 'inside Heaton Park. I'm wearing a blue coat and a woolly hat that's too small for my head and I'm standing at the bottom of the hill with Mam, watching Dad and my big brother Liam sledging' (Berry 1). The play represents the world through their eyes as it unfolds in 'real time.' Heaton Park also signals the contemporary (real-world) setting by situating the play in trendy (youthful, lively, cool) Heaton. After the pair exchange awkward greetings, Rosie's mother drags her away. Rosie etches Charlie's name onto the frosted glass of her mother's car window as they drive off.

The paradox of this kind of postdramatic affectation (performance of inner-monologue) is that, one one hand, it seeks to emphasise liveness – with the characters right there with us (the audience) in the moment – expressing that we are here together, sharing *in* the moment, emphasising co-presence and the electricity of the live encounter. For theatre critic Peter Mortimer, the 'technique makes them specially [sic] vulnerable (and appealing)' (Mortimer)

– indicating its role in producing emotional connection for Mortimer to Rosie and Charlie. Yet, arguably, this form of postdramatic narration may also have the opposite effect, distancing characters from their experience of the world by making them narrators (i.e., observers) of it. Are Rosie and Charlie really addressing us, or made to look as though they are? In the performances I attended, the actors tended not to make eye contact with the audience. More often, they looked past the audience, thus maintaining the 'scripted' nature of the performance in a way which maintains the fourth wall. Thus, we were kept at a distance, on the outside looking in, where there is little opportunity for actual interaction.

Thompson's reflections on direct address are also instructive here. Thompson believes that:

> there is something I've noticed about direct address and how it really works and connects with people here at Live. We've been discussing a lot recently with Joe Douglas, our new Artistic Director who's come on board [who replaced Max Roberts in April 2018], about what makes a 'Live play,' and that recurs as one of the characteristics, we think. Whether it's direct address or just inner monologue or just people directed to look like they're talking to an audience as opposed to not.

The technique can be read here in broader terms as part of confessional drama in which characters perform their vulnerability. Rosie and Charlie are still talking to an *imagined* audience, not the one in the room at the time, though we are made to feel as though they 'see' us. Thompson believes, however, that such a tactic achieves the desired effect among audiences: building a sense of connection between audiences and performers, which, for Mortimer, was successful.

Snowflakes' use of flash-forwards also underlines its situation in perpetual advent. The play suddenly jumps forwards seven years to when Rosie and Charlie meet again in Heaton Park as teenagers aged fourteen and sixteen, replaying their initial encounter as young children. There is no delay (physical scene change); characters simply announce the start of the next scene by narrating the action, cued by brief sound effects and subtle shifts in lighting. Such is *Snowflakes*' continuous compression of time and plot. As such, *Snowflakes* is a play forever cutting to the chase – contemporary in mirroring desire for action. The play presents Rosie and Charlie's lives as a series of key encounters, as if running a highlight reel of their lives. There is seemingly no room for extraneous detail, no meat on the bone, only the pivotal encounters stripped of all context. The temporary moment triumphs over the period. In doing so, *Snowflakes* eschews suspense and tension. There are no clear dramatic stakes, jeopardy, conflict, or sense of anticipation – only a relentless 'now,' happening all the time.

Indeed, as the word 'velocity' indicates in *Snowflakes*' title, Rosie and Charlie find themselves hurtling at speed through the contemporary's swift, relentless, ambulatory now. The notion of 'terminal velocity' raises the question of a limit as well as an endpoint, however; and, thus, of individual agency versus fate. Freed of totalising grand narratives, where is 'culture' going, what is the destination? Rosie and Charlie reflect on their uncertain place in such a world, and where they are going, using Christmas as a trigger for reflections on the years past and ahead of them:

> CHARLIE: I look around me at the park and I can't help but think what have I actually done this year and where will I be next year?
>
> ROSIE: Will anything have actually changed?
>
> CHARLIE: Will I have changed?
>
> ROSIE: Will I know where I'm going?
>
> CHARLIE: Or what I want to do with my life?
>
> ROSIE: And no one else understands. (Berry 11)

The use of flash-forwards also has the effect of mirroring neoliberal 'cuts.' Rosie and Charlie are not willingly flexible, made possible by possessing access to various forms of capital, but forced to adapt, which they misconstrue as elasticity and freedom. Rosie and Charlie are constantly on the back foot in this regard, running to catch up with a system that always seems to leave them behind, recalling the locomotive quality of the contemporary. For all Rosie and Charlie narrate their lives, which gives the impression that they possess agency as authors of their own stories, they are in fact obliged to react and adjust to life's scene changes. They are only able to temporarily position themselves within a present moment before they are displaced by the *next* moment. Temporariness and precarity therefore come to characterise *Snowflakes*' presentation of the contemporary moment as something fleeting and thin yet unrelenting and exhausting. Flexibility enables Rosie and Charlie to move around, yet flexibility is the very thing preventing them from inhabiting a stable future.

In addition, *Snowflakes* positions Rosie and Charlie along clear class and gender lines, which anchor them in a present world characterised by the loss of a futural moment. Charlie is the mischievous *Boy*: bunking off school and, later, getting into fights (echoes of Billy Casper from *Kes*). Rosie is the brighter, conscientious, 'well-spoken' *Girl*: she looks on in disapproval at Charlie's boyish antics. We then learn that Charlie's mother has since died (echoes of Billy from *Billy Elliot*), and his father and uncle are both alcoholics. *Snowflakes*

further hints at Charlie's neglect, as his father texts him to remind him to buy milk 'so that neither of us have to have dry cornflakes for the third morning in a row this week' (Berry 10). Charlie's troubled background thus draws upon popular themes of poverty and personal tragedy that recur in dramatic representations of life in the North East (from *Billy Elliot* to *I, Daniel Blake*), particularly regarding its male figures. In this way, Rosie and Charlie fit into 'traditional' class positions in the social hierarchy, which enables audiences to place them discursively. Charlie is a male Geordie and so therefore *must* be poor and neglected.[71]

Rosie and Charlie's social and financial division is later supplemented with geographic and intellectual division when Rosie moves to London to study physics at university. Charlie only seems interested in partying and drinking alcohol, further drawing upon both traditional and contemporary representations of the figure of the male Geordie as poor and dense. The pair's classed division reaches something of a peak when Rosie moves to London, with dreams of an illustrious career as a physicist (echoing Marianne's journey in *Constellations*), while Charlie remains 'stuck' in Newcastle working an unfulfilling bar job with 'fuck all in my [bank] account' (Berry 23). Rosie, however, feels that her parents have 'already planned out my entire future for me and I don't get a say in any of it' (Berry 9), expressing the idea that she is, ironically, trapped by virtue of having a future already to a certain extent guaranteed, in which her social moves will always count, while Charlie's future seems non-existent. It seems that the best Charlie can hope for is the continuation of the status quo – ultimately passive and not able to make his moves count in the same way.

Berry explains that sending Rosie to London and leaving Charlie in Newcastle intended to convey the idea that 'they are on opposite sides of *their* world' (Berry). Indeed, Newcastle is not depicted as a 'happening' place (culturally or economically) in *Snowflakes*. In other words, Newcastle is decidedly non-contemporary when read in relation to the attraction and opportunity of London. Rosie's move to London thus reinforces its place at the centre, as an implicitly logical destination for one to gain an education and pursue a career, while Charlie's sense of confinement in Newcastle reinforces his alienation from the centre. *Snowflakes*' positioning of Newcastle in relation to London reinforces both a material reality (that London is the power centre) and an operative fiction (that access to this power centre is

[71] Thompson notes that he and Berry made a decision 'quite early on in terms of socioeconomic factors; that Charlie's family were slightly less well-off than Rosie's, although Rosie's in no way were rich' (Thompson).

advantageous). As such, London is deployed as a culturally scripted representation of the distance between Rosie and Charlie, but also as Newcastle's inverse.

There is a lot at play here regarding the framing of Newcastle versus London and North (East) versus South (East), which underpinned Berry's decision. Berry notes that:

> when you're going through something and you're already feeling quite lonely and isolated, I think the fact that [Rosie] would be taken there would be a place that I knew would accentuate those kinds of feelings and emotions. And the fact that here [in Newcastle] you walk down the street and you bump into at least one person you know... You go to Tyneside Cinema and do a bit of work and you'll bump into five other people that you know and have a conversation. […] Or even if it's just the person that you end up having a conversation with… Northerners tend to have a bit more of an openness. There's that kind of… You meet someone, and it wouldn't be terribly weird if they were to tell you their life story.

For Berry, London not only represents a logical destination for academic and professional opportunity, but it accentuates social isolation and coldness versus Newcastle's perceived sociability and 'openness' (warmth and friendliness, a trait for which the wider region is known). Put another way, London is a place which is thought to magnify the anonymity of the individual yet is ironically a place one *must* go in order to get noticed. At the same time, Berry's observations indicate a view that Newcastle is claustrophobic and insular, a city in which it is difficult to avoid familiar faces, which can be comforting but also presents the local art culture as homogenous and small, which threaten its ability to maintain diversity, opportunity, and choice. This underpins another common perception of not only the city but the wider region – that it is 'tight-knit,' which is positive in terms of experiencing a feeling of community but can also feel narrow and homogenous. Such perceptions of Newcastle/London (and wider North East/South East) are therefore maintained in *Snowflakes*.

Yet, contrary to these ideas, sending Rosie to London is also used to destabilise the idea of London as a desirable or unavoidable destination. When Rosie witnesses a group of students 'unbutton their fur coats to reveal expensive dresses purchased on credit cards', she wonders 'whether any of them are actually happy' (Berry 29). London is here framed as vacuous and elitist. Likewise, Charlie asserts that his brother 'thinks he's got it made with his big shot job down south and his perfect fiancé with a baby on the way, and I think about how I'm still stuck here, on my own and how everything is just shit' (Berry 31). For Charlie, though life 'down south' seems more secure, it is pretentious and represents a form of violence, as it literally broke up Charlie's family, taking his brother away from him. In this regard,

Snowflakes emphasises Rosie and Charlie's mutual dissatisfaction with contemporary (metropolitan) life, irrespective of their position in London and Newcastle, which sets up their eventual withdrawal from contemporary life altogether.

Indeed, Rosie and Charlie's sense of connection irrespective of their national position is demonstrated by performing their inner-monologues side by side, as if occupying the same time and space. As Rosie lists the Tube stops in London, for instance, Charlie lists the Metro stops in Newcastle. Though Rosie is studying at university, both characters work in part-time bar jobs, enlisted into a low-paid, disposable, casualised workforce with no security or guaranteed future. Rosie and Charlie live at opposite ends of England, but it does not matter; they both remain excluded from the opportunities and luxuries supposedly afforded to young people under neoliberal capitalism. Positioning Rosie and Charlie in London and Newcastle also serves to address two different audiences, enabling the play to be 'relevant' to London and Newcastle simultaneously. In other words, in order to be contemporary, *Snowflakes* must acknowledge and include London, itself appearing as a kind of meta-character, where focusing purely on Newcastle would make the play appear insular and provincial, disconnected from London and thus from contemporary life.

Rosie and Charlie's bond is then underlined when Rosie, while working on her undergraduate thesis, describes the physical properties of particles as they come into contact. Rosie explains that as coffee enters a cup, the two previously distinct materials become 'entangled' and can no longer be defined as distinct. Charlie meanwhile literally acts out Rosie's speech by making (and then clumsily spilling) a cup of coffee. Rosie then instructs the audience to 'think of a feeling: sadness, loneliness or love. Now think of two people who once shared that exact same feeling but could now be living at opposite sides of the world. What if they could still feel each other, perceive the happiness or the sadness of that same person despite their distance from each other?' (Berry 27-8). This represents *Snowflakes*' 'scientific' (intellectual, contemporary) register. While on one hand expressing a traditional, romantic trope of characters' cosmic entanglement, *Snowflakes* achieves this by opening up a conversation about entanglement *theory*, thus evading simple sentimentalism.

Following Rosie and Charlie's separation in London and Newcastle, the play flash-forwards another two years to when the pair meet in a bar in Newcastle on New Year's Eve – that classic temporal cusp on which lives are renewed and relationships remade. As they stand outside in the snow, Charlie shares his feelings for Rosie, telling her, 'I know you felt it too

back there' (Berry 44). Charlie then repeats *Snowflakes*' narrative hook, asking Rosie, 'did you know that no two snowflakes are alike?' (Berry 44) – highlighting the improbability of their encounter. The pair turn to the audience and describe the journey of a falling snowflake – the play's central romantic motif – after which Rosie feels 'something rushing through my entire body' (Berry 45). At this moment, Rosie and Charlie are suddenly transported back to Heaton Park, replaying their first encounter as young children, emphasising the play's staging of first love. The pair announce that they feel:

> CHARLIE: In every part of my body -
>
> ROSIE: That this person -
>
> CHARLIE: Standing in front of me right now -
>
> ROSIE: Is the person that I'm meant to be with -
>
> CHARLIE & ROSIE: For the rest of my life - (Berry 47-8)

The pair kiss, fulfilling their destiny. They describe the sensation of time standing still, as though entering their own world. They feel empowered to 'do anything' and 'go anywhere' and are able to experience 'infinite possibilities' (Berry 49). Their newly discovered time-travelling powers are unlocked by their kiss in which they are able to experience 'past, present and future' (Berry 50). Charlie is quick to exclaim that it is '*our* future' – they are, in this moment, at the centre of the universe. The pair wake up in bed together on New Year's Day. Rosie asks Charlie:

> ROSIE. Would you stay knowing that a life with me will never live up to this moment? Or would you leave knowing that when you were with me and me with you, when we were together, no matter how brief or short-lived it might have been, you could truly say that it was more perfect than anything else in the world? (Berry 54).

The energy and electricity of the immediate moment, the excitement of the beginning (of both the New Year and the pair's relationship) is valued by Rosie above all else. Will the future live up to this present? To find out, the pair leap forward into their infinite futures. This is *Snowflakes*' central narrative pivot, the point at which Rosie and Charlie venture into a series of seemingly infinite futures, imagining their career successes, personal accomplishments, marriage, and children, but also the dead-ends and disappointments – all that life has to 'offer' in the future. Rosie exclaims, 'we can go anywhere, see anything we want to. We're the ones in control' (Berry 55). There is no one path available to Rosie and Charlie as they throw themselves into their futures:

ROSIE: I'm twenty-six and Imperial are publishing my thesis -

CHARLIE: I'm thirty-one, I'm with Dad and he's telling me how proud he is of me -

ROSIE: I'm twenty-four and my parents are getting divorced -

CHARLIE: I'm twenty-seven and I'm a starting a new job – (Berry 56)

4.4.1 (In)flexible futures

In their self-scripting futures, Rosie and Charlie make their dreams come true.[72] They appear to be agents of change, active participants in bringing forth their own utopic futures. *Snowflakes* thus emphasises acts of personal intervention: one ultimately has control over one's life despite feeling a loss of control. Salvation comes from within. Yet, the future does not seem to promise anything truly new; only endless variations on what already exists, an idea expressed by Boris Groys in *On the New* (2014, first published as *Über das Neue* in 1992), and evocative of what Mark Fisher more recently called capitalist realism – the 'widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher 2). The feeling is freeing yet deflating – the rhetoric of entrepreneurial work ethic and self-belief pervades. Rosie and Charlie are children of British austerity in this regard: young people from working- and lower middle-class backgrounds who reached adulthood in the wake of the global financial crisis, whose futures were plundered to plug holes in a spent capitalist system, haunted less by their pasts and more by futures which never came to pass.

In actuality, then, Rosie and Charlie are not in control. Rather, they spin the roulette wheel and picture what their lives *could* look like if they are lucky enough to hit the jackpot, which reinforces their powerlessness and economic precarity. Rosie and Charlie double as speculators on the open market, betting on and against their own financial security, and as passive consumers at the mercy of an autonomous system of simulated futures designed to track trends and predict outcomes. In contemporary culture, the future is increasingly articulated in predictive algorithms – forecasts of 'emerging trends' – in which human agency is vanishingly meaningful and influential. *Snowflakes* operates in this regard like a computer network: running endless projections; scripting potential futures; a web of computations. Whether thinking of Rosie and Charlie's shared future(s) as the outcome of a shot on the

[72] Thompson also explains that using first-person narration in this regard 'really allowed us to be signposting for the audience as well. So, it wasn't just like, throwing a load of different abstract ideas at an audience and then them feeling unhappy when they didn't get it, which can happen in other plays' (Thompson). In other words, characters literally tell audiences where they 'are' to avoid audiences getting lost.

roulette wheel, market speculation, or as determined by artificial intelligence, all reveal their powerlessness as the odds are heavily stacked against them.

For all Rosie and Charlie experience past, present, and future, their world is also cocooned from the outside world – time*less* in its self-absorption. The infinite multiverse in which *Snowflakes* takes place is transformed into a solipsistic *you-niverse* constructed entirely of Rosie and Charlie's relationship. Campos observes a similar dynamic in Nick Payne's *Constellations* in which 'the 'universe' is reduced to the letter 'u', suggesting the possibilities of other 'yous' and the equation between a lover and a universe' (Campos 4). The same is evident in *Snowflakes*: Rosie and Charlie leap forward into their futures to determine the outcome of a universal equation: do they match? The future is broken down into a series of fragments. All one need do is find the correct combination, fitting the jigsaw together and thus completing one's life (which, in Rosie and Charlie's case, is a harmony of financial security, professional success, family, and the survival of their love).

The extent to which *Snowflakes* is wrought by neoliberal inversions of individual freedom and personal responsibility is also emphasised in the play's handling of flexibility. While Rosie and Charlie appear flexible in the sense that they are able to move between an infinite set of interlocking realities in which their moves count – i.e., they are the contemporary's self-scripting, mobile individuals able to ride the waves of free-market capitalism – their actual moves are inflexible and artificial. This leads to numerous situations in which Rosie and Charlie announce dramatic changes in their lives, yet *nothing changes*. Rosie and Charlie glimpse their futures but never seem to fully inhabit them, as the present constantly regains control. Consequently, Rosie and Charlie are stuck in a simulation in which the present status quo (rather than utopic futures) perpetually dominates their material reality. It is therefore ironic that while *Snowflakes* is ostensibly set in the quantum multiverse i.e., a vast, diffuse, interlocking series of realities, these realities all look part of the *same* reality. Consequently, Rosie and Charlie become hostage to their own shared present.

Indeed, while contemporary life is characterised by perpetual cultural flux, it is also true that little seems to change. Culture is endlessly repetitive, almost instantaneously co-opted by brands, or subject to the ravenous piranha feeds of rolling news coverage, online discourse, and the viral meme, which strip cultural events to the bone in a matter of hours. At the macro level, wealth continues to travel upwards and is consolidated in the hands of the uber-rich, while the poor remain trapped and dispersed. The Internet is all but privately owned and state

monitored at this point. As such, the contemporary moment itself feels stuck, at once marching on at an ever-increasing pace and yet frozen in time, unable to push through and into *something* new – which is struggling to be born, as Antonio Gramsci put it.[73] The contemporary works like a treadmill in this regard – running on the spot – a conundrum posited by devastating injuries to conceptions of society, collectivity, and progress. We are moving, but where are we *going*? The situation can, and often does, feel hopeless.

Snowflakes' neoliberal logic is further mirrored in its stage economy (see *Fig. 5* below). Thompson explains that the starkness of Luke W. Robson's set design derives from the production's 'limited budget' (Thompson), which evokes an austere winter wonderland. The 'pop' of colour is provided by Rosie's yellow jacket. The sparse set enables Rosie and Charlie to move between times and places without the physical constraints of realistic scene changes. But because their surroundings look the same no matter where they go – representative of much contemporary design – they exist everywhere and nowhere, simultaneously in London and Newcastle; in the past, present and future; a totalising and all-encompassing here and now which becomes placeless and timeless, robbed of all particularity. Consequently, Rosie and Charlie are stripped of their citizenship in a globalised world that purports to be open and borderless yet detains and immobilises. They are in another sense here 'digital nomads,' afforded the freedoms of flexible, 'agile' working, yet perpetually itinerant.

[73] Originally written circa 1930, with this English translation taken from *Prison Notebooks: Volume 2* (2011): 32.

Figure 5: Rosie and Charlie in Snowflakes. *Courtesy of Live Theatre 2017.*

The apparent vacuity of contemporary life is also mirrored in the uniformity of the set: blank, smooth surfaces on one hand designed to denote wintry settings for a 'pure' love story, yet on the other evoking featurelessness and producing superficial reflections of Rosie and Charlie's futures. It is an entirely utilitarian set which can be made into anything: a park in which Rosie and Charlie fall in love or the space outside a hospital where Rosie receives a terminal cancer diagnosis. The set is as flexible as their relationship: constantly recycled and adapted. As Angelaki argues with regards to *Constellations*, 'flexibility as the root of the inability to attach to relationships and contexts and to make some claim to permanence, is an elusive concept emerging from the neoliberalist context of modern lives' (129). Moreover, the utilitarian ('universal') set is indicative of the whiteness of the play – twinned with the heavily sentimental, dreamlike nature of Rosie and Charlie's fantasy.

Flexibility is also observed in Live Theatre's decision to programme *Snowflakes* in its sixty-seat studio space. *Snowflakes* is in this respect the ideal Christmas production for Live Theatre: affordable, lightweight, and easy to stage (all of which underpin contemporary theatre in an age of limited resource); though still popular with audiences; and which also

does not threaten the theatre's main house demographic and output. On a related note, too, programming *Snowflakes* in the studio also signals a broader issue in British theatre in which women remain underrepresented on theatres' main house stages. Plays written by women are seen – consciously or not – as 'riskier'. While the studio space affords *Snowflakes* a sense of intimacy, which aligns with the romantic content and directness of the play, it is also evident from Thompson's earlier comment ('what's the worst that can happen?') that *Snowflakes* was seen as something of a punt – a risky experiment offset by the affordability – and one which was never planned to transfer to Live Theatre's main house stage.

Following their freewheeling run of self-scripting futures, Rosie and Charlie realise that which was the case all along: they never were in control. They arrive at the only certain future: death: Rosie and Charlie reach the limits of infinity, the logical consequence of a universal equation which cannot be balanced. Here, Rosie is diagnosed with a premature terminal illness aged thirty-three, a situation from which there is no alternative, and seemingly no hope, with echoes of Marianne in *Constellations*. Just as Rosie and Charlie's futures are cut short, so too is Rosie's life. Charlie asks in desperation:

> CHARLIE: But it doesn't make any sense. We're the ones in control, you said it yourself -
>
> ROSIE: I know I did but -
>
> CHARLIE: But what?
>
> ROSIE: Maybe… maybe we aren't anymore.
>
> CHARLIE: What do you mean maybe we're not?
>
> ROSIE: Or maybe we never were, not really. (Berry 65-6)

Rosie states solemnly that they 'have to watch it play out' (Berry 67), acknowledging their status as passive observers. In recognising that they are out of control and out of time, it appears as if their relationship is doomed. At this moment, Charlie comes to embrace the immediate moment:

> CHARLIE. You and me Rosie, that's it, that's all there ever has been, and I know that now because out of all the possibilities in the world, the universe even, you've always been with me. You make the world a better place to live in you know that don't you? But most of all you make me better.
>
> Nothing else exists anymore, nothing else is real but this. And we need to hold on to it, because if we let go, then, it'll disappear, we'll disappear. (Berry 75)

At this point, *Snowflakes*' status as a piece of Christmas theatre is underlined, as I will discuss in more detail below. As Mackey-Kallis argues with regards to the typical hero quest, 'the hero, during her imprisonment or time spent in passive receptivity to her fate, is often confronted with her death and thus the meaning of her life' (135). In *Snowflakes*, Rosie and Charlie are imprisoned not in a physical place as Dorothy is in the Wicked Witch's castle, for instance, but rather in a system of algorithmic futures in which they are held captive. In this regard, they too spend time in passive receptivity to their fate, now visited by their own mortality, which recurs as a central motif in canonical Christmas texts such as *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life* in cinema. Rosie and Charlie come to the brink, or perhaps more specifically a crossroads, either destined to accept their fate or experience an epiphany/salvation in which the prospect of death prompts a resolution between free will and fate.

4.4.2 Escape into the Festive

At this point, it appears as though *Snowflakes* fully embraces its festive register. Rosie states:

> ROSIE. I want you to know that when I'm gone, it won't be the end of you and me.
>
> Because, well because there are so many different states, so many different possibilities available to us, to both of us.
>
> It's like, like being in the park and starting out next to the gate, far from equilibrium, you remember? And then you enter, and you have this enormous place and you get lost in it and you never come back to the gate. So, me leaving is just one- just one possibility. (Berry 74)

As the pair sit holding each other, Charlie suddenly exclaims, 'Rosie, that's it. That's the answer, me and you, so we can go back to the beginning, back to the gate. That's how we stop this because, well, because it'll be different this time' (Berry 76). At this point in the performance, lights flash overhead – perhaps snowflakes tumbling towards the earth, perhaps stars scattered across the cosmos – triggering Rosie and Charlie's transition into yet another reality (see *Fig. 6* below). I also interpreted this moment as a representation of firing neurons, which depicts both Charlie's epiphany and the idea that *Snowflakes*' action is in fact taking place inside the 'world' of its characters' minds. The next scene opens with Rosie and Charlie as young children once again in Heaton Park. While Charlie suggests that going back to the gate in Heaton Park enables them to 'stop this' (avoid death; regain a sense of agency and control), they in fact re-enter the multiverse in which they are made passive once more. Is it truly *their* decision to go back or are they forced to return?

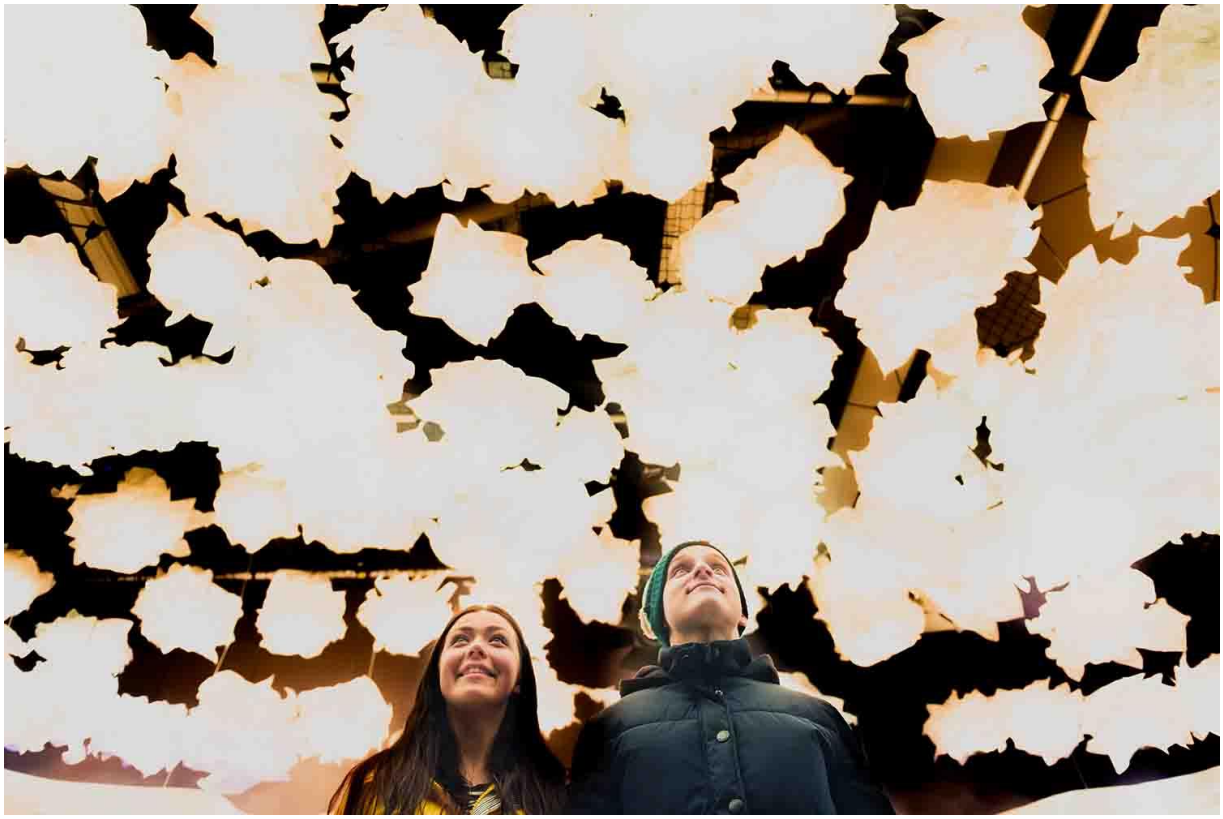

Figure 6: Rosie and Charlie gaze up as they transition into another reality. Courtesy of Live Theatre 2017.

The gate in Heaton Park functions as a portal in this respect. It is both the literal gateway from which Rosie and Charlie enter the multiverse but also its terminus – the perpetual beginning and end of Rosie and Charlie's story. No matter how many futures or realities they move between, they are still forced to come 'back' (to the beginning). The intellectual design of the play seems to reach a limit – as do its characters – as Rosie and Charlie seem unable to break the cycle. More importantly, in line with the play's festive register, they have made it home. Rosie and Charlie stand in the snow as two identical snowflakes fall into their hands, symbolising their shared fate. The pair have returned to the source and achieved immortality. Heaton Park becomes a kind of Garden of Eden (perhaps Heaven), symbolising life everlasting, providing comfort and safety even from death.

CHARLIE. And then I smile at her -

ROSIE. And I smile back at him -

CHARLIE. And we stand there -

ROSIE. In Heaton Park -

CHARLIE. Looking up at the sky -

ROSIE. Watching the snow fall -

ROSIE & CHARLIE. Together.

Lights fade to black.

The End. (Berry 83)

While Rosie and Charlie's ability to go back to the beginning is achieved by a deus-ex-machina, it is plausible according to the rules of festive drama (it is a Christmas miracle); according to multiverse theory (they will always exist together *in some reality*); and in the sense that they are stuck in a simulation, which will always necessarily lead them back to where they began. Charlie's epiphany that the answer is 'me and you' further underlines what Campos observes in *Constellations*: the 'equation between a lover and a universe' (4). Rosie and Charlie's romantic relationship is transformed into a unifying theory of the universe – me + you. While Heaton Park communicates the play's contemporary setting, it doubles as a magical place for two Christmas rituals: wholesome family activity and a romantic beginning (to which Rosie and Charlie return).

In returning to Heaton Park, they also complete their Christmas Odyssey, which is foreshadowed throughout the play. Aged fourteen, Rosie is already quick to 'wish that I could go back in time because, well, when I was younger everything seemed so much simpler, so much easier, and Mum and Dad, they were good then, they were happy then' (Berry 10). *Snowflakes* combines wishing – a classic festive trope – with nostalgia for childhood as a way of revealing Rosie and Charlie's desire to rediscover home (and each other). *Snowflakes* frames growing up as frighteningly complex, hazardous, and ultimately disheartening. For Rosie and Charlie, the contemporary world is too dizzying, fragmented, and devoid of hope. For Rosie, there are too many competing voices, options, and expectations, while for Charlie such opportunities seem completely out of reach and unattainable. They seemingly must withdraw and return home where they will remain.

Despite their (classed) difference, Rosie and Charlie's apparent cosmic entanglement is underlined throughout the play as characters repeat to each other the line that 'no two snowflakes are the same', foreshadowing that they are the perfect match for each other.[74]

[74] On this point, Berry notes that '[i]t wasn't until we got into the rehearsal room and Max [Roberts] came into the room, and we did a reading of the full-length piece that he was very much, "This is a play about classes. This is about two characters from different worlds coming together." And I was like, "Yeah, do you know what? It is." I hadn't actually sat down and given that all of that much thought.' (Berry). There is a separate discussion to be had here regarding authorship (Roberts' influence on the play's narrative). Rosie and Charlie's romantic union seems to represent, for Roberts, a sentimental 'coming together' – a union which magically solves social division. Rosie and Charlie come from different 'worlds,' recalling the notion of 'star-crossed lovers.'

Even Charlie's troubled background frames him as a type of Tiny Tim character in-keeping with the Christmas tradition. Yet, their differing backgrounds are framed as immaterial when read against their shared fate. Rosie and Charlie are the titular snowflakes tumbling through time and space, whose encounter is written in the stars. In this regard, the festive is too powerful a literary force: it overpowers the contemporary. Indeed, rather than facing specific contemporary worries, Rosie and Charlie's inner-most anxieties are highly generalised and abstract ('universal'), indicative of the play's festive register.

This is to say that while Rosie and Charlie share their inner-most feelings to the audience regarding their place in a chaotic contemporary world – giving voice to two young Geordie characters – there is nothing especially contemporary about their anxieties, nor does *Snowflakes* explore the precise social and political conditions which underpin their lives as young people living in Newcastle. *Snowflakes* is instead concerned with the 'timeless' questions of the individual's place and purpose, for ideological frictions seemingly have no place in festive drama. Rosie and Charlie are the paradoxical everywoman and everyman of the present, who transcend the particularities of the moment, yet also live in the moment. Rosie and Charlie therefore appear to belong to the here and now in the sense that they clearly live in present-day Newcastle, each placed into different class backgrounds to foreshadow that they must ultimately cross a frontier, yet they are presented more as 'universal' young adults, festive flâneurs, concerned with their identity and journey.

While using Newcastle and London to address contemporary conditions of life for Rosie and Charlie, *Snowflakes* also reproduces a popular trope in hero-quest narratives. As Mackey-Kallis argues:

> The classical call to adventure for the hero often begins with the hero longing for distant lands, or at least a place where the 'grass is greener' than the pedestrian world of the family home. *The Wizard of Oz* is no exception. The central lesson of Dorothy's adventure in Oz, however, like George Bailey's in Bedford Falls, will be to correct this perception and come to see home as the source of all being. Her adventures in Oz, in other words, are needed in order to come to this realization. She must first lose home before she can truly 'find' it (130).

Snowflakes also recycles the provincial-metropolitan dichotomy which is itself central in many hero-quest narratives. Mackey-Kallis observes that:

> This portrayal of big cities as impersonal places where the hero loses her soul and her goal, is a predominant theme not only in *The Wizard of Oz*, but also in *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Gone with the Wind*. Since the family home in the 1930s was synonymous with the family farm, it is not surprising that

> agrarian or populist values would come to predominate in popular films of the 1930s and 1940s. The city, in many films, came to represent those forces that potential destroy the family, seduce the hero, and waylay his quest. (134)

Snowflakes invokes a similar critique of the big city, from which Rosie and Charlie retreat.

Charlie's epiphany also signals a pivotal moment in the regional story. Rosie's death represents the moment when the pair rationalise their entrapment, which in the past might have felt inescapable, a future in which they had to simply accept their regional position as passive and stuck. Now, however (in 2017), the pair realise that their future is not predetermined; they are the authors of their own story, and thus Charlie's realisation signals a broader moment of clarity and liberation – a new dawn. Upon his realisation, Rosie and Charlie go back to the beginning, now armed with the knowledge that they do not have to simply follow the rules where 'outside' forces (such as London) dictate their place to them. Rosie and Charlie have broken the spell of the past and can advance on a new trajectory. Their lives begin now. And therefore, the rebirth they experience is meant to stand in for a regional rebirth where 'we' help each other to move forward 'together.'

It is unclear, however, whether or not Rosie and Charlie's ability to cheat death represents their detection of a point of egress from a closed system which blocks them off at every turn. Does going back to the beginning rather constitute a retreat into the safety of romance, which provides comfort and salvation even from death? Rosie and Charlie seem to journey back into an idealised past (of childhood innocence). The internal logic of the play therefore seems circular or looped yet at the same time offers a chance to 'reboot' the system, giving characters a second chance. However, the causal loop remains problematic as it frees Rosie and Charlie from any sense of ethical decision or consequence. If every possibility is happening in an infinite number of realities, then there are no consequences, and no tough decisions for its characters (and the audience) to negotiate.[75] In this regard, *Snowflakes* and *Constellations* both seem to express the necessity of finding a lover.

[75] Payne himself expressed an awareness of such an interpretation of the play. Interviewing Payne in 2012, Maddy Costs writes that a 'cosmologist at Sussex University whom [Payne] met as part of his research told him the theory [of the multiverse] is rubbish, and perhaps quite dangerous: "She felt that it could remove the idea of consequence," he explains. "I could kill someone knowing in another universe they'll live." And, as he wrote, he realised that whatever universe the couple inhabit, their story always has to conclude in the same way – with death.' (Costa). Angelaki notes that while this moral dubiety exists in *Constellations*, it would be unfair to linger on it, as the play captures in a number of ways 'the contemporary human condition' (133).

The final word of *Snowflakes* spoken by Rosie and Charlie simultaneously – *together* – reinforces their love, underlining the fact that their relationship has survived the turbulence of contemporary fragmentation. Thompson suggests that:

> I think in *Snowflakes* there's a lot of struggle, there's a lot of anxiety, there's a lot of dreaming. But ultimately at the end, there is hope. The sixth scene when we go back to the very beginning but things are slightly different, I think the idea that we're trying to say is that there is hope for the future, there is hope for these characters. And I think there is hope in the North East, I definitely like to think so. I think Newcastle as a city has fared quite well. I know there are other places that are a bit less well-off as some of the other urban centres. But… I don't think it's as bleak as what some pictures could be painted. I mean I guess we see what the future has and what Brexit and everything will mean.
>
> But I think as well, there's something about having confidence. And I think from living in other places and working with other people in different parts of the country, I think for some, especially more working-class young people and artists here… I think there sometimes isn't a confidence – and I think this is a real working-class legacy, actually – that somehow […] you [aren't] even allowed to think big for yourself and to dream […] There's that [feeling of] sometimes you can't maybe control your future when you can. And I think one of the key things in *Snowflakes* was that for that brief moment in time they got to control what happened, which always they felt like they hadn't been through adolescence into their early twenties.

Snowflakes clearly centres the experiences of two Geordie characters in ways which enable them to dream. This is meant to act as inspiration for the viewer. However, the play's neoliberal inversions of personal freedom and love in the quantum multiverse remain troubling in terms of the messages and values they project. It is also unclear in terms of what it suggests for Newcastle. On one hand, there is a lack of engagement with contemporary life in Newcastle, and with how Newcastle has fared as a city, yet *Snowflakes* appears to valorise the non-metropolitan: Rosie and Charlie come to realise that home is where the heart is. *Snowflakes* in this regard depicts a sense of satisfaction with Newcastle as a home; Rosie and Charlie recognise that the home they seek was there all along. On the other hand, *Snowflakes* also appears to revile the non-metropolitan: Rosie and Charlie return to their 'rightful' place in a romanticised past, destined to perpetually live out a self-fulfilling provincial fiction in which every decision leads them back to square one. Their situation seems *hopeless.*

Thompson's above reference to dreaming also invites further consideration in this context. In returning to a romanticised past of childhood innocence, the past functions as both a source of nostalgic comfort for Rosie and Charlie but also a type of dream. This is to say that while Rosie and Charlie spend much time dreaming of potential futures in alternate realities, their true dream is of their return to childhood, thus fulfilling their festive destiny. Such a past

provides an almost womb-like comfort in response to their lack of agency in the present (i.e., they can evade the harsh realities facing young people in the contemporary moment by returning to their first love). Yet, equally, history functions as a nightmare from which they are trying to awake, as James Joyce wrote in *Ulysses* (1922), in the sense of breaking the cycle which repeatedly leads them back to square one.

Beyond this, it is not Rosie and Charlie who dream so much as the system itself. Indeed, as I have shown above, they are lost in the dreamworld of contemporary neoliberalism, with its endless claims of flexibility and adaptation, from which they are simultaneously trying to awake. *Snowflakes* can be understood in this regard as a piece of neoliberal dreamwork – the kind examined from many perspectives in Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk's edited collection, *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (2007) – within which they are not only trapped (in the festive sense) but enslaved (in the contemporary political sense). The stakes of their passive receptivity thus relate less to what 'timeless' moral the play seeks to tell us in terms of dealing with death at an emotional and interpersonal level, and more in terms of contemporary generational struggle and liberation from a capitalist system which plundered the future to pay for the greed of the past.

Consequently, the multiverse appears to be an enticing, liberating creative framework and form of artistic terrain: a playground in which writers and their characters can *lose themselves*, dream, bend time and reality, script new futures. Yet, this is arguably as much an illusion created by neoliberal inversions of flexibility and freedom. The playground can be thought of as, rather, a material and intellectual prison, controlled by capital and its agents, within which characters are only given the minimum space to move rather than organise and stage a prison break. Perhaps, the metaphor here is that Rosie and Charlie are given time in the exercise yard before returning to their cell. While their quest for connection underlines their sense of a loss of feeling in contemporary life, it also serves to underline their social and political alienation. Do they truly yearn for interpersonal love or radical collectivity? The latter appears to haunt them more pointedly throughout the play, emphasised in their status as insecure, non-unionised young workers roped into a system which runs on the exploited labour of a generation already demoralised by the loss of a futural moment.

4.4.3 A Hopeless Future?

This seems to ring hollow yet true in the social, political, and economic context in which *Snowflakes* was made. What is surprising about *Snowflakes* is that the play premiered in

November 2016 and returned in 2017 at the height of renewed hope and energy under Corbynism, facilitated by the mobilisation of a generation of young people into a mass political movement for change to the status quo; a manifesto which outlined the rebuilding of national public services; and widespread gains for the British Left in the 2017 General Election. Despite this, *Snowflakes* feels more hopeless than hopeful, due in large part to succumbing to feelings of insecurity and loss of home in response to wider forms of anxiety (austerity, globalisation, and Brexit, the latter of which heralded particularly devastating economic consequences for North East England). The hope, in other words, never quite breaks through in *Snowflakes* and gives way to these wider forms of anxiety and doubt.

Equally, however, Corbynism's subsequent defeat, constituting a moment of brief but ultimately dashed hope for the many young people who supported him, raises questions about unresolved collective grief. Hope seemed restored, new alliances were formed, a generation engaged in a common project, all of which arguably possess value in their own right. But this has come at great cost. Many were radicalised the other way (arguably the centre collapsed into the right), and therefore *against* a socialist future. What is more, has Corbynism marooned the British Left in an even greater (and thus worse) position of dispersal and despondency? Yet, brief glimpses of hope, collective action, and joy have emerged since 2019, such as the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston and, subsequently, the acquittal of the Colston Four in January 2022. While *Snowflakes* could not have anticipated Corbynism's defeat at the point of its performance in 2017, it still seems to function as a forecast of what was to come: a future within reach but thwarted once more.

This is further complicated in a play which sympathetically voices the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of two Geordie characters in ways which appear to be hopeful, enabling them to be active agents of change, not only in dreaming but inhabiting their future. However, these seemingly optimistic ideas and overall mood of the piece are wrought by neoliberal inversions of hope, love, utopia, desire, agency, and self-belief, which reassert the power of individualism. Wider forms of anxiety prove too reality-shaping and impassable, and they inspire *Snowflakes* to retreat into the land of festive fiction, which tells a comforting story of provincial safety and security. The play achieves this by adding a number of fairy-tale motifs into the mix to provide the Christmas 'magic,' which offers a stabilising vision of white social totality in the midst of contemporary atomisation and futility. Consequently, the play's critical inquiry into the present conditions of life for young people in Newcastle surrenders to a feel-good 'White Christmas.'

The play's valorisation of cyclical time also seems to conflict with its status as contemporary. The locomotive 'now' of the contemporary disappears and is replaced by history repeating itself. I would suggest that this circular ending reflects Berry's personal desire to present a closed conclusion. Berry explains that her decision to resolve the story derives from her view that:

> Sometimes, I really struggle with stories that are left open-ended. Sometimes I feel like I've been cheated… But I think the fact that [*Snowflakes*] ends in that way, it does offer up different interpretations, but also, like the journey of the snowflake, like anything in life, life itself is continuous. So, I always knew that it would be cyclical. And I think the point of view that I wrote it from was that in fact any of the story could have been in any number of different worlds, but the fact is that these characters were always and will always be together.

Cyclical, or predetermined? The answer is not clear. Different interpretations of *Snowflakes*' ending represent external threats to the play's concluding vision of white social totality, threats which *Snowflakes* is keen to vanquish. On the contrary, Rosie and Charlie achieve their dream ending *in spite of* different interpretations; their relationship survives against the odds (i.e., contemporary fragmentation). This contemporary fragmentation threatens their relationship, and thus their 'world,' yet in depicting Rosie and Charlie's victory over the contemporary, *Snowflakes* presents an ending that is not only magical but a continuation of the status quo. As Mackey-Kallis postulates:

> The mythic critic can also ask to what extent does the story that is being told open up interpretive possibilities rather than close them down? To what extent does the myth allow for, even invite, multiple stories, with possibly different moral lessons for living, to coexist in the same mythic universe and possibly even inside of the same story. […] Parable, like myth, by its very nature is an open form. Open not in the sense that absolutely any interpretation of meaning will do, but open in the sense that the range of interpretations of meaning is broader rather than narrower, polysemic rather than monolithic. (233)

Snowflakes' ending is clearly concerned with intimacy, care, and togetherness, which may be read as a response to a perceived lack of these ideals under neoliberal capitalism. However, *Snowflakes* frames these ideals as ambiguous interpersonal traits (we must 'find' each other). This recalls Tomlin's analysis of Uninvited Guests' *Love Letters Straight from Your Heart* in which Tomlin argues that while '*Love Letters* does indeed seek to reinvent 'ways of being together' in relation to the audience/actor conventions of theatre, it does so through very familiar ways of being together in a society that appears insatiable in its demands for the authenticity of true stories based on interpersonal, rather than social or political, relationships' (Tomlin 192). There does appear to be a similar situation in *Snowflakes*, which

depicts Rosie and Charlie's interpersonal relationship as depoliticised and solipsistic, articulating a cosy fiction of young love, which warms the heart and solves all problems. Yet, interpersonal relationships can still reflect the mood of a time/generation, which, in *Snowflakes*, constitutes a longing for human connection.

In reaching this endpoint, *Snowflakes* also appears to affirm the cycle of life as a way of fulfilling the criteria of its status as a Christmas play and to offer a sense of continuity. Berry states that:

> I suppose *Snowflakes* is quite spiritual in that sense, that, actually, death doesn't really exist if you think about the world as just being vibrations. And in fact, the other play that I'm working on for Live is about how everyone is made up of matter and the same stuff that stars are made up of. In the same way that the world began theoretically, humanity and the universe will end in that same way. So, actually, if we're all going to die eventually and we're all just going to become what we started out as, if we can take death into our own hands, because death doesn't really exist.

There is something here to the idea that *Snowflakes* looks to science for answers and understandings. In some respects, the play appears contemporary in terms of engaging with quantum mechanics (string theory, vibrations), which performs our collective knowledge of the universe at the sub-atomic level in ways which also inform the structure of the play. *Snowflakes* mirrors an Enlightenment-era faith in science and reason to provide concrete notions of material reality and truth. This in turn comes to underpin a variety of 'mechanics,' whether quantum, artistic or game in the sense of how Rosie and Charlie are able to detect 'shortcuts' and 'cheats' to the system, yet ultimately are unable to break the system altogether.

Despite *Snowflakes*' application of entanglement theory, then, the play remains, at heart, a piece of Christmas theatre. Berry herself explains that her ambition with *Snowflakes* was:

> to write a piece of theatre that encapsulated the emotions that people tend to go through at that time of year, and something that was universal, that would appeal to lots of different ages. […] And especially when it comes to being in a relationship, I think it tends to highlight whether you are or whether you're not, and whether you're happy with that person or whether you're not, and whether you want to take that

> relationship into the next year […] So, I think it was just an amalgamation of those kinds of ideas and concepts and emotions.[76]

Berry is upfront in framing *Snowflakes* as in fact quite traditional in terms of how Christmas is typically represented and understood in popular culture. It is considered to be a time for emotions and interiority. It is also conceived of by Berry as a romantic time, which has the potential to intensify feelings of love and loneliness. It also possesses a wistful, contemplative quality in terms of promoting reflection on, as Berry notes above, 'what you've achieved in that year and where you want to be next year or in five years' time.' In other words, Christmas is a time for personal consolidation and interior reflection – a time which accommodates past, present, and future. Above all else, this moment of consolidation and anticipation is framed as individual and emotional.

Yet, personal stories which emphasise emotion cannot avoid the social and the ideological. For *Snowflakes*, its 'detachment' from social and political arenas in fact constitutes its situation in a cocooned world of white social totality and provincial fiction, which stands in for universal storytelling. With regards to Berry's desire to tell a universal story, then, not only is such a desire impossible in the sense that a play cannot please everyone, but it is also a fallacy because its story is always told from particular perspective(s), and so therefore any attempt to make universal theatre involves *universalising* the particularity of these perspective(s) – and in this case, a dominant perspective – an argument expressed in McGrath's *A Good Night Out* (1981). Relating this back to this chapter's opening paragraph in which Max Roberts described *Snowflakes* as a piece of 'delightful alternative Christmas entertainment,' alternative can be said to mean escapist: providing temporary relief and distraction from contemporary events and an opportunity to forget social tensions and retreat into a festive land in which we all 'come together' in social harmony.

The hope, then, that Thompson feels is evident at the end of the production is called into question. Rosie and Charlie's experience of hope is not one of egress but of further withdrawal into fairy-tale, which provides comforting grand narratives of heroes' triumphs. Romantic unions are formed, the family unit survives, and home is rediscovered. This rediscovery is crucial for there 'can be no pleasure in paradise regained,' argues Mackey-

[76] Berry notes further, 'something that I wanted to really create with *Snowflakes* is that it would, as I say, be universal and relate to a lot of people, but also reflect real life, but not try and imitate it. It is its own different world, I think in a similar vein to films like *La La Land* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I think that's what I really like about theatre is that you can go and be taken to a different place, but also you can see some of yourself within it and within the characters' (Berry).

Kallis, 'until it is lost' (130). Fundamentally 'good' characters come to the brink at which point they are faced with the meaning of life, after which they are reborn. While they experience a personal/emotional rebirth, the world itself does not change. On the contrary, things go back to 'normal,' which is to say a period of social equilibrium, which maintains the status quo. Above all, peace and the balance of power are restored.

All of these issues have implications for the region's theatre culture. On one hand, they speak straightforwardly to the idea that Christmas is a time for escapism and fairy-tale. But framing *Snowflakes* as contemporary suggests that it asks questions not only about how Newcastle has fared under austerity, but how the city (and region) understands its position post-Brexit and where it might seek to go – a question that is (was) prompted by the horizon-expanding potential of Corbynism. The question of 'the future' is one which is prompted by highly specific social, political, cultural, and economic developments in Europe and Britain *and* by long-standing questions relating to how Newcastle and the North East break free from the regional nostalgia myth-symbol complex. This pertains to rewriting and displacing dominant portrayals of the region as obsessed with its (white) working-class roots and industrial heritage, and popular portraits of the North East as intoxicated, while retaining a sense of its own identity, which is principally articulated and maintained through social realist stories of ordinary people and/or the working-class.

It is also worth highlighting Berry's own career journey following the success of *Snowflakes*. Berry herself made the decision to move to London 'because I've always said that that's something that I would do' (Berry), signing with an agent off the back of her successful debut. In this regard, her journey to London seems predetermined, a kind of unquestioned logic. Berry goes on to note that she 'grew up in the countryside in the middle of nowhere, and I knew when I came to university, I was dying to be in a city… And Newcastle seemed massive to me when I first came. Now, I'm like, "It's really not," especially in comparison to London' (Berry). Again, the notion of London's size and diversity is considered a draw; one promotes oneself or moves 'up' through the ranks, from village/countryside to a city, then to *the* city (London). Berry's journey contributes to a familiar one-way cultural transmission, where regional artists make the pilgrimage to London, which maintains the notion of the regions as 'training grounds' for London, and indeed contributes to the national brain drain, where the regions subserviently depend on London to 'give' 'our' writers careers.

Interesting, then, because Berry herself represents, simultaneously, a success story and a dashed hope. Live Theatre has seemingly produced a playwright capable of writing plays that will appeal to both a metropolitan theatre-going public and a local audience in Newcastle. Her debut play was a hit, earned her an agent, at which point she planned to move to London. The cycle goes on.[77] Berry is not from Newcastle, but studied here and was trained here, thus making it her professional home. She follows in the footsteps of many before her, of course, who likewise were able to move 'up' through the ranks and achieve wider notoriety and success via London. Yet, it remains a loss for the region and a gain for London, as the capital maintains its gravitational pull of talent and resources.

At the same time, however, Live Theatre cannot know in advance who will stay or leave. It simply seeks to identify new talent and help them on their way in the industry (though, of course, it is never that straightforward or rosy). Irrespective, Live Theatre's mission is to provide opportunities for aspiring new writers and theatre-makers *outside* London, and indeed specifically the North and North East. Even if that talent then subsequently leaves, Live Theatre will always have a 'connection' to them, and vice-versa, always able to claim that the writer was 'made' in Newcastle. Wherever the artist journeys, and whatever they achieve, they carry Live Theatre (their mentor) and Newcastle (their roots) with them, which in effect validates Live Theatre. What is more, it also includes the idea that no matter where the writer goes, their *spiritual* home is Newcastle, the place where it all began. Not only does this reinforce the origin story, but it also constitutes a question of ownership. If Berry goes on to fame and fortune, 'we' (in Newcastle) knew and saw her before she was famous, and thus affirm our own sense of authenticity and role in supporting her from the beginning.

What is therefore at stake in this discussion of the contemporary is both how Live Theatre continues to be caught within the provincial-metropolitan bind and how a strand of contemporary British theatre is itself caught within a provincial fantasy. Given *Snowflakes*' close relationship to *Constellations*, the play mimics and in doing so serves London. If *Constellations* is contemporary, the logic follows that *Snowflakes* is contemporary by association. This brings Newcastle 'up to date' (co-temporaneous) with London. But this also

[77] Writing in 1974, Smith described a similar journey of the provincial artist in Australia who leaves for the metropolitan centre; adopts the leading style; returns home (bringing with them popular avant-gardisms); but struggles to build and maintain an audience for the work; then leaves again for the metropolitan centre only to discover the style has changed once more, forcing them to either defend their now-outdated style or get on board with the latest style, whose origins they have missed out on. 'Most artists are flexible enough to go one or two rounds in this circus,' Smith argues, 'but after that it becomes increasingly debilitating' (8).

suggests that all one need do (to be contemporary) is replicate London. Once validated, Live is effectively given the green light to start pipelining more writers *to* London. Live is then at risk of doing the work *of* London, which reinforces the region's role as training grounds for London. The regional artist is dutifully trained in the dark arts of the capital; which is then provided an endless supply of fresh talent with which to sustain its own culture; which is then 'refined' and shipped back out to the regional audience in the form of the 'latest' (fancy/exotic) art styles, thus forcing metropolitan taste on the provinces.

There is also an element of this cycle where Live has, in effect, programmed a play that could not fail (i.e. the success of *Constellations* could be seen as a guarantee for *Snowflakes*' own success). This in turn opens up a discussion regarding the extent to which a part of the contemporary British theatre market can be considered a closed shop. There is always a risk that regional audiences will not take to a play in the same way, but the success of *Constellations* seemed to constitute a winning formula. It is also interesting to note that *Constellations* was remounted in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, presumably as a way of offering familiarity and comfort to audiences and as something of a cash cow. This arguably demonstrates the 'safety' (conservatism) of the theatre industry more broadly, mining the fertile ground of its past successes.

4.5 Conclusion

As its title suggests, *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes* displays a concern with the speed at which objects travel through, and in Rosie and Charlie's case collide in, time and space. *Snowflakes* in this regard performs a 'timeless' story of young love in a contemporary age of economic precarity and social atomisation. Rosie and Charlie are positioned in the midst of neoliberal hostility in the sense that they are in a state of alienation and withdrawal from it. Their ending suggests that 'we' need to 'find' each other, evoking a desire to feel and re-connect, to consummate the moment, thereby re-enchanting our interpersonal relationships. Yet, they also retreat into sentiment and impossibly stable conceptions of the (white) provincial home. The concept of finding each other is not presented as a socio-political issue, in which we might attempt to understand each other across a wide range of borders and divides, but in the sense of coupling up within our respective gated communities at home, a white fantasy which stands in for a 'universal' story of safety and security.

In the same way that *It's a Wonderful Life* valorises domestic life in direct response to the threatening conditions of the time (loss of home during the Great Depression), *Snowflakes*

also valorises domestic life in direct response to the threatening conditions of the time (loss of home in response to austerity and globalisation). Characters from different 'worlds' coming together i.e., romanticised social harmony, is presented as the ultimate aspiration: magically crossing divides and proceeding 'together,' as equals. Again, *Snowflakes* is not concerned with exploring social relations as political, nor the contemporary conditions which impede or otherwise influence the pursuit and production of utopia. Rather, the fairy-tale ending is preserved. *Snowflakes* therefore time travels not into a variety of utopic futures, but an imagined traditional past. The pure moment envisioned by *Snowflakes* is of the first love between two people as staged in their 'natural' place of birth.

Snowflakes appears to be concerned with the 'deeper' metaphysical question of what it means to exist. However, rather than excavating the here and now for possible answers, *Snowflakes* reverts to mythologies of the individual's quest for home. Rather than seeing the contemporary moment as one of opportunity – however rigged against ordinary people the economic system may be – *Snowflakes* considers the present moment to be one of atrophy and thus one from which 'we' should retreat. The idea of *Snowflakes* as a piece of contemporary theatre about Newcastle also suggests that the play addresses how Newcastle has fared in this period (the mid-2010s) – a city unevenly exposed to increasing gentrification in its centre yet at the same time devoid of public investment. While *Snowflakes* can be thought of as contemporary in terms of its performance of both austerity and contemporary fragmentation, it also seems to skirt these conditions. Rather than emerge as ideas to be met head-on, they seem to do the work of capital on its behalf.

Snowflakes is also instructive in acting as a reminder of the hostile face of English nostalgia, which always lurks around the corner. *Snowflakes* is clearly not nationalistic in the English conservative sense of the word. However, it nonetheless upholds a provincial fiction, which prioritises white social totality, a powerful idea capable of confirming a socially conservative worldview, which is in turn easily weaponised. *Snowflakes* risks presenting a cosy fantasy, which yearns for the safety of home, which is threatened both in terms of disruptions to local space in the form of neoliberal austerity; national space in the form of globalisation; and in more widespread fractures to the local, the regional, and the national.

Chapter 5. Darlington Operatic Society: *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse Darlington Operatic Society's 2018 amateur theatre production of jukebox musical *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. I saw *Priscilla* on the final three nights of its eleven-night run from Wednesday 18 April to Saturday 28 April 2018 at the Darlington Hippodrome.[78] The production involved approximately 40 performers – a mix of the principal cast, ensemble, and the company's own full orchestra, with a small army of additional people working behind the scenes. I interviewed the show's (external, professional) director and choreographer, Martyn Knight, who was hired in to direct *Priscilla* (a routine practice for the company); Jo Hand, a professionally trained dancer and choreographer, who describes herself as 'a resident director/ choreographer with Darlington Operatic Society, but on this particular production I was assistant director to Martyn Knight' (Hand); and Julian Cound, a Trustee of Darlington Operatic Society, whose day job is Marketing Officer for Darlington Hippodrome (Cound), and who also performed in the role of Bernadette in *Priscilla*.[79]

I use *Priscilla* to answer the following question: what does it mean for Darlington Operatic Society to describe its work as lavish? Unlike the other terms I analyse in this thesis, which all came from my field interviews, I took the word lavish from the 'Our History' page of the company's website:

> DarlingtonOS has a long and colourful history dating back over 100 years. The company as we know it today has been producing two full-scale musicals [per year] at Darlington Hippodrome since 1945 and has a national reputation for creating large scale, lavish productions (DarlingtonOS).

Though the roots of DarlingtonOS can be traced back to 1912 (Lloyd 1), the company cites its post-war revival in 1945 as the true beginning of the company as it exists today, as 1945 represents the starting point of its uninterrupted output. The company refers to itself in the present-day as DarlingtonOS rather than the full Darlington Operatic Society. Cound explains that this mini rebrand took place because the Society felt that the 'operatic' label no longer

[78] The Darlington Hippodrome is one of three dedicated live performance venues in the town, and is by far its oldest, biggest, and most well-attended theatre. The second is the nearby Majestic Theatre, a smaller independent theatre run by volunteers which opened in 2017, whose programme also includes tribute acts, concerts, and an annual pantomime, but whose future is far from certain (Lockwood 2020). The third is Theatre Hullabaloo, a specialist children and young people's theatre company, which opened its own building in 2017 adjacent to the Hippodrome, forming something of a mini cultural quarter in Darlington town centre.

[79] Cound and Hand are married – I interviewed them together at their home in Darlington in July 2019.

described the kinds of 'modern' musicals the company now tends to stage (Cound). In recent years, for instance, DarlingtonOS has staged *West Side Story* (2017); *Spamalot* (2016); *Legally Blonde* (2016); *Hairspray* (2015); *Sister Act* (2014); *Grease* (2014); as well as their own versions of *Strictly Musicals* in 2013 and *Strictly Musicals 2* in 2017 with a *Strictly Musicals 3* coming in 2021 (qtd. in DarlingtonOS), which have largely replaced the Gilbert & Sullivan and Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals which appeared more regularly throughout the company's twentieth and early twenty-first century history. But the company's name is well-known locally and nationally – a name with prestige. So, 'DarlingtonOS' strikes a balance between preserving the company's heritage and signalling its contemporary repertoire.

Unlike the other terms I have examined in this thesis – authentic, contemporary and official – which have been the subject of considerable amounts of scholarly attention, the term lavish has not received any significant analysis. The closest work in this area is Adam Alston and Owen G. Parry's *Staging Decadence: Decadent theatre in the long twentieth century* (2020), a two-year research project funded by the AHRC which 'looks at how theatre makers have been engaging with decadence as an embodied and enacted practice, one that has much to offer to our understanding of cultural politics both historically, and in the present moment' (Staging Decadence). Alston and Parry's focus on decadence relates more specifically to narratives of decline and treats decadence as a principally historiographic concept and practice. I examine lavish as distinct to decadence (though with some inevitable crossover), thinking of the term as an artistic strategy, an aesthetic register, and an affective experience set within a variety of social, political, ethical, and ideological tensions.

5.2 Prioritising Pleasure

The word lavish conjures up images of sumptuous comfort and luxury – no expense spared. Because of this, lavish promises audiences a good night out; where we can cut loose and break away from the quotidian; where we can be treated, spoiled, feast or gorge ourselves, and unashamedly satisfy our desires – theatre as indulgent self-gratification. DarlingtonOS wants to be known for prioritising pleasure and offering such 'premium' experiences, both of which, I will argue, are highly political in nature. For the company, lavish is not a dirty or unproblematic word; it conveys the type of 'rich' theatrical experience audiences can expect when attending a DarlingtonOS show. So, lavish communicates in a straightforward way the

idea that the company spends a lot of money on its shows as well as the idea that audiences will experience comfort and luxury when they attend.

Indeed, the production budget for *Priscilla* was approximately £110,000 (Cound), which cannot compete with the multimillion-pound productions of the West End but still greatly exceeds typical amateur theatre budgets and the modest grant-level funding available in the subsidised theatre sector. This financial resource enables DarlingtonOS to stage a size of production which many professional companies cannot. Ironically, being an amateur company helps in this regard. The company is able to draw from a large pool of performers, which means that it can stage shows which require a large ensemble. As the company does not pay performers, *Priscilla*'s £110,000 budget could be spent on acquiring the rights for the show; marketing the production; hiring out the Hippodrome, props, costumes and set; and employing a professional director, which maintains a divide between paid pros and unpaid amateurs. Jo Hand notes that the company is 'more towards a professional amateur theatre in that, because of the costs that we have to cover, we can't just stick the poster in the chip shop and hope that that's going to do it' (Hand). In this regard, DarlingtonOS presents itself as, essentially, a professional outfit, eschewing the amateur.

But the company's ability to stage large-scale productions is also in part a product of specific material advantages. DarlingtonOS' close association with the Darlington Hippodrome, for instance, is preserved by the fact that Cound's day job is Marketing Officer for the venue, while the company also benefits from limited competition for audiences.[80] Darlington is unlike Newcastle in this regard, where there is an abundance of large amateur dramatics groups (although arguably more theatres in Newcastle among which these groups can be shared). DarlingtonOS benefits from favourable venue hire rates, a guarantee of two slots per year to perform shows and inclusion in the Hippodrome's brochure, which no other external hire companies receive. All of these things enable the Society to produce the kinds of large-scale productions for which it has built a strong reputation, and to position itself as a

[80] Cound notes, 'We are the only amateur musical theatre company that performs at the Hippodrome. Now for us, that is great, a unique selling point for us. But also, it enables us to be one of a kind in the area in the fact that we haven't got any other amateur companies fighting for the same audience base. There are other smaller groups, some drama groups, some musical groups in Darlington who produce amateur theatre on a different level and perform at smaller venues. So, in terms of visibility for the people who use the Hippodrome, as far as the community offering, we are it, which is fabulous as far as we're concerned' (Cound).

'leading' amateur dramatics company both within the area and nationally, or, alternatively, as an elite amateur company operating on the more professional end of the spectrum.

Despite these factors, it is still surprising to find the word lavish used to describe the work of an amateur theatre company in Darlington. In a town with high levels of economic deprivation, which has felt the full force of austerity policies, here is a theatre company with money – spending big on its shows.[81] Lavish therefore raises questions of wealth inequality and responsibility in Darlington and at wider levels, about who can afford to partake in 'lavish' experiences or lead lavish lifestyles. Indeed, more common associations of the word lavish tend to relate to extravagance, excess and waste. To be lavish in this sense is to be over-the-top or profligate, to spend or produce more than is 'necessary,' particularly in a way which highlights inequality – uninhibited capitalism. Who can afford to be wasteful? How much is too much? Such questions are relevant in our present world of wealth inequality and in the context of a global climate emergency which necessitates an immense shift in consumption habits and arguably the annihilation of the existing economic order.

In one sense, then, I argue that *Priscilla* enables local audiences to briefly escape the reality of austerity. The idea of a lavish experience appears vital, which turns the show into a social safety valve. *Priscilla* gives audiences, as Sierz writes about popular theatre in general, 'a shot of adrenaline – the most traditional and reliable legal high' (1-2). I explore the ways in which prioritising pleasure in this way remains a political decision. In doing so, I go on to argue that there is no true escape – no free-floating world into which we can disappear. *Priscilla* is not 'just' hedonistic fun, nor simply a money-making machine for DarlingtonOS and the rights holders. Our experience remains shaped by material conditions such as the venue, ticket prices, and the politics of the production. I follow David Savran who argues that musical theatre is particularly well-suited to developing a politics of pleasure in that 'the utopian—and mimetic—dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced' (216). This frames my discussion of the 'feel-good' experience. How, and to what, are we seduced?

[81] Vickie Cooper and David Whyte argue that austerity policies have 'led to a dismantling of the social systems that operated as a buffer against economic hardship, exposing austerity to be a form of systematic violence' (1). Alarming figures show that over 25% of children in Darlington and County Durham live in poverty (Banks). In September 2021, a report from the Nuffield Foundation found that the North East of England had the highest rate of early childhood poverty in the UK at 46 per cent (qtd. in The Northern Echo).

In turn, this leads me to complicate the extent to which *Priscilla*'s queer politics of representation 'rewrite' Darlington's depiction as a generic protagonist in a story of 'northern' post-industrial decline. On one hand, *Priscilla*'s prioritisation of camp and queer identity unsettles the dominant representation of Darlington and presents a 'colourful' alternative to 'drab' depictions (while also providing evidence of a thriving theatre in the centre of Darlington). On the other hand, I argue that the show maintains the status quo in a variety of ways, suggesting that it is not as alternative as it might appear. While the 'grim up North' cliché is itself something of a relic of the past (though one which endures in contemporary media), the representation of a queer North-East more broadly has only become more visible in recent years, driven by the likes of Curious Arts in Newcastle and Gateshead, *Queer & Now* at Live Theatre, and a growing contemporary drag scene evidenced in the likes of *Dragfetti* festival at Alphabetti Theatre in Newcastle and in the work of companies which experiment with drag conventions such as Bonnie and the Bonnettes. Is *Priscilla* part of this contemporary drag scene or a piece of 'straight' theatre which maintains the social order?

5.3 The Civic Break

DarlingtonOS' role in saving the Darlington Hippodrome from demolition is often cited as the Society's greatest triumph.[82] The Hippodrome originally opened as the New Hippodrome and Palace Theatre of Varieties in 1907 in line with numerous music halls across the country. But as with many provincial theatres in England in the mid-twentieth century, attendance dried up and the building fell into disrepair, and was considered for demolition before Darlington Operatic Society stepped in and ran the theatre voluntarily for two years in the mid-1950s (Lloyd 76). After realising the task was unsustainable long-term, the Society persuaded the local council to buy the venue (Cound), which the Council renamed the Darlington Civic Theatre. Cound wryly notes, 'typical DOS: we sold it at a loss. Am I bold enough to say that without the Operatic Society, we wouldn't have the theatre there? Yeah, it probably would have just been left to rack and ruin.' DarlingtonOS' role in saving the theatre

[82] This fact is cited on both companies' websites as well as in biographies such as Lloyd's *Something Exciting, Something Inviting: The Story of Darlington Operatic Society* (1995); Morrison's *A Theatre for the People: The Story of the Darlington New Hippodrome and Palace Theatre of Varieties, now Darlington Civic Theatre* (1983); and Lloyd's *Of Fish and Actors: 100 years of Darlington Civic Theatre* (2007).

from demolition therefore contributes to the interconnectedness of the two companies as well as DarlingtonOS' sense of local embeddedness and community belonging.[83]

Sixty years on, renovation beckoned again. The Civic closed in March 2016 to undergo a major £13.7m revamp, which included a £4.5m grant from Heritage Lottery Fund, and reopened in the autumn of 2017 under an abridged version of its original name – the Darlington Hippodrome.[84] Reverting to the Hippodrome name seems to encapsulate the theatre's programme of popular variety entertainment, which includes jukebox musicals, gigs and concerts, stand-up comedy, tribute acts, and Christmas pantomimes. But jettisoning the worthy Civic name is perhaps surprising when considering that £4.5m came from a public source and that the Council still own the building, but especially at a time when the idea of 'civic' theatre has such currency.[85] Abandoning the Civic name might in this sense indicate that the theatre, and the Council, are moving away from thinking of the theatre building as a public asset and more a private enterprise.

In another sense, abandoning the Civic name distances the Hippodrome from typical images that the word civic tends to produce: an austere, official, dated place of administration and authority i.e., the antithesis of the lavish productions of DarlingtonOS. The Civic Centre in Newcastle, for instance, can be considered architecturally striking, poetic and futuristic, yet old, hostile and drab. Civic in this sense represents bland bureaucracy, red tape, and day to day drudgery, all of which stifle creativity and seem to run counter to what goes on inside a theatre. Ostensibly, civic buildings are for quiet clerks and circadian rhythms, not loud thespians and extraordinary encounters. This departure from the civic echoes research

[83] Cound remarks, 'the people who run the Hippodrome really appreciate that and understand the link. We try not to overstep the mark, [joking] "Don't you know who we are!? If it wasn't for us, this wouldn't be here!" We understand that it's a two-way street.'

[84] Reverting to the venue's original name also evidences a wider valorisation of 'roots' in restoration projects across the country in which old buildings are simultaneously modernised and returned to their former 'glory.'

[85] The opening of the Gosforth Civic Theatre in Newcastle in 2016 indicates how the Civic name is still valued and considered modern. Since 2016, *The Civic Role of Arts Organisations* has sought to build a case study bank of arts organisations which centre civic practice (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation). In 2020, the AHRC-funded Women Theatre Justice project held an online in-conversation event with Clean Break and SlungLow reflecting on the civic role of arts organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic (Clean Break). In 2021, Dan Hutton's *Towards a Civic Theatre* was published, which examines how theatre can fight austerity, free market logics and privatisation; Tribe Arts hosted *Decolonising the Civic: Redefine, reclaim, relegate?*, a discussion of the civic role of theatres from an empire and race perspective (Tribe Arts); and Mel Steer, Simin Davoudi, Mark Shucksmith and Liz Todd's edited collection, *Hope Under Neoliberal Austerity: Responses from Civil Society and Civic Universities*, was published, which uses the North East of England as a lens through which to explore how different communities have responded to austerity in ways which generate hope and inspiration.

findings in Helen Nicholson, Jenny Hughes, and Louise Ashley's Creative Towns project, which investigates the civic role of theatre in towns. Nicholson cites the team's research which 'suggests that theatres in towns are able to be non-hierarchical and creative because they are *uncivic* – unconstrained by civic infrastructures – sustained by informal, ad-hoc networks of friendships, shared interests, emotional connections, and local ties' (Nicholson). In this respect, civic is potentially too closely linked to the world of officialdom, rules, and power. Hippodrome, on the other hand, sounds grand and exciting: a place to which we can *escape* the official world.

But does true escapism exist? We can be taken away from the quotidian and experience things which are exciting and rare, which can make us think differently, look at the world and each other more closely or thoughtfully, or simply give us a break. But at the same time, neither the industry nor individual theatre productions exist in a vacuum. No matter how much companies might try to depict themselves or their work as offering an escape, theatre as a mode of industry, an artistic practice and a shared, affective experience unavoidably deals with, and is conditional on, issues of politics and power. While theatre can dress up these issues in feathers, such as in *Priscilla*, the messages and experiences we have in the theatre remain actively social and political in nature. Jettisoning the Civic name makes the Hippodrome's intentions clear: to turn the venue back into a fun p(a)lace, which provides thrills and delights; which rescues us from day to day drudgery: a place which tells 'colourful' stories, not dull expressions of duty. Yet this decision is not itself a neutral one.

A sense of luxuriousness is evoked upon entering the newly restored Darlington Hippodrome. We enter the Edwardian theatre building through a grand new entrance and promenade gallery, displaying photos of the building from its past, which leads off to a vaulted function room and education centre. The plush red velvet seating in the theatre auditorium now comes with extra leg room, while access facilities have been improved across the theatre. The setting in which we watch *Priscilla* is lavish in the sense of luxury. This frames the type of pleasure audiences can expect at the Hippodrome (and from a DarlingtonOS show): a deluxe form of pleasure in which we are made to feel comfortable and encouraged to spend money. Our pleasure is delimited by a strict start and end time; licensed by what drinks we can purchase at the bar; organised around travelling to and from the venue; booked usually in advance and therefore budgeted and accounted for in our personal finances. Ticket prices for *Priscilla* range from 'cheap' £20 stalls tickets to 'premium' £75 seats in the circle or theatre boxes,

creating stratification of pleasure. Audiences can choose to have a 'premium' experience (if you can afford it). In this regard, we must pay for the luxury: pleasure as a commodity.

Though the roots of the jukebox musical – a subgenre of musical theatre in which shows have no original score and instead use well-known songs – stretch back to the revues of the early twentieth century (Taylor 149), *Priscilla* emerged during a particularly prosperous period for the jukebox musical in Australia, the UK, and the US in the early twenty-first century. This period was prompted by the global success of *Mamma Mia!* (1999) and followed by the likes of *We Will Rock You* (2002); *Jersey Boys* (2004); *Rock of Ages* (2005); and *Grease* (originally staged in 1972 but notably revived on Broadway and in the West End in 2007). The original 1994 film version of *Priscilla*, curiously considered both cult and mainstream, was adapted into a jukebox musical in 2006 by the original film's Australian director-writer Stephan Elliott, and producer Allan Scott; then on Broadway in 2011; before going on to global success – performed in over twenty countries. The market is now crowded with a range of commercially successful jukebox musicals, many of which are 'global smash-hits.'

Familiarity plays a key role in the popularity of the jukebox musical. In particular, audiences may have seen original film versions, previous productions or simply recognise the music. As such, there are numerous cultural entry points for audiences and thus ways of marketing these shows to us. As Taylor notes:

> …jukebox musicals are hugely popular entertainments that use many of the same features as other musicals, but they also have some aspects that are more strongly featured. In particular, audiences may know most of the music of these musicals before seeing them, and that knowledge may be linked to a wider intertextual field and offer a different type of dissonance from its context than in 'integrated' musicals. […] Vestiges of the revue formula attached to a story are also present in the extravagant song, dance and costume spectacles in, for example, the stage production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and in British pantomime' (149).

Cound confirms that similar factors played a part in the company's decision to stage *Priscilla*:

> …people tended to like the fact that they know more or less every song in the show, which *Priscilla*, because of the music, it's the whole jukebox of some of the best disco pop music. And the audiences that go to the Hippodrome do tend to like the jukebox-y shows as well. For me, as a marketing guy, it was a no-brainer. I knew there was an audience out there, and I knew that our company could perform it very, very well with the quality of singers and performers and dancers that we had.

Cound and Hand also note that, in their view, DarlingtonOS audiences tend to prefer 'new' shows, but only ones which are already popular in wider society:

> JC: There are certain, more traditional shows that Darlington [Operatic Society] have never done. If we were suddenly to choose *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which is a traditional old Stephen Sondheim show, we've never done it, but I think it's of an age that, even though it's 'new' to DOS, audiences wouldn't come and see it. But if it's a new, modern release show that is probably in the public psyche because they've seen that a professional tour has recently been around and about… It's obviously a bit more of a modern story, modern music. So, I think it's more to do with the fact that it's a new released show rather than just new to the Operatic Society (Cound).

> JH: We have these discussions a lot about, again, just because it's new doesn't mean it's marketable. So, for example, *Urinetown*, which is a great show, but isn't really well-known, people go, 'Oh, the title…' which is part of the irony of the show, they wouldn't come to see it just because it's new. There has to be something that you can kind of connect in. I think *Priscilla,* people know the film, and also the fact that 'if I don't really know the film, I'll really know the music though,' so there's something there that you can kind of grasp hold of (Hand).

The question of what is considered marketable to DarlingtonOS audiences suggests that the company is heavily reliant on Anglophone film and music industries to drive interest and awareness, which commercial theatre can then cash in on since the heavy-lifting work has already been done. In this regard, there is less 'risk' in staging jukebox musicals whose plot or music is already well-known among the public, which suggests a conservatism to the kinds of choices the company makes. While DarlingtonOS audiences may favour 'modern' musicals over the classics, the familiarity of these musicals nonetheless makes the programming decisions appear quite safe and conventional. *Priscilla* also seems to capitalise on the ubiquity of disco music in contemporary culture more broadly. The 1980s as a decade seems to be particularly favoured for reproduction in the twenty-first century, a process which Jay Springett refers to as 'cultural fracking' in which we 'mine' aspects of our past culture and repurpose them for audiences in the present. Springett uses the term cultural fracking to criticise a perceived vacuous tendency of contemporary culture not to develop new ideas but to instead harvest the profitable lands of old successes and safe, dependable hits.

This has implications on the idea of what an indigenous North-East theatre culture looks like. If Darlington is not producing its own stories but rather importing them from outside the region, is it 'stuck' in a passive consumer relation which maintains its position as a satellite town for ideas and cultural experiences which are 'sold' to audiences? Tim Prentki and Jan

Selman argue that defining popular theatre simply as theatre that is enjoyed by the greatest number of people:

> leads to an assumption that the megamusical is the current 'popular theatre'. However, better described as 'populist', this form contradicts almost every principle of popular theatre: despite its popularity, it is inaccessible to the majority due to prohibitive ticket prices; it is imported culture, created and controlled by interests external to the local community; it is seldom about anything of immediate concern to its audience; it is escapist and entertaining, but of little relevance. (9).

Following this idea, *Priscilla* might actually pose a threat to indigenous culture, not only in the sense of hindering opportunities for a grassroots culture to prosper but in that it keeps Darlington in a state of deference to, and dependence on, external tastes and market influences. *Priscilla* therefore also evidences the central role which large groups and cultural institutions such as DarlingtonOS and the Hippodrome may play in upholding this state of affairs, attesting to the tension between their dual role as locally rooted community-based organisations and importers of mass market culture.

5.4 *Priscilla*: A Lavish Experience

Priscilla opens with an extravagant song and dance routine featuring Weather Girls hit, 'It's Raining Men,' performed by the musical's three 'Divas' (see *Fig. 7* below). The costumes, set and routines are full glitz and glamour, which present a lavish image, as we might expect (even demand) from a production of *Priscilla*. Male members of the ensemble soon join the Divas, launching into a high-energy dance routine set to a medley of popular disco hits which feature throughout the show, presenting a preview of what is to come, as audiences clap and sing along from the first word. Audiences arrive armed with a knowledge of the rules of the jukebox musical (namely that audience participation is allowed). Indeed, there is a sense in the auditorium of cutting loose from the word go: the lavish experience begins with our immediate sense of ease and comfort.

Figure 7: The Divas in Priscilla, *performed by Rhiannon Walker, Jenny Poole and Tori McDougall. Courtesy of Darlington Operatic Society 2018.*

As such, familiarity pertains to what audiences are 'allowed' to do. Jukebox musicals are not written for audiences to sit in quiet receptivity behind a fourth wall – having a silent, studious experience in which we are 'absorbed' in a show – but having a loud, expressive, shared experience where audiences interact with each other, their surroundings, and the cast. The jukebox musical in effect offers a tweaked version of straight musical theatre. *Priscilla* can be considered a more 'popular' form of performance in the sense that there are numerous fourth wall breaks (though not actually all that often) and, principally, in that audiences are authorised to participate. These attributes are written about at length in Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double, and Louise Peacock's *Popular Performance* (2017) and which Taylor notes connects the jukebox musical with another popular form of entertainment: pantomime (149). The jukebox musical also borrows from the contemporary rock concert where audiences are encouraged to sing along, making the jukebox musical into a hybrid form which blends conventions of music hall, panto, rock concert and straight musical theatre. Crucially, audiences arrive not only with intertextual knowledge of previous productions or popular music but of the 'rules' of popular performance borrowed from these forms.

In the same way that familiarity underpins the popularity of the jukebox musical in wider culture, a sense of familiarity is key to the experience of this particular production. DarlingtonOS' production presents a faithful adaptation of the original story. *Priscilla* is set in Australia and follows the lives of two female impersonators, Tick/Mitzi (played by Nicholas Fletcher-Holmes) and Adam/Felicia (played by Luke Oldfield), and an older transgender woman and seasoned drag performer, Bernadette (played by Julian Cound), all of whom are performers in Sydney's drag clubs. Tick discovers he has a son from a former relationship living in Alice Springs, a remote outback town in Australia's Northern Territory, so he persuades Adam and Bernadette to go with him on a road trip to perform there (see *Fig. 8* below). The story documents the trio's road trip in a 'budget Barbie camper' they call Priscilla, detailing their encounters and exploring their own lives. Bernadette meets a man, Bob (played by David Murray), and decides to stay with him in Alice Springs, while Tick is reunited with his son and accepts his paternal responsibilities. Again, a feeling of comfort is key to the experience – we know what to expect and can therefore relax and feel at ease.

Figure 8: Adam/Felicia (Luke Oldfield), Tick/Mitzi (Nicholas Fletcher-Holmes) and Bernadette (Julian Cound) perform in Alice Springs in Priscilla. *Courtesy of DarlingtonOS 2018.*

DarlingtonOS also presents a faithful adaptation of *Priscilla* in the sense that the production uses similar (and in some cases the exact) costumes, props, and a set used in previous

professional productions of the show. The bus, for instance, was previously used in a recent professional production of *Priscilla*, recycling familiarity for audiences in Darlington (Knight). The cast all perform with an Australian accent, again reproducing the original. Almost everything about the production is familiar. Yet, this means that there is little which actually seems to place *Priscilla* in Darlington – it appears as a kind of free-floating production devoid of any particular context, which is also what produces an opportunity for escapism. Indeed, *Priscilla*'s value here is that it takes us away from, rather than reminds us of, our own lives. The only things that seem to place this version of *Priscilla* in Darlington are the fact that the show is performed in the Hippodrome and the company of performers, who will be recognisable to audiences. But even this produces an extra layering of familiarity – the show and the music are recognisable at a broader cultural level while the cast are well-known by audiences and the venue is one in which audiences feel comfortable. The familiarity of popular culture sits in harmony with the familiarity of the performers and the setting.

Nostalgia also plays a part in producing feelings of pleasure. The very first thing we hear in *Priscilla* is something we recognise. From the first note, we are made to feel comfortable. Taylor argues that:

> The re-use of existing songs in new settings, which is a feature of bio-musicals, compilation musicals and revues, allows intertextual and personal associations in reception as well as the response to the dissonance and comedy of camp. This contributes to the sense of familiarity and nostalgia experienced by audience members, which in turn allows them to be removed from their everyday lives, to relive fantasies and memories, and to participate in singing and dancing. This infectious experience of joyful community involves the audience as participants in the event, which contributes to the entertainment felt as a result of attendance. And entertainment is the point. Many compilation and revue style shows are extremely good at entertainment (152).

The idea of being 'removed from their everyday lives' underlines the extent to which the jukebox musical functions as escapism from the quotidian. Yet, equally, the 'escape' is as much into our own memories as it is the 'world' created on stage. Jukebox musicals offer not only the chance to hear familiar songs, but to experience the memories and feelings that those songs evoke (of youth and/or a happy time). The cultural cues therefore come directly from the music rather than from a character encouraging us to participate. Throughout *Priscilla*, we are treated to a selection of disco hits, including 'What's Love Got To Do With It?', 'Don't Leave Me This Way,' and 'I Love The Nightlife,' which, in the tradition of musical theatre, are used to tell part of the story or express the inner emotions of characters. Music

remains one of the most effective tools in stirring an audience's emotions. Using popular songs in particular achieves a double effect where we feel a sense of nostalgia at the same time as that feeling is connected to the characters on-stage and therefore converted into a strong affective power which draws us in and makes us care about their 'journey.'

Pleasure is also produced in shared laughter – arguably one of *Priscilla*'s defining features. The script is packed with risqué comments, puns, and quips all shared among the show's three drag queens whose rivalry, teasing, and 'bitchiness' underpin much of the banter. After the show's opening number, Bernadette launches into her drag act, a mix of stand-up and singing, welcoming us to the Cockatoo (cock-or-two) Club. Each night, Bernadette performs a mini routine in which she berates a latecomer (who is non-existent but because the house lights are down, we cannot tell that this is an invented part of the routine), a scripted interaction common in panto, which audiences are therefore also likely to recognise as stock. The show-within-a-show convention used in *Priscilla* enables the musical to signal to audiences when we are meant to participate. Any sections of the show that are framed as performance effectively give us the green light to join in. Alternatively, the show-within-a-show convention enables *Priscilla* to instruct us when to become active.

Kitsch and triviality also play a key role in the production of laughter and pleasure. During one of Tick's musical routines, the ensemble appears on stage dressed as cupcakes, which in itself draws laughter from the audience and yet still makes sense within the camp register of the show as a whole. Such absurdity might in another show risk losing the audience altogether, whose belief in the 'reality' of the world on stage could be jeopardised. But *Priscilla*'s notoriety as a kitsch show, which also ramps up the kitsch through the various drag acts performed as part of the show-within-a-show device, ultimately keeps the audience bought in and invested no matter what is thrown at us. *Priscilla* is meant to be kitsch yet is able to use the show-within-a-show convention to push this to comically overblown levels, while being able to then switch away and continue on with the 'realistic' road trip narrative following the three drag queens across Australia in search of Tick's son.

The role of kitsch in producing a pleasurable experience opens up broader questions of theatrical form and resource. Contemporary theatre is frequently austere, often as a direct result of funding limitations in the subsidised sector, but also because the contemporary aesthetic is dominated by the postdramatic. An example can be found in this thesis – *Snowflakes*, which is highly minimalist, deriving both from its modest budget and from a

story composed of rapid 'cuts' which require the set to be endlessly 'flexible' – subjecting the play to neoliberal logics. Wider examples can be found in contemporary solo performance where actors address the audience directly or sit behind a desk and talk into a microphone, a minimalist, 'lecture' style of performance which has become a genre in its own right.[86] In this regard, contemporary theatre's value proposition hinges on ideas of artistic restraint, rigour and utility while *Priscilla* openly embraces ideas of excess, triviality, and indulgence.

Lavish is also in this respect instructive in opening up discourses of antitheatricality within the industry. Lavish productions are sometimes thought of as, ironically, 'cheap' or vulgar, lacking emotional depth and intellectual sophistication. With regards to musical theatre specifically, Savran argues that the genre 'remains (at best) a guilty pleasure—a little too gay, too popular, too Jewish, and too much damned fun' (216), while modern theatre historians have tended 'to dismiss twentieth-century theatre that lacks an obviously modernist pedigree, aims chiefly to produce pleasure, and remains too scandalously intimate with mass culture' – a dismissal which serves 'to ignore entertainments that have had a far greater and deeper impact on far more people than *Six Characters in Search of an Author*' (213). More than fifteen years on from Savran's article, popular theatre is no longer the unpopular kid of academic scholarship.[87] But while popular theatre is increasingly represented in scholarship, an analysis of a lavish production still enables further opportunities to reflect on discourses of antitheatricality which are built around competing taste publics and snobbery that have created imbalances in theatre historiography.

5.4.1 The Big Night Out

While lavish is in many ways an aesthetic and affective quality produced in, and brought out

[86] This includes work by theatre-makers such as Hannah Nicklin, Daniel Bye, Chris Thorpe, Shôn Dale-Jones, and Kieran Hurley; and other small-scale or studio work from the minimalist tradition such as that of Barrel Organ Theatre, Breach Theatre, Bertrand Lesca, and Nasi Voutsas, Forced Entertainment, Tim Crouch, Sh!t Theatre, and Lucy McCormick (though many of these artists also experiment with convention).

[87] While scholarship engaging with 'popular culture' stretches back much further (see Samuel's 1981 collection, *People's History and Socialist Theory*, published the same year as McGrath's *A Good Night Out*), work to legitimise 'popular performance' more specifically as a valid subject of academic enquiry has expanded in the twenty-first century with the likes of Elizabeth L. Wollman's *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (2006) and Taylor's *British Pantomime Performance* (2007). From 2015, Taylor and Dominic Symonds have been series co-editors of 'Critical Perspectives in Musical Theatre' and 'Palgrave Studies in British Musical Theatre.' In 2016, *The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical* was published, followed by Ainsworth, Double and Peacock's *Popular Performance* in 2017. In the years since, Sierz's *Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre Since the Second World War* (2020); *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (2020); and Stacy Wolf's *Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America* (2020) have all followed.

by, the show itself, a significant part of the pleasure-giving experience in *Priscilla* is the consumption of alcohol. Not only is it an expectation that we can buy alcohol at most theatres today, it is encouraged as it represents a significant revenue opportunity for the venue (and is arguably central to the tradition of the 'big night out' in British culture more broadly). Opportunities for audiences to buy alcohol are built into the show itself – from the enduring use of intervals to singalong sections, which are entertaining in their own right, but also create an opportunity for audiences to slip out of the theatre without spoiling the experience for others. For director Knight:

> The important thing is, in this day and age, people don't want to sit in the theatre for longer than about an hour before they need to get up and have a pee and get a drink. So, you've got to keep it flowing very, very fast, and stop them talking and getting up and going out to the toilet. So, as soon as you can, as soon as one scene is coming to an end, you drop a cloth in and set the scene, so it flows. That's the main priority for me.

Drinking alcohol lubricates sociality – it lowers inhibitions, producing feelings of relaxation, social harmony and togetherness, but at the same time social friction and potentially violence. Jim Drobnick argues that alcohol's potency in this regard 'renders it a paradoxical consciousness-altering agent, capable of creating feelings of cordiality as well as releasing chaotic energies' (27). Drinking can make one feel good before bad; it can make one friendly and articulate before it makes one hostile and incoherent. On one hand, this lowering of inhibitions becomes part of the experience, heightening enjoyment, yet arguably produces an 'artificial' feeling of pleasure, or one which comes from the alcohol rather than the artistic strategies of the performance on stage. On the other hand, the social event is still important: alcohol does not 'trick' audiences into having a good time but is part *of* the good time, which may complicate Sierz's view that '[a]s often as not, the feeling in the auditorium is one of love. Popular entertainment gives audiences a shot of adrenaline – the most traditional and reliable legal high' (1-2). Is the risk that we reduce entertainment to a simple chemical process involving the release of dopamine, serotonin, and adrenaline?

This is not to say that all audiences consume alcohol during a show, nor that alcohol is the sole cause of feelings of communality, rather to highlight the importance that ready access to alcohol plays. For Knight, the biggest change in audience behaviour over the years ultimately comes down to:

> Drink. Because you can take your drink into the audience now. In *Grease*, they had a party. I think I went to see the last night because I was in York and I thought, 'I'm going to go up and see it.' It was like a

> bloody free for all. People standing up with their drinks in their hand. Mid-show, they'd go out and get another drink and bring it back in because you can now take drink into the audience.

Knight's comment raises a fundamental tension between *Priscilla*'s status as a piece of popular entertainment, where drinking and rowdy behaviour are encouraged, and as a piece of 'legitimate theatre,' which audiences are expected to watch in sober, well-behaved receptivity. The idea of a *free for all* is particularly instructive – a performance in which there are no rules, where audiences are disorderly. To be sure, the etiquette of popular performance tends to be far more relaxed than the perceived stuffy world of legitimate theatre. There is no shame in going out for a night of entertainment, drinking alcohol, singing along to familiar songs, blowing off steam – a throwback to its music hall roots where shows were performed outside of established theatres. Such was my experience of *Priscilla*, where audiences became increasingly rowdy throughout the course of the night (especially so on the weekend shows). But while popular entertainment has made increasing inroads into theatre buildings – in part down to the fact that many theatres today are licensed to sell alcohol – Knight's comments indicate that there is still a lingering tension (perhaps an elitism) because the show is being performed in a *theatre* and thus deserves our full attention and solemn respect.[88]

The idea of a free for all also invites a wider discussion of Carnival. For Knight, the idea of a free for all is a negative: a loss of decorum and control. This would seem to highlight the decadent side of lavish in which things get out of hand and audiences go over the top. But a commonly considered utility of carnival is that it creates a 'second world' outside of officialdom, where it is possible to be *free*, to live according to different rules, a utopian antidote to repressive forms of power everywhere and thus harbouring its own power to truly transform social relations (Jackson 224). But this is facilitated by where carnival actually takes place: usually on the streets or in markets i.e., people's venues, away from licensed bourgeois theatre spaces such as that of the Darlington Hippodrome where the type of pleasure we can experience, and our actions while experiencing it, are highly orchestrated and policed by our physical surroundings (and sometimes by the people around us).

[88] These questions relate to contemporary disputes regarding theatre etiquette, reintroduced to mainstream discourse by the 'Theatre Charter' drawn up by Richard Gresham in 2014 – a campaign backed by Stephen Fry to 'improve audience etiquette' (Alberge). But *Priscilla* is a type of show in which we are 'authorised' to be loud. Does this mean there are no rules? And if not, does this make a show like *Priscilla* democratic and unpretentious? In *The Reasonable Audience* (2018), Kirsty Sedgman argues that these issues centre on what is considered 'reasonable' behaviour and who gets to decide, which is often subject to the classed, gendered, and racialised prejudices that white middle-class people bring into a theatre space thought of as 'theirs' (157).

Street performance, on the other hand, dissolves the distinction between participant and observer, actor, and spectator. We are all part of the same spectacle. Mikhail Bakhtin argued that:

> …carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it (qtd. in Jackson 225).

Another value of Carnival is that it often puts ideas of etiquette, rules and, significantly, power, on stage in order to subvert or remake the social order. Bakhtin also describes, for instance, the social and cultural logic of Carnival and its exploitation of the central political contradiction between a ruling group and the people. Whereas in *Priscilla,* the social order is maintained, which is most evident at the end of the show when Tick accepts his paternal responsibilities and Bernadette decides to stay with Bob in Alice Springs. Both characters 'settle down' (into relatively traditional social roles and relationships). Is there actually a *suspension* of the social order in *Priscilla* or a replication of it? How transgressive has this production been? Conversely, in his book *Walter Benjamin Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981), Terry Eagleton argues that Carnival is itself still a licensed or approved form of transgression and therefore offers nothing more than the mirage of change. But the point about *Priscilla* is that it sits uncomfortably between two modes of performance. At times, it appears carnivalesque in its blurring of audience and spectator, lubricated by alcohol, but at other times works to re-establish the divide and assert itself as straight theatre.

This tension is evident in other ways throughout the show. Despite the show's raucous moments of audience participation, *Priscilla* still centres core emotional moments of introspection, where story takes precedence over the songs, such as when Bernadette decides to stay in Alice Springs with Bob, and Tick is reunited with his son. In particular, for these core emotional moments to be effective, they require audiences to pay attention throughout the show and invest emotionally in the narrative, so that the payoffs and resolutions pack a punch. What is more, we are not necessarily encouraged to sing along to *every* song. While on the road to Alice Springs, for instance, the trio's bus breaks down and they arrive at a bar in Broken Hill, an outback mining town, in full drag, and start a bar dance party (singing 'I Love the Nightlife') where audiences join in. But when they return to Priscilla, they discover that the townspeople have spray-painted hateful anti-gay statements on the bus. Tick is upset,

but Adam and Bernadette comfort him (singing 'True Colours'), a poignant moment where audiences do not participate. The upbeat numbers are designed for participation while the downbeat, emotional ballads are left to the cast, a 'rule' which audiences seem to follow.

So, even in a show like *Priscilla* in which we are encouraged to participate, it is perhaps more accurate to say that there are sections of the show where we are 'allowed' to participate – moments when we are cued into action, which direct us as to when and how to behave – and then other sections where we are meant to be emotionally invested and therefore silent. Arguably, then, moments of participation function more as diversions or points of relief, which provides temporary breaks from the tiring 'work' of paying attention to the main story, before re-immersing ourselves within it. Put differently, moments of audience participation represent instances where we come up for air before diving back down, allowing us to move in and out of the world of the story. These breaks serve two purposes: giving audiences a mental break from paying attention for long periods of time while literally creating opportunities for audiences to leave the auditorium to buy a drink.

But it is a tricky balance. Too much audience participation and the audience go away having 'felt' nothing. Too little and the performance might lose the audience completely. In other words, the lavish experience must be constantly dialled up and down. This ties in with what Jo Hand, the show's assistant director, says about emotional investment:

> Where I've seen *Priscilla* go wrong in other productions is that it's just seen as this big gay musical where there's no heart. But actually, *Priscilla* is a story about love and relationships and acceptance, surrounded by a lot of fluff and feathers. But if you don't get the storyline and the heart of those characters right, people go away going, 'It was lovely,' but they don't go away having felt anything. […] I know I'm invested in ours, but I felt I cared about the characters and I wanted Tick to see his son and I wanted Bernadette to find love and I wanted Felicia to be happy. So, I think that's where you have to think at the very beginning when you're directing a show or involved in a show at all about all other aspects, not just let's throw lots of glitter at it and do all of these songs.

Consequently, the lavishness of the production, crucial to the success of the show, is framed here by Hand as a type of showy pretence or disguise, which is not enough on its own. The substance of the show is considered by Hand to be the production of empathy in the minds of audiences, where we root for the characters, which is what ultimately lies beneath the show's glossy surface. For Hand, *Priscilla* must still get key moments of emotional engagement 'right,' which require us to pay attention throughout. For Cound, confirmation of getting it right is most clearly produced in the minds of performers by silence in the audience,

communicating our emotional involvement. We are meant to be as seduced by the 'quality' of the performance – the script, direction, staging and performances all working together to engage us – just as much as the raucous fun of singing along to disco music or drinking alcohol. On the topic of silence, Cound comments on the idea that:

> …if there are certain scenes where there is silence in the audience and they're listening, it means that they're caring, they've got it, they understand that and they're with you absolutely. And it might only be for a split two or three seconds, but you've got them and that's all that matters. And that's when the last six months of pain and wearing high heels has been worth it for those moments of silence. As a performer, I actually prefer moments of silence. Obviously, you love when everyone is standing up and clapping and screaming and shouting because everyone is just having a wonderful time. […] But as a performer, to feel that silence, and you can feel it on stage at certain points, it's knowing that the audience have understood what the hell it is you've been trying to tell them for the last hour and a half.

So, for both Cound and Hand, there remains a hierarchy of value where audience participation is undoubtedly key and enjoyable for both the audience and the performers, but the moments of emotional connection, indicated by silence, are even more important and rewarding. In other words, *Priscilla* is fundamentally viewed by Cound and Hand as a piece of straight theatre trying to 'connect' with (get an audience to empathise and understand), a narrative journey, whose direct connection with an audience is therefore fundamental, which alcohol can facilitate but also jeopardise.

This tension between *Priscilla* as a piece of carnivalesque entertainment and straight theatre is also evident in the kinds of audiences DarlingtonOS sought to attract. For instance, Cound comments that the company took the view that *Priscilla* would appeal to the hen party crowd, demonstrating not only that the company targets specific sections of the pub-going marketing but that *Priscilla* might function as part of a last hurrah for women before settling down into that most conservative of social institutions. *Priscilla*, as a camp musical, functions as a farewell to (nominally heterosexual) singledom. On one hand, then, the actual story or artistic 'message' of the show is of relatively trivial importance – what matters is that sections of the pub-going market can be brought in to spend their money. On the other hand, the story must still appeal to conventional, mainstream attitudes and tastes. Cound's comments also evidence that there is no shame in being upfront about seeking out such parts of the market. As Knight comments, 'It's a small business now, running an amateur theatre company. It has to be approached as a small business. You can't afford to lose money. So, you have to make

certain you get bums on seats.' While the company's intention is to put on a 'good' show, making money is the priority in order to ensure its survival.[89]

Despite DarlingtonOS' upfront attempt to attract sections of the pub-going market, *Priscilla* remains, as Hand and Cound's reflections indicate, a traditional show with strict moral and ideological messages. In particular, the drag trio's performance of 'True Colours' following their discovery of hate speech spray-painted onto the bus is a crucial moment in communicating the show's value system. Broken Hill is an outback mining town, framed as a bigoted and small-minded place where attitudes are regressive and intolerant, hostile towards outsiders or anyone beyond the straight, white, masculine norm. Ironically, this characterisation is set up through a camp musical routine in which a group of locals sing 'Thank God I'm a Country Boy' by John Denver, which frames the idea of the rural as laid-back, simple, and old-fashioned and the urban as lively, sophisticated, and progressive.[90] 'True Colours' expresses the show's valorisation of, again, the idea of looking beneath the surface to the real, authentic individual beneath – promoting ideas of empathy and tolerance.

There is also a potential connection here between Broken Hill and Darlington, an English town off 'the main drag,' which tends to be framed as 'traditional.' *Priscilla*'s representation of Broken Hill satirises the relationship between 'big cities' and 'small towns,' with all the ideological baggage and associations which come with these discursive constructions. While this representation is imported from Australia, it appears to map onto a British context quite straightforwardly. In this sense, *Priscilla* appears openly critical of people who live in small towns, framed as 'backwards.' This might in fact appear offensive to audiences in Darlington who make the connection. But in another sense, DarlingtonOS thinks of its audience as broadly progressive. Hand notes:

> …we did have a couple of audience members who left the show because they felt that it was rude. I did actually have a… 'warm' discussion with one of our Trustees who said about somebody feeling that it was an inappropriate show for DOS to do. I mean, we're talking one in like, 6,000 people. And I said, frankly, I wish you'd allowed me to have that discussion with them because I don't see what is

[89] One limitation of my analysis here is that I do not know who attended *Priscilla*. Evidence of the town's working-class attending *Priscilla* versus the town's middle-class would potentially produce quite different conclusions about the social function of the show, as would evidence of a broad class, race and gender mix. From my own observations of audience make-up on the nights I attended the show, the audience was overwhelmingly white and weighted towards women and couples from young adult to middle age.

[90] The idea that formulations of masculinity are ironically presented as camp appears elsewhere, too, such as in one of Felicia's drag performances dressed alongside members of the ensemble as Spartan warriors with plenty of flesh on display, indicative of the 'butch' persona adopted in the routine.

> inappropriate about telling a story about love […] If you don't want to come and see a story about love because it's not male and female, if that's what you're actually saying, then, actually, personally I don't want you as a member of our audience because, actually, welcome to the real world.

But should the idea that Darlington might be more 'progressive' than its dominant portrayal often suggests come as a surprise? In 1994 when the original film version of *Priscilla* was released, as Anne Le Guellec-Minel notes, drag, queer culture, and camp aesthetics had already been assimilated into the mainstream (10). The story can be thought of as cult but not particularly transgressive – arguably one of the reasons it became popular. With regards to the film, Le Guellec-Minel notes, '[t]he fact that *Priscilla* has been able to please both a mainstream and a 'queer' audience who perceive themselves as marginalised by a dominant gender system begs the question of the particularly ambivalent politics of kitsch and camp in the highly funds-dependent film industry' (1). The stage show then emerged at a time, in 2006, when drag, queer culture, kitsch, and camp aesthetics were even more firmly embedded into the mainstream. At the time of DarlingtonOS' production, the show was already a global success, while drag has become ever more popular and mainstream. Drag is also an increasingly well-studied and legitimised performance mode in its own right.[91]

5.4.2 Camping Up the Status Quo

Hand's quote above does raise the question, however, of the extent to which *Priscilla* is a story about queer liberation and empowerment or a highly generalised tale of love, self-expression, tolerance, acceptance, and empathy, which Le Guellec-Minel suggests risks 'pandering to mainstream tastes and values in order to achieve a sense of shared communality' (11). Hand already expressed her view that *Priscilla* is a much broader show 'about love and relationships and acceptance, surrounded by a lot of fluff and feathers'. This reflects a common view of *Priscilla*, which uses the lives and experiences of three queer characters to promote ideas of empathy, tolerance, and acceptance to an implicitly 'traditional' (heterosexual) audience. Indeed, the show's ending is highly traditional: Tick is reunited with his son and 'becomes' a father, which turns the story into one of his own redemption while at the same time reinforcing a popular narrative in British theatre of the happy family (not necessarily a nuclear family but still one in which characters take up

[91] Evidenced in publications such *as Canadian Theatre Review*'s issue on *Drag!* in Winter 2021 (Crookston and Kuling), as well as Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier's *Contemporary Drag Practices & Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene Volume 1* (2020) and *Drag Histories, Herstories & Hairstories: Drag in a Changing Scene Volume 2* (2021).

traditional social roles).[92] The balance of power is restored and in this moment characters fit back into a (hetero)normative position which is designed to make us feel safe and secure. We might therefore think of *Priscilla* as conventional in its conclusions rather than contemporary and challenging.

Another dimension to this question of *Priscilla*'s conventionalism relates to its gender politics. While in one sense progressively queer in its prioritisation of gay and transgender identities and experiences, *Priscilla*'s representation of women remains in other ways troubling. Men are frequently framed as victims; the drag queens are afforded more agency than other women; and women themselves are presented as masculine in stark contrast to their emasculated 'henpecked' husbands, all of which reinforces the centrality of masculinity in the story.[93] With regards to the character of Bob, a mechanic who fixes Priscilla, whom Bernadette falls in love with, he is initially presented as a 'bloke' in a way which is designed to make us think he will hold dogmatic views. However, we learn that he previously saw Bernadette as a younger performer in the 'Les Girls' drag show in Paris, by which he was entertained and impressed. Hand notes:

> Bob is portrayed as a bloke-ish bloke. You'd expect from the first time that you see Bob on stage living in this outback that he's going to have these views. And I think this is where Bernadette feels a bit uncomfortable that they're suggesting that they do their drag act at this outback water. And Bob is like, 'Oh, yeah, I saw *Les Girls* back in the day. Yeah, they were really great.' So, interesting that generally as a public we judge Bob as much as everyone else because we think he's going to have fixed views, but actually, he didn't. So, it's not judging the book by the cover again.

Yet arguably in this regard, as Le Guellec-Minel notes with regards to the original film version, *Priscilla* 'does, to a certain extent, appear reassuringly conventional for the mainstream viewer since it suggests that 'mateship', that most essential of Australian democratic values, is possible even between queer and straight men as long as it takes place

[92] The representation of drag in *Priscilla* is therefore arguably a secondary concern which, as Edward and Farrier argue, is often the case with the representation of drag in more traditional straight theatre, which 'mostly shows only the representation of drag in service of a larger narrative (some recent examples include *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, the Musical*, and *Kinky Boots*). Frequently, the structure of works that represent drag serves to romanticize the form. The narrative often positions the drag performer as a function in a tale of redemption (of straight people in the case of Kinky Boots)' (Edward and Farrier 6-7).

[93] Le Guellec-Minel notes that in this regard, '*Priscilla* shows, rather conventionally, how the main characters' quirky journey towards empowerment makes it necessary that strong, gender-bending women should be put in their places' (10). 'In so doing,' Le Guellec-Minel goes on to argue, 'the film makes, as Philip Butters writes about *Strictly Ballroom*, "a range of concessions to an only slightly different form of hegemonic masculinity." Diana Sandars argues, however, that *Priscilla* is merely balancing "drag's liberation from hegemonic sex and gender roles with the self-loathing, homophobic and misogynist elements that form the dark side of drag culture".' (10).

far from the oppressive domesticity of the home, in a pub or by a camp fire, locations women can be marginalized or excluded from' (16). Perhaps also, then, one of the reasons this specifically Australian musical has found global success is that its appeal to conventional masculinity lines up with a hegemonic form of masculinity that is portable and shared among numerous nations, particularly in the western and Anglophone world. Le Guellec-Minel considers 'whether the subversion of hegemonic masculinity the film undertakes really opens out onto a world of greater inclusiveness and tolerance, or whether, as critics like Susan Sontag have suggested, camp merely depoliticizes the struggle against marginalisation by foregrounding artistic self-expression and the performance of quirky individualism' (12). This arguably also indicates the small-c conservatism of the mainstream itself in which 'blokey' men are authorised to engage in non-heterosexual relationships without jeopardising their masculinity.

This opens up a conversation regarding the extent to which *Priscilla* is something titillating and outrageous (but also comforting) for the mainstream viewer. Is *Priscilla* meant to provide mainstream audiences with the opportunity to consume queer performance and culture – or to openly laugh at characters which Bernadette sarcastically refers to as 'a cock in a frock?' I felt particularly uncomfortable at what exactly audiences were laughing at on occasion, although it is impossible to know what audiences were thinking or feeling in the moment. For instance, during one of Felicia's drag performances in which she performs a version of 'What's Love Got To Do With It?' which involves a number of pelvic thrusts towards the audience, a couple next to me were laughing but also shaking their heads in disbelief, perhaps simply at the deliberate suggestiveness and silliness of the routine, and yet in a way which also seemed to indicate a sense of embarrassment, as if the performance was making them uncomfortable. In this regard, *Priscilla* is not merely lavish in the sense of harmless fun but arguably built on the objectification of the queer other.

An even greater moment in which I felt uncomfortable was during *Priscilla*'s portrayal of the character of Cynthia, a Filipina mail-order bride who is married to Bob. Not only does Bob explain why he married Cynthia to a group of aghast white men to satisfy their fascination with the exoticised Cynthia, the character of Cynthia herself is played by a white woman, Lisa-Marie Watson, who performs in a highly exaggerated Filipina accent. Perhaps most troubling of all is a scene in which Cynthia performs her infamous 'popping' routine set to the song 'Pop Muzik,' in which she gyrates at various points around the stage, popping ping-pong balls from between her legs to an onlooking crowd of men. This draws some of the

biggest laughs of the night from the audience, yet this instance of light-hearted comic relief is quite clearly tied up in a form of racialised othering.

Much has been written about the problematic Orientalist logic which underpins Cynthia's portrayal, and which goes into reaffirming the white hegemonic masculinity of Australian identity (Laforteza). Because of the documented problems, should such a racist portrayal therefore still remain in contemporary productions of *Priscilla*? Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson suggest 'the fact that the UK's National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA) had to release a fact sheet as late as 2013 explaining the cultural politics and unease around 'blacking up' following a number of disputes between amateur companies and local authorities, is indicative of a deep malaise around the issue' (11). It seems that a similar issue is at play in *Priscilla* where our collective entertainment is produced through a shared sense of whiteness, which consumes the figure of the 'Oriental Woman' as a sexualised spectacle. Not only does this raise concerns regarding what audiences are meant to find entertaining, the production also highlights a potential problem with staging 'faithful' adaptations, which can serve to uncritically reproduce racist logics.

This question of consuming otherness for our own entertainment value underlines a well-established anxiety regarding *Priscilla,* which follows on from Le Guellec-Minel's critique of the film. Kelly Farrell expresses concern regarding 'the ease with which heterosexuality can co-opt queer [citing *Priscilla* as an example] and contain it within the broader concerns of the maintenance of national identity' (158) and alleges *Priscilla* 'turn[s] queer into mainstream cultural capital' (161). This opens up recurrent questions about the consumption of cult/fringe products by popular/mainstream markets. In 'going mainstream,' does drag enrich and expand the horizons of the mainstream, enabling the art-form to reach more people and thus gain greater legitimacy in culture? Or does 'going mainstream' describe assimilation *into* the mainstream, rather than the transformation of the mainstream, and as such a process in which queerness is 'normalised,' which is to say commodified and robbed of its political agency? If so, should the objective therefore always be the inverse: to queer what we think of as normal rather than to normalise queerness?

This may describe something of a perpetual dilemma in theatre. Advocates of contemporary performance might want 'good' shows (in terms of their craft and desire to question dominant structures or ways of thinking) to go mainstream because they will enrich the mainstream, thus remaking what we might consider mainstream. But as things stand, going mainstream

often means becoming assimilated into or normalised by the mainstream (where the work has only found mainstream success to begin with because it appeals to dominant groups). This presents a difficult paradox: how can something which seeks to remake the mainstream break into the mainstream? How can something challenge that to which it seeks entry? There has to be an act of authorisation, which 'allows' the show entry, yet in gaining permission, it becomes entirely rule-following. The show which intended to be 'disruptive' (itself a nebulous term which brands have adopted) has become compliant; that which was unruly has become well-behaved; that which was inconvenient has become tolerable.[94] These issues reveal the extent to which *Priscilla* is far from just a lavish production in which audiences blow off steam; the show raises uncomfortable questions about what audiences are actually meant to find entertaining and the horizons of the mainstream more broadly.

Another dimension to this discussion of *Priscilla* as a show which appeals to and preserves mainstream attitudes is the idea that *Priscilla* is a 'universal' story about love. In his review of the original film in 1994, Roger Ebert argued that 'the real subject of the movie is not homosexuality, not drag queens, not showbiz, but simply the life of a middle-aged person trapped in a job that has become tiresome' (Ebert) in reference to the ageing Bernadette. A double dynamic is at play here where, on one hand, *Priscilla* is framed as an uncomplicated story ('simply' about the life of a middle-aged person), and on the other hand, 'more than' a drag story, which relegates drag. Focusing on the relationship between Bernadette and Bob once more, Hand explains her view that:

> I think that's where everybody really warmed to Bob because, with Bob, you hope there are Bobs in the world. For everybody who was worried about being judged for themselves, everybody wants a Bob, because Bob was just like, 'I don't care. I'm looking beyond. And I'm looking for what's within.' As I say, in terms of *Priscilla*, that was dealt with through the lens of sexuality. It's probably why something like *Greatest Showman* resonates now, it's like that, 'This is me.' People being able to accept people for who they are. I think that's where *Priscilla* has that message that runs through it. It could be anything – gender, disability, anything – that people can look beyond the package and actually just look at the heart. And I think that's what's so lovely.

[94] But does this merely reproduce a historical binary between the mainstream and the avant-garde? Some critics have argued that the binary is already dead, as the avant-garde capitulated to the commodity in the 1990s after three decades of repeated injury (Foster). Does this therefore compromise all binaries between avant-garde and rearguard, art and commerce, lowbrow and highbrow, which have collapsed into one another? Is there now only a spectrum of *commercial* theatre, rather than a spectrum of theatre, which is not to say that all performance is the same, but that there is no longer a genuine avant-garde?

Again, *Priscilla*'s value is seen to flow from its broader promotion of acceptance, of looking beyond particular markers of identity and at the 'real' authentic self which lies underneath. But this broader theme which is often cited as evidence of *Priscilla*'s universality and thus its value must at the same time sit alongside a more specific sense of responsibility to queer representation. Hand also notes:

> …you [would] think we live in a society that people should not be bothered if it's man, woman, transgender. But you know, actually, not played right, that any of those situations can… Again, you feel like you have a responsibility to the LGBTQ community to tell their story correctly. […] Darlington has quite a big gay community who came into it. And I think that story really resonated with them particularly. I think the story can resonate with anyone because it's a story about love and it's a story about acceptance, and that goes beyond sexuality, it's about life generally.

Priscilla is therefore seen to meet these varying, and potentially competing, needs of responsibility and representation. *Priscilla* is about promoting a sense of empowerment through self-expression and individual agency, which is articulated less as a product of socio-political influences and more as the idea of the 'authentic' self (a pervasive concept in contemporary culture, subject to scrutiny elsewhere in this thesis); promoting tolerance and acceptance directly to 'mainstream' (white heterosexual) audiences; and yet at the same time holding these notions of universalism in partnership with the idea of responsibility to the local LGBTQ+ community within Darlington.

Priscilla therefore holds together a difficult duality of feel-good comfort viewing for mainstream audiences and a story of queer self-empowerment in a way which appears awkward and even self-contradictory. With regards to the original 1994 film, Le Guellec-Minel notes that the film has 'earned a place in the midnight-movie category with its focus on homosexuality, its strong language and risqué jokes and, at the same time, [has] become the ultimate 'feel-good' film that programmers in fifty-six countries throughout the world chose after 9/11, in replacement of *Die Hard* type of features' (1). *Priscilla* was seen as vital comfort viewing in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, capable of serving numerous social, cultural, and political functions: to entertain and provide pleasure, to soothe tensions and anxieties, to perform and construct a vision of social harmony, and, importantly, something that was able to do all of these things across borders, a 'universal' story pitched at a 'global' level. Drag to the rescue.

5.4.3 Going Out with a Bang

But this idea of global, shared communality also risks flattening difference. The diversity of

audience experience is swept up in a grand narrative of how 'everybody' enjoyed themselves equally and we all come away feeling happy and more 'together' (feelings which take priority over feeling represented, challenged or empowered). This is a fundamental function of popular theatre: to produce an individual sense of happiness which adds up to a feeling of collective joy. In particular, what is often deemed most memorable about a show is how we are left feeling at the end, exiting the venue humming the music or buoyed by a thrilling finale. Knight comments, for instance, that:

> You can do the most amazing things in Act One, but the last thing [the audience] remember is the bows and the play-out music. So, it's got to have something that finishes with a bang. You can work your arse off during Act One and beginning of Act Two, making everything absolutely amazing, but they'll go out saying, 'Oh, I loved that last bit, especially when the glitter canon went off.' Their attention span isn't that long, so that's what you have to leave them with. And leave them wanting more.

Indeed, *Priscilla* ends with a literal flourish – a glitter canon (see *Fig. 9* below) – which rains down confetti on the stage. Glitter itself – its shiny surface, which sparkles and dazzles, also fragments what we see, which seems to characterise the hollowness of ending with a bang. Whatever came before, whatever 'journey' we went through, is exploded, broken up into a thousand pieces and left strewn across the stage. What is more, glitter creates literal mess. We have had our fun, had our fill of pleasure, and now we get to leave the theatre free of any responsibility, having created a mess that someone else will clean up. How might this be different to, say, *Slava's Snowshow* (which premiered in Moscow, 1993 and has been performed and revived many times in the West since), which culminates in the show's infamous snowstorm, a hurricane of confetti which blows out over the audience? Arguably, a show of this kind gets away with creating mess because it is considered a justified artistic decision i.e., the final thrill or flourish is considered intellectually meaningful. Whereas in *Priscilla*, there is 'less' artistic justification for the glitter cannon: it is pure frivolity.

Figure 9: Priscilla*'s glittery finale. Courtesy of Darlington Operatic Society 2018.*

The use of glitter – and indeed the extravagant set as a whole – also raises broader questions in the context of climate change and global wealth inequalities between North and South. Should we (the UK, but the Global North collectively) be cutting back on our lavish lifestyles, consuming less, thus manufacturing and importing less, and therefore generating fewer carbon emissions? Is it 'right' in this context of global emergency for a wealthy nation, albeit one with its own serious economic inequalities evidenced in Darlington, to produce lavish experiences, lead profligate lives, and spend a lot of money putting on resource-heavy shows? The matter of lavish theatre is in this regard a question of environmental responsibility and climate justice as much as it is an aesthetic matter relating to audience experience and theatrical form. But these questions cannot be separated from a class analysis. What does 'we' as a 'nation' mean? Is it more accurate to say that our biggest manufacturers and private companies, alongside wealthy individuals, are the ones who ought to be cutting back, rather than the working-class whose social safety net and other forms of economic support have already been cut to the bone? *Priscilla* hardly seems decadent in comparison to the hoarding and centralisation of wealth at a global level, yet it still raises questions of responsibility.

Knight's comment that 'you have to leave' audiences with a final flourish also curiously frames the glitter canon as unavoidable and implicit, as if whoever is putting on a production of *Priscilla* has no choice but to end with a glitter cannon. Is this because Knight is worried that all the work that has come before will be forgotten, that he may have put on a 'bad' show, which the glitter cannon will rescue in a final moment of desperate panic? Knight talks here as if there simply *must* be a glitter canon. Not only does this represent something of a negative view of audiences (that they have short attention spans and slavishly seek the final flourish), it also limits the imagination of theatre overall. Every show must seemingly follow this custom i.e., again, maintain convention.

The final point to make about the finale relates to Knight's comment regarding leaving the audience 'wanting more.' Of course, this is a standard cliché which endures in the theatre industry, designed to get audiences to return for the next show (in fact this is facilitated by the next show going on sale as the current show is being performed, so that audiences, in their state of ecstasy, will book for the next show). But the idea of leaving audiences wanting more is also about making us *addicted*. We have been given a taste, but the point is to get us hooked. The drug metaphor is used by Sierz too to describe the idea that '[p]opular entertainment gives audiences a shot of adrenaline – the most traditional and reliable legal high' (Sierz 1-2). While this does seem true in the sense of the actual chemical reaction which takes place in our bodies, is it also an unhealthy way of thinking about theatre? Returning to the idea of ready access to alcohol, what is it we are actually getting addicted to? Fully embracing the term lavish might in this sense risk glossing over these matters.

There is also something of an artificiality to the show's finale. The bows at the end practically form a section of the show in its own right, including two curtain calls, where the cast continue to sing a medley of popular disco tunes as they receive their applause and audiences whoop and cheer. By the end, everyone is on their feet as cast and audience party together, which indeed produces a feeling of communality and joy. In effect, the jukebox musical – and indeed musical theatre in general – essentially orchestrates a standing ovation every night because audiences are on their feet to join in with the celebrations. This enables companies to frame their shows as successful no matter what because, purely as a spectacle, the audience are (already) on their feet. *Priscilla* is thus considered valuable not only because it tells a universal story but because it offers an ostensibly universal experience, where we all leave the theatre feeling the same thing. Yet there is also a form of social pressure and coercion to this collective feeling, as the risk is that anyone who does not leave the theatre

feeling happy is perceived as a killjoy, in the same way that there is a strong degree of social pressure in all forms of audience participation.

5.5 Conclusion

While DarlingtonOS uses the term lavish in a positive way to evoke ideas of comfort and luxury, the politics of these experiences, and the variety of conditions on which they are based, demonstrate the intensely fraught nature of the term. We might read the idea of a financially resourceful amateur theatre company in Darlington as a story of inspiration and hope: not only has this theatre company survived throughout difficult economic circumstances, but it appears to be thriving. In staging *Priscilla*, DarlingtonOS provides an opportunity for audiences to experience pleasure and joy, offering a brief escape from the grinding reality of economic hardship, austerity and precarity. In *Priscilla*, we can be spoiled by the comfort of the theatregoing experience; consume alcohol; sing along to popular songs; all of which enable audiences to blow off steam and 'escape' the quotidian.

Yet, this lavish production also performs ideas of excess and waste which cannot mask the realities of economic inequality and environmental responsibility. In this regard, there is no escape. Factors such as ticket prices and the site of performance still dictate the type of pleasure we can experience (and who gets to experience it). We are also still required to invest in a story, one which cannot park its inherent ideological positions and messages, just as we cannot leave our own ideas, values, or beliefs at the door. There is no such thing as a free-floating, 'apolitical' story just as there can be no suspension of the various beliefs and values we take into the theatre with us. While the lavish experience is one in which audiences can cut loose, it is at the same time one which remains bound to the material conditions of its production and the political ideas to which we are seduced.

In particular, our lavish experience is largely produced by feeling reassured by the existing social order. The feel-good experience hinges at times on the reproduction of troubling cultural logics and representations as much as it does the ability for audiences to feel relaxed and free. For instance, audiences are encouraged to derive a sense of entertainment from the representation of the queer other and the figure of the Oriental Woman, which rehearses a cultural hierarchy which places the white, heterosexual, 'mainstream' viewer at the top, whose lavish experience is in part produced by consuming multiple forms of otherness. As such, *Priscilla* plays a part in regulating the social order. We are able to briefly escape the

quotidian in order to blow off steam, but doing so also replenishes our energy levels and, to quote Sierz, gives audiences 'a shot of adrenaline' (1).

Observing a lavish theatre production also raises questions regarding the future of contemporary theatre and performance. Is our future, especially post-Covid or perhaps *with* Covid, one in which 'megamusicals' dominate the market even more; in which smaller-scale work becomes harder to make as resource shrinks or becomes more concentrated; in which we have less choice as consumers; or perhaps more gloomily in which the kinds of experimental, fringe or avant-garde work vanish? These questions echo the concerns of Elizabeth LeCompte of The Wooster Group who notes:

> I see young people who could make it in the theatre, but it's so much more important now to have money than it was when we were coming up, when it was fine to be poor. It's not any more. It's a shame thing for people now if they're not making money. That's not necessarily a bad thing. It's just the way it is. I was lucky to come up when money was not the most important thing.
>
> It's the kind of thing that so many Black artists had to deal with. You see what Black painters were doing during that time on nothing: they were able to keep going and make beautiful work. It's just that the theatre needs a lot of people. There'll be a lot more art, but it won't be this kind of theatre, it won't be [an] experimental art form. There'll be plenty of big shows, musicals, all that kind of thing. (qtd. in LeCompte, Shevtsova, and Valk 221).

LeCompte's prophesies tie in with wider concerns that theatre, and the arts more broadly, particularly in Britain, are becoming increasingly the preserve of the wealthy – activities of the leisure class – which not only shrinks our national cultural life and makes it less democratic, but which arguably signals a 'return' to a nineteenth century mode of social stratification. Lavish productions such as *Priscilla* – which spend big, prioritise comfort based on who can afford to pay for it, and which offer a temporary escape but in a way which reinforces the status quo – might signal what is on the horizon for audiences in the future.

Chapter 6. The People's Theatre and Shoe Tree Arts Association: *HEATON!*

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present a performance analysis of *HEATON!* – a co-production between the People's Theatre, an amateur repertory theatre based in Heaton (a suburb of Newcastle upon Tyne) and Shoe Tree Arts Association, a local community arts group. *HEATON!* can be considered something of a historical epic. On one hand, it celebrates a specific history of social reform and innovation in Heaton, which centres on the lives of a handful of 'pioneers' associated with the suburb between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries – including Charles Parsons, George Stanley, Ove Arup, Colin Veitch, and Florence Harrison Bell. On the other hand, it celebrates Heaton as a place, presenting an image of the suburb as innovative, progressive, and with a strong sense of community togetherness. The play is written by Peter Dillon, a local resident of Heaton and co-founder of Shoe Tree Arts Association, and directed by Chris Heckels, a People's Theatre member since 1970. It was performed by the People's Theatre ensemble over five nights in July 2018, accompanied by the Heaton Band, Heaton Voices Choir, and a chorus of supporting roles.

The play is told in flashback through the eyes of Freddie and Catherine – a fictional working-class couple in the present-day who take up a variety of alternative classed positions. Freddie, for instance, plays Charles Parsons' apprentice, while Catherine doubles as a militant suffragist and munitions worker. There is no narrative as such – the pair jump around in time between the mid-1800s and mid-1900s, leading us on a guided tour through histories of engineering, suffrage, football, architecture, and the arts. We are aided by George Stanley, who doubles as the master of ceremonies, as the play leaps from time to time, incorporating a local band and a community choir who appear from the audience. Charlie Hardwick – a North East-born actor famous for her television roles in *Byker Grove* and *Emmerdale* and theatre roles in *Cooking with Elvis* (2001, Whitehall Theatre), *Clear White Light* (2018, Live Theatre), and *The Last Ship* (2018, Northern Stage) – appears on-screen in a recorded musical number. The scale and pace of the production is quite staggering.

During an interview I carried out with Dillon at his home in Heaton in July 2018, he described the play as 'the official history of Heaton' (Dillon).[95] Below, I consider what it might mean to make this claim for *HEATON!*, and what this surprising gambit has to tell us about the position of amateur theatre in the UK's theatre-making ecology and how North East England represents its own histories. On one hand, I argue that *HEATON!*'s status as an official history can be said to reflect its reproduction of Geordierama's tropes – namely, romanticisation of the working-class; nostalgia for past triumphs; and the wider valorisation of the North East as a pioneering and industrious region, which aims to 'celebrate' life in the region. In this respect, *HEATON!* upholds the regional master narrative (or official history). Yet, I also experienced a production which displayed numerous anxieties regarding representation, regional nostalgia, social harmony, and class. As such, *HEATON!* engages critically with the regional master narrative and, in particular, legacies of the North East's socialist history, in ways which go beyond simple nostalgia and celebration of the suburb.

In researching *HEATON!*, I was expecting to find evidence of what Patricia Holland calls 'other histories to be written, embedded in the old, interpreting, reconstructing, making sense of events in less dominant ways' (14). Instead, I found a complex mix of dominant and non-dominant history. During my interview with Dillon, he acknowledged that 'there is another show to write about Heaton which kind of undermines this: the unofficial history, the ne'er-do-well history, the much more scruffy – Bohemian, possibly – you know, different feel of Heaton' (Dillon). In contrast to a 'scruffy' and 'Bohemian' history – the kind of which sits outside of what Holland calls the 'authority of legitimised knowledge' (14) – sits *HEATON!*: explicitly framed by Dillon as the respectable side of Heaton. While this is in part achieved by concentrating on the lives of Heaton's professional middle-class (reconstructing history from 'their' perspective), the play also engages with conceptions of unofficial history. As such, I consider how the labels 'official' and 'unofficial' operate as rhetorical, discursive constructions, used to authorise particular statements, evidence, and sources.

I open up this discussion across four sections. In section 6.1, I consider what it might mean to call an artwork official, drawing on the work of Cochrane, Robinson, and John Murphy. I also situate *HEATON!* in a national context in which official history is subject to widespread

[95] Dillon wrote *HEATON!* to coincide with the Great Exhibition of the North – a ten-week showcase of the North of England's cultural and industrial heritage hosted across Newcastle and Gateshead between June and September 2018. Dillon recalls that 'in January 2017, I suddenly thought, wait a minute, why don't we do a show about Heaton, which combines with the Great Exhibition of the North in its investigation of engineering, social reform, different kinds of engineering? Because that all happens in Heaton' (Dillon).

re-evaluation. In section 6.2, I consider the extent to which the People's Theatre might be understood as official, drawing on the work of Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson. In section 6.3, I present my performance analysis, which considers how the official and unofficial work with and against each other. In section 6.4, I offer conclusions on the ways in which *HEATON!*'s straddling of the official and unofficial reveals the complexities of how the North East represents its own histories.

6.2 Defining Official Artworks

The word official refers to anything which is what John Fiske in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* calls 'socially and institutionally legitimated' (31). We might think that an artwork is in effect sanctioned, legitimised, and made official when it receives material support from cultural institutions and/or political bodies. But it would be inaccurate to call, for instance, Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* – a 13-metre-high sculpture inspired by the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace, commemorating the victims of British slavery displayed at the Tate Modern in 2019 – 'official' just because it received the necessary backing and approvals. Curator Clara Kim, who commissioned Walker, expressed her hope that the artwork would encourage people to 'go back out into the city to look at where these monuments come from and the official accounts of our histories' (qtd. in Bakare). Such artworks might receive authorisation, but still seek to challenge 'official accounts of our histories' i.e., dominant narratives of the past typically promoted by the state.

In the context of these conditions, the label 'official' refers most accurately to artworks which are deemed to uphold or reinforce the status quo. In this sense, we could say that something is only truly official when it represents, perhaps more controversially 'celebrates,' and is in turn accepted by powerful or dominant groups. This notion of 'celebration' lies at the heart of anxieties and uneasiness regarding official artworks. Some critics have claimed that they rehearse nostalgic fictions and nebulous traditional values. Rodney Lowe, for instance, calls official history 'mere propaganda – "official but not history" in Basil Liddell Hart's tart phrase' (Lowe), while David F. Trask describes official history as 'doctored history intended to justify a given version of events acceptable to those in power' (47). If we follow this interpretation of the term, then artworks which are labelled 'official' are likely to reinforce the status quo and/or the authoritative position of dominant groups, which necessarily involves excluding or devaluing subaltern groups.

Some historians contend that interference or vetting by federal offices has undermined official history to the point that it is no longer credible. Writing in 1994, Murphy posed the question, 'is it any longer possible, at the end of the twentieth century, to write official history?' (119). Murphy refers to one of seven volumes on Australia's military involvements in Southeast Asia, which 'diplomatically skirts the controversies that characterised the Vietnam war' and which is 'peopled by commanders and medal-winners, mobilising the culture and concerns of a professional army perspective' (119). 'Both,' suggests Murphy, 'may represent the exhaustion of the mode of official history writing, and its displacement by more specialised sub-disciplines of historical discourse' (119). In other words, official history's widespread avoidance of what might be called uncomfortable evidence, alongside its reconstruction of the past purely from the perspective of those in positions of power and authority, has irreparably damaged its professional integrity.

Dillon's framing of *HEATON!* as an official history appears at odds with a contemporary theatre landscape heavily populated by productions which seek to challenge dominant narratives of the past. *HEATON!* shared the 2018 calendar with a number of professional theatre productions which could be considered counter-histories: Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's *Emilia*, an all-women play which reclaims the life of Elizabethan poet Emilia Bassano Lanier; Stephen Daldry's production of Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance*, which traces the stories of generations of gay men in New York; Jeanie O'Hare's *Queen Margaret*, which centres Shakespeare's rarely discussed Margaret of Anjou; Breach Theatre's *It's True, It's True, It's True*, which dramatises the trial of Agostino Tassi for the rape of baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi; Blood of the Young's *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of)*, an all-female adaptation of Jane Austen's literary classic; and the National Theatre's celebrated *Pericles*, a musical Shakespeare adaptation by Chris Bush, which included a community chorus of 200 amateur actors, dancers, and musicians. These productions indicate interest in alternative history.

Engagement with this issue is also ongoing. In the years since *HEATON!* was staged, the question of how we represent the past, and engage with what (or who) has been marginalised within or left out of history, has become an intensely political matter. In September 2020, the National Trust published a report on links between 93 of its historic places, colonialism, and slavery, which the Trust argues 'is part of a broader commitment to ensuring links to colonialism and historic slavery are properly represented, shared and interpreted' (National Trust). The same month, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Oliver

Dowden, sent a published letter to a number of DCMS Arm's Length Bodies following the toppling of the Statue of Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020. The letter included an implication that government funding may be withheld if heritage institutions do not comply (Dowden 2). Such developments point to the widespread re-evaluation of (and direct action taken against) official history in culture as well as to the political backlash.

The cultural shift towards reclaiming marginalised or underrepresented histories is mirrored in theatre historiography's ethical turn. Cochrane and Robinson's edited collection, *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, brings together scholars to reflect on, for example, questions relating to rewriting master narratives, retracing 'other' histories, and thinking through the ethics of evidence. Much of this scholarship centres on questions of perspective, responsibility, and response-ability, asking what it means to respond to history, and what it means to be historically responsible. Cochrane and Robinson note that the academic field is something of a latecomer to this ethical turn, 'which began to gather momentum in the humanities in the late 1980s' (3), but that theatre is an 'ideal site for ethical study' because it is 'an inherently social art form' (3). These developments in theatre historiography and wider culture signal a clear direction of travel: exploring historians' own sense of ethical responsibility to attend to what (or who) is hidden, obscured, or disappeared, or is otherwise at risk of becoming lost.

Challenges to official history can be also observed in academia in moves toward greater horizontalism, which seeks to break down power hierarchies. Such developments are engendered in terms of shared ownership: the 'co' of co-creation, co-curation, and co-authorship; knowledge exchange; thinking-with; do-it-together (as opposed to do-it-yourself). Recent pioneering work by Robinson and Carletti on the topic of 'citizen scholars' (2019), for instance, was designed to enable Nottingham Theatre Royal to preserve and manage its own archives and histories by building a research community of experts and non-experts. Such projects facilitate public participation in scientific and humanities research while at the same time unlocking the academy by offering training, such as sharing best practice regarding archiving, and opening up universities' own repositories of knowledge. They reflect a conviction that history is for everyone to participate in and arbitrate, not simply professional scholars, while demystifying the discipline by providing access to skills, training, and other resources, thereby breaking down the divide between official/unofficial.

This work is taking place within a wider context of cultural developments and research projects which are also seeking to assist in loosening the official's hegemony and monopoly of ideas, resources, vocabulary, attention, institutions, and narratives. Growing efforts to decolonise academic fields, professional industries, and cultural institutions are reflected in a major body of decolonial scholarship covering areas such as reparations and colonial atonement; the Eurocentricity of curricula; caste prejudice within institutions; and intersecting campaigns for social justice and economic equality (see Buettner 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2018; and Hilmy 2020). When read in connection with the prevalence of specialist historical sub-disciplines and fields such as Black history, feminist history, queer history, working-class history, and indigenous history, it is apparent that existing dominant narratives are increasingly contested across the board.

6.3 An Official People's Theatre?

Any understanding of what it might mean to label *HEATON!* 'official' must engage with the venue's history. The People's started life as the Clarion Dramatic Society in 1911, set up to raise funds for the British Socialist Party and spread the word of socialism (Veitch 14). The company was first situated on Leazes Park Road in the centre of Newcastle, before relocating to the Royal Arcade in 1915, and then to Rye Hill on the outskirts of the city centre in 1929. In his invaluable account of the Society's early years, co-founder Norman Veitch (whose brother Colin – a former Newcastle United footballer – is represented in *HEATON!*) notes that the company decided to formally drop the Clarion Dramatic Society and adopt the People's Theatre moniker in 1929 because the name had fallen into common usage and it 'sounded better' (i.e., not necessarily because it reflected the theatre's socialist mission, by which time it had largely abandoned (Veitch 106)). The company then bought a former cinema in the heart of Heaton, which it converted and moved into in 1962, where it has been based ever since.

In its self-published *People's Theatre Arts Group*, the company argues that 'it has always been the policy of the People's to try to present plays of high quality to a discerning audience. Plays are not selected because of popular 'box-office' appeal' (4). The company would endeavour to perform:

> one time-honoured classic (a Shakespeare, for instance), one modern classic (such as Shaw or O'Casey) and two contemporary plays. The selection of contemporary plays is never easy. With new plays there is not the time to await posterity's verdict on their artistic worth (People's Theatre Arts Group 4).

From this, we might discern the People's Theatre's typical criteria of value in which the company looks favourably upon the classics and with a degree of scepticism toward contemporary plays. The People's audience is also framed as 'discerning' – intellectual, well-read, who in another sense might be called *connoisseurs* who expect not only to see classic plays being staged but also that they be of a high standard. The People's has therefore long-since thought of itself as official – an authority figure within the region when it comes to knowledge and performance of European drama.[96]

One of the surprising things about Dillon's description of *HEATON!* as an official history is that it is an amateur theatre production, which has tended to be framed as unofficial in relation to professional theatre (namely due to amateur theatre's historical marginalisation in scholarship). However, amateur theatre is increasingly represented in theatre studies scholarship, which therefore brings the amateur into the realm of the official. Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson's *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018); Landreth's *Break a Leg: A Memoir, Manifesto and Celebration of Amateur Theatre* (2020); Coveney's *Questors, Jesters and Renegades: The Story of Britain's Amateur Theatre* (2020); and Coates' 'Mapping London's Amateur Theatre Histories' chapter in Cochrane and Robinson's *Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* (2019) reflect greater scholarly engagement with this mode of theatre.[97]

Increasing attention to amateur theatre can be seen as part of a wider academic focus on everyday forms of culture and creativity. Cochrane and Robinson make the link between increasing academic interest in popular theatre – including amateur work – and a desire to challenge underlying assumptions of cultural value:

> Indeed the recent growth of studies of popular, mass pleasure-giving theatre such as commercial theatre, variety theatre and pantomime and amateur theatre is undoubtedly the result of academic historians recognising and questioning their own criteria of value: not least because in the attempt to construct a

[96] In this sense, the People's Theatre ties in with what Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson call an 'idea of the amateur [as] a space of cultivation and taste, pitted against commercial or mass entertainment' (7).

[97] Coveney refers to the People's as 'still one of our leading amateur companies' (53). He also notes that '[i]n addition to Shaw, John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett and J. M. Synge, the People's authors over their first ten years [from 1911-1921] included Ibsen, Chekhov, Hauptmann, as well as Molière and Shakespeare. The place embodied the intellectual idealism of the already vociferous campaign to found a National Theatre (54) […] This is, and always has been, no ordinary theatre. Thornton Wilder, American author of *Our Town*, said of it: 'I was deeply moved by the fact that over so many years the People's Theatre presented so many notable plays of the world. It is like having a living library in the town.'' (56).

> fuller, more equitable representation of the past, something arguably much more fundamental is being tested in disciplinary practice (8).

Increased academic attention to the People's Theatre therefore contributes to the making-official of the company in terms of its recognition in British theatre history. Existing 'insider' books on the theatre's history include those of co-founder Veitch (brother of Colin Veitch, both of whom are represented in *HEATON!*), whose book *The People's* (1950) offers an account of the company's early days as the Clarion Dramatic Society; the company's self-published history, the *People's Theatre Arts Group* (1963); and Goulding's *The Story of the People's* (1991). 'Outsider' books have since added to knowledge, including Milling's work on the People's (34-36) and Coveney's chapter (2020) on the People's mentioned above. The People's Theatre is therefore well-known and highly regarded in the history of the amateur theatre movement in Britain.

During the 2010s, the People's Theatre has also been made official in that it has been formally recognised as a member of Newcastle's cultural ecology (and therefore legitimised). In 2012, an exhibition held at Newcastle's Discovery Museum showcased the histories of Newcastle's Theatre Royal and four other Newcastle-based theatres: the Tyne Theatre, Live Theatre, Northern Stage, and, notably, the People's Theatre. This attracted comment at the time. Arts journalist Whetstone observed that 'by including the People's Theatre the exhibition also acknowledges the contribution of amateur drama companies.' As such, the People's Theatre was deemed equally worthy of recognition and commemoration – enshrined in official history.

HEATON!'s director, Chris Heckels (a member of the People's Theatre since 1970, who also sits on the Company's production and management committees) notes that following this exhibition, the 'Arts Council started coming and seeing shows and talking about us. Plus, they acknowledge, I think, that this place changes people's lives for the better, not just in terms of the number of people who go from here into professional theatre, which happens quite a lot […] but in terms of the social, emotional, psychological benefits of being involved in this place.' This idea of the People's Theatre as not only a grassroots pipeline to/training

ground for the professional theatre industry, but a civic institution in its own right informs a key part of how the People's Theatre thinks of itself.[98]

But Heckels' comments also evidence her view that this civic role played a major part in the Arts Council and Newcastle City Council's decision to acknowledge the People's Theatre. Heckels notes what she perceives to be a reciprocal change of attitude among theatre members towards Newcastle City Council. She explains that:

> [Newcastle City] Council's attitude to us was very negative for years. We were regarded as a bunch of middle-class wankers playing about in Heaton. For a long time. And there was a certain amount of people encouraging that. 'Oh, we don't want the Council messing about in our theatre.' And that has changed. So, the attitude of the people here has changed a lot as well, which is also a good thing in terms of we don't see ourselves as a slightly posh… I mean, we started off as a socialist theatre and then it became very not socialist. And I think we see ourselves now not so much as political in any sense but as more of a community organisation, and that we have a responsibility to the community, and that we're not just doing it for ourselves (Heckels).

The class status of the People's Theatre is of particular interest given its location in Newcastle, a city which exists in the popular imaginary as working-class – established in stories about the city's industrial heritage and socialist convictions, maintained in recent years in theatre productions such as Northern Stage's *The Last Ship* (2018) and *The Ballad of Johnny Longstaff* (2020) – the latter of which tells the life story of Johnny Longstaff, a 'working-class hero' (*The Guardian*) born in Stockton in 1919 who participated in the Hunger Marches to London and later fought fascists in the Spanish Civil War, set to folk music by Stockton-based band, The Young'uns.[99] Heckels' view that the company is thought of as middle-class, which echoes a stereotype of amateur theatre as being what Milling calls 'a middle-class pastime' (33), is to some extent confirmed by Heckels' comment that the

[98] In this regard, we might observe what Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson consider to be a cultural moment where 'another rhetoric is emerging in which [citing Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska's 2016 AHRC report on cultural value] the 'evolving ecology of commercial, amateur, interactive and subsidised engagement needs to be [...] seen as enriching rather than antagonistic'' (9).

[99] Following a gig in 2015, The Young'uns were approached by Longstaff's son, Duncan. Band member Sean Cooney writes that because 'the three of us in the Young'uns shared the same birthplace as his dad – Stockton-on-Tees – and because we'd sung about the fight against fascism there, Duncan hoped we might be inspired to write a song about his dad' (The Guardian). Cooney writes that the trio were enthralled after diving into Duncan's personal archive, immersing themselves in Johnny's unpublished memoirs and listening to tapes of his life story that he recorded for the Imperial War Museum shortly before he died in 2000 (Cooney).

company has tended to see itself as 'slightly posh.'[100] The notion that the company no longer sees itself as 'political in any sense' further signals its alienation from its socialist origins.

New sources of funding for the theatre have further complicated its status as un/official. Between 2014 and 2018, the People's Theatre raised £1.65m. This £1.65m is made up of £500,000 from a long-term loan from Newcastle City Council; £100,000 from Arts Council England; and the remaining £1.05m from over twenty-five trusts and foundations as well as numerous individual donations (Childs). Money was spent refurbishing the theatre's exterior, foyer, bar, and gallery; upgrading electrical, heating, and lighting systems; creating full access to all areas of the venue for wheelchair and mobility restricted users; and building a separate soundproofed studio theatre space to the main house theatre, which enables two performances to run concurrently (People's Theatre). Receiving this material support represents a form of official legitimation of the People's Theatre, while its various upgrades and, significantly, the construction of a second 'studio' space, bring the theatre further in line with how many contemporary professional theatres tend to operate.

In a sense, *HEATON!* unveils this revitalised theatre, whose emblem is a phoenix, which has been regularly deployed as a symbol of the company reinventing itself over the years. The funding that enabled these developments has brought a new set of concerns with it, however. Heckels draws a direct connection between the People's Theatre's new-found sense of responsibility to the community and the decision to programme *HEATON!*. Heckels notes that:

> …the proposal was that [Shoe Tree Arts] wouldn't do it as a hire; they would bring it to us and we would provide all the actors and direct it, and it would be a People's Theatre production, but that they would have input into it in terms of all the other elements […] It was discussed at management committee, and, put it this way, twenty years ago, everybody would have gone, 'We're not doing that' […] Some people were a bit wary about it, but I was one of the people who said, 'I think we have a responsibility to do this' [...] Various other people agreed and said, 'We've got money for the redevelopment on the grounds that we are a community resource, and if we don't get involved in this massive community project, then we need shooting, really. We have a responsibility and I think we are obliged to.'

[100] In *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018), Milling writes that the People's is 'based in leafy [i.e., affluent] Jesmond' (35). In fact, the People's Theatre is in Heaton – a less affluent suburb which directly borders Jesmond. This can be said to reflect local class tensions, as the People's Theatre attracts a considerable audience from the surrounding suburbs of Jesmond and Gosforth, which tend to be considered 'posher' than Heaton. Milling's decision to place the People's Theatre in Jesmond rather than Heaton might be said to reflect the extent to which the People's draws a lot of its audience from Jesmond, while use of the word 'leafy' might be to insinuate that the People's Theatre is itself affluent and therefore potentially alienated from its socialist origins.

Heckels indicates that a major driver behind this new-found community responsibility is the People's receipt of public money. But a question remains regarding how the People's Theatre sees itself today: as a civic institution with a responsibility to the local area (and thus to engage with the question of representation more broadly) or as a membership body, staging productions for a 'loyal' or 'core' audience who have sustained the theatre for many years. Heckels' account of the discussion over programming suggests that there may be some truth to the idea that the People's Theatre has enjoyed being overlooked, precisely because it has enabled members to manage the theatre in their own way. Heckels' use of the word 'obliged' also suggests a lingering reluctance to get involved with 'community' work, which might damage the People's reputation as a distinguished theatrical institution making 'serious' drama, which remains an important part of the company's self-image. While this indicates an internal tension between 'real drama' and 'community theatre,' lingering reluctance among theatre members is arguably also as much about feelings of control and ownership – that the company still see the theatre as 'theirs' more than belonging to 'the community,' but feel an increasing sense of duty to open up their doors to 'outside' groups.

Dillon notes that '[o]ne of the things coming into this, from Shoe Tree anyway, was that this was very much a community event. Now, that didn't always play well – in fact, it was the antithesis to how the People's work,' referring to the fact that the People's typically has full control over every element of a production. This tension played out in part as a matter of authorship: not only of what to cut from the script, but of how to 'instruct' groups not under the 'control' of the People's Theatre. Dillon recalls, for instance, that different members of the choir would turn up on different nights, making it difficult to rehearse and block a scene (Dillon). It also played out as matter of acknowledgement. In a particular moment of controversy, Shoe Tree Arts printed their own A5 insert to the official theatre programme produced by the People's Theatre, which failed to credit members of the film team on the Shoe Tree Arts side as well as groups and institutions such as Northumbria University, Heaton History Group, Tyne & Wear Archives, and the Women's Engineering Society who all provided material support.

The extent of the transformation of the People's Theatre over recent years is reflected in the fact that some in the company reject the 'amateur' label altogether today. Cater, a member of the People's Theatre management group and Chair of the production committee at the time of interview, explains that 'I hate these amateur/professional nomenclatures, you know, but I think we have got to be far more business-like about how we do things because we can't

afford to fail at the minute' (Cater). In one sense, a tension emerges between the idea of being 'business-like' – a term with associations to professional formality and dispassionate transaction – and between being a 'civic' institution – a term with associations to mass participation, provision, and representation. In another sense, this breakaway from talking about itself as an amateur theatre company might cement the People's status as more institution than company. In shedding its amateur skin, the People's takes a further step into the official realm, which raises as-yet unanswerable questions about what amateur principles it might seek to retain, reconfigure, or abandon completely.

6.4 *HEATON!*: A Distinguished History

Activity in the People's Theatre foyer on each night of the production is indicative of the complex reality of *HEATON!*'s status as an official history. Upon arrival at the theatre, audiences are greeted by cast members dressed as suffragettes. In one corner of the foyer, a live band is performing. In another corner, a local schools exhibition celebrating 250 years of science, engineering, and mathematics in Heaton is on display (see *Figs. 10* and *11* below).[101] The walls double as a gallery space showcasing the work of local artists, which is all available to purchase. Production photos of the cast are also on display, illustrative of the People's preservation of its own heritage. Local community activity and creativity is interwoven with the celebrated 'official' history to which we are being directed. An ostensibly unofficial (amateur) community congregates in its own theatre building, which lies outside the authorised cultural ecology of Newcastle, to celebrate an official history.

[101] This schools project was created in partnership between Shoe Tree Arts Association and Heaton History Group (a local history society of which Dillon is a member and whose research Dillon used in *HEATON!*). Five local primary schools worked with local artists, Heaton History Group researchers, and volunteers. The schools project is part of a series of work called *Brains, Steam and Speed: 250 years of science, engineering and mathematics in Heaton*, funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, with additional funding from Heaton History Group and The Joicey Trust. This underlines the broader community activity surrounding *HEATON!*.

Figure 10: Audience members gather in the People's Theatre foyer. Photograph by Andrew Latimer 2018.

Figure 11: An exhibition featuring a diorama on the work of Sir Howard Grubb Parsons by students from Ravenswood Primary School in Heaton at the People's Theatre. Photograph by Andrew Latimer 2018.

Once we are seated in the theatre, a short film plays depicting an official Heaton and a community view of the suburb captured by Dillon and Shoe Tree Arts. The film shows Michael Stout in character as George Waller – a penny farthing rider from Newcastle who won the World Cycling Championships in London in 1879 (Heaton History Group) – riding

through present-day Heaton. The film begins in black and white and transitions into colour – cycling through time. On-screen stills of Victorian and Edwardian Heaton fade into contemporary shots of the suburb in which we see football teams in Heaton Park, the local mosque, the local church, shops – as Dillon notes, 'all sorts of little communities, little bits of all sorts of Heaton life, just in a kind of postcard version' – brought together under one roof. Lots of little 'communities,' but all part of one 'place'. The Heaton we see is at once official – reconstituted from official archives – and captured by residents.

HEATON!'s retrieval of an official heritage, indicated by its use of archival images of Victorian and Edwardian Heaton, is emphasised by its focus on 'distinguished' individuals. George Stanley (played by Steve Robertson – see *Fig. 12* below), a theatre impresario who opened the Tyne Theatre and Opera House in Newcastle in 1867, delivers an opening sermon. He announces that we are gathered to celebrate 'the pioneering sons and daughters of this Parish' who have 'distinguished themselves in the fields of science, engineering, the arts, social reform and football, and indeed changed their world and so transformed ours' (Dillon 2). We meet Heaton's 'great men' – Charles Parsons (played by Michael Smith), an engineer who designed the Turbinia in 1894, the world's first steam turbine-powered vessel; Ove Arup (played by Reg White), engineer of the Sydney Opera House; and Colin Veitch (played by Ben Ostell), a Newcastle United footballer and co-founder of the People's Theatre in 1911. They are familiar faces who form the canonical foundations of the history.

Figure 12: Steve Robertson as George Stanley in HEATON!*, courtesy of the People's Theatre. Photograph by Jim Mohan 2018.*

Additional images shown on screen drawn from official repositories of knowledge underline the status of *HEATON!*'s historical figures as official. As Stanley introduces us to Heaton's famous figures, we see photographs taken from official institutions such as the National Portrait Gallery, Newcastle University Special Collections, and the Birr Scientific & Heritage Foundation. The provenance of images is made central to the history. This is to say that *HEATON!* not only mobilises the lives of individuals already deemed worthy of preservation and remembrance – enshrined in the archive – but that the production aligns itself with such 'distinguished' history, framing itself as official.

HEATON!'s preoccupation with the lives and activities of 'distinguished' men sits alongside a desire to include the experiences of Heaton's women, signalling its intentions to 'correct' official history. As part of the play's prologue, Stanley introduces Florence Harrison Bell (played by Ellie North – see *Fig. 13* below), a British suffragist and socialist campaigner born in 1865; Lady Katharine and Rachel Parsons (played by Ann Zunder and Catherine Ellis), engineers and co-founders of the Women's Engineering Society in 1919; and Edith Stoney (played by Alison Carr), an Irish mathematician who worked with Charles Parsons on his

famous Turbinia at the end of the nineteenth century.[102] As Stanley introduces Florence Bell, another character announces the address of Bell's former residence in Heaton and asks members of Newcastle Council allegedly sitting in the audience to 'stick a blue plaque on it. If you can do it for the men, what about the women?' (Dillon 2). And as Stanley introduces Colin Veitch, she shouts, 'yet another man with a blue plaque' (Dillon 3-4). *HEATON!* signals its feminist credentials – to correct an official history dominated by men.

Figure 13: Ellie North as Florence Bell in HEATON!*, courtesy of the People's Theatre. Photograph by Jim Mohan 2018.*

HEATON! also adds into the mix the experiences of the working-class, which further complicates its valorisation of official history. The play is told in flashback through the eyes of Catherine and Freddie (see *Fig. 14* below), a fictional working-class couple who represent what Freddie calls 'the people, the common or garden Heatonians' whose story is 'just as important as any of these famous folk' (Dillon 11). Freddie states his name, only for George Stanley to consult his official register and declare that he has never heard of him. 'That's because I'm a work of fiction,' exclaims Freddie (Dillon 2), absent from real-world official

[102] In August 2018, Heaton History Group found evidence that Edith Stoney worked with Charles Parsons. Newcastle University's Special Collections department wrote a blog article thanking Heaton History Group, 'whose research into the Stoney family of Heaton solved one of the mysteries in our archive! A fascinating letter in our Manuscript Album […] was obviously about one of the Stoney sisters, but we didn't know which one. […] all evidence points to Edith as our mystery mathematical genius!' (Newcastle University).

history. Catherine and Freddie stand in for an 'ordinary' working-class, mirror opposites of the play's distinguished figures, official and unofficial Heaton presented side by side. The narrative loosely follows the couple's journey through history, as they galvanise the fiction by aiding and quarrelling with the play's real-world historical figures. In other words, Catherine and Freddie serve as interlopers who take up alternative classed positions.

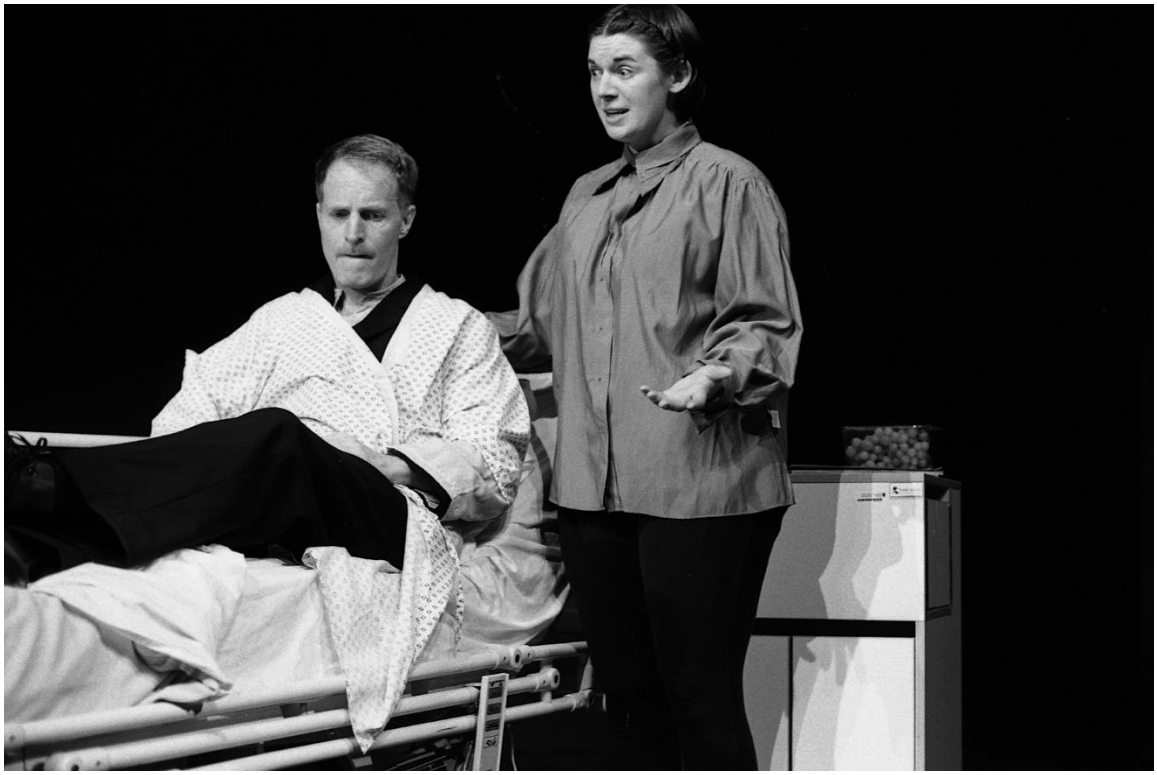

Figure 14: Stephen Sharkey (left) and Rhiannon Wilson (right) as Freddie and Catherine in HEATON!*, courtesy of the People's Theatre. Photograph by Jim Mohan 2018.*

HEATON! suggests that the historical figures had a complex relationship to authority, or a frustration with the status quo. *HEATON!* depicts its historical figures as dedicated, principled, standing up for what they believed in, at odds with convention. Colin Veitch is presented as headstrong and brave for following his dreams of becoming a footballer, acting against his father who wishes for him to follow the family line and become a teacher (football, his father argues, is dishonourable). Meanwhile, Charles Parsons has a ferocious temper and cannot understand why people are not as committed to his work as him, which Dillon contends is 'a trait in brilliant folk' (Dillon). Florence Bell is cast as the leading voice of socialist reform, speaking at protests and organising campaigns amid a patriarchal culture hostile to women's emancipation. Veitch, Parsons, and Bell are therefore all cast as outsiders – singular individuals doing what they believed to be right.

These figures become symbols of progress in this regard, used as evidence of progressive change in Heaton's history but also Heaton's 'contribution' to national history. Veitch, for instance, is presented as a 'modernising' force in sport who instigated and led the most decorated period in Newcastle United's history (1905-1911). In doing so, Veitch is shown to elevate the cultural status of football, which brings the sport into the official realm, thus making it a legitimate activity. Consideration of the class of these characters is suggestive of another way of reading this bid for status. In elevating the cultural status of football and Newcastle United, Veitch as a member of the middle-class also stakes his claim to it. He is written into a commanding position. This indicates the extent to which 'progress' is considered to be led by history's middle- and upper-classes.

The characterisation of Charles Parsons also contributes to this view of progress. Parsons is framed as what Dillon calls a 'maverick,' further underlining *HEATON!*'s framing of its historical figures as 'outsiders.' Dillon interviewed Brendan Parsons, 7th Earl of Rosse, nephew of Charles Parsons. His testimony informed Dillon's representation of 'Anglo-Irish' Charles as a 'maverick' who 'loathed the British society of which he was kind of brought up in' (Dillon). The figure of the maverick is familiar here: a term often used sympathetically to depict men as independent free thinkers or wildcards. This demonstrates not only *HEATON!*'s interest in the personalities or dispositions of its historical figures but reinforces a common masculinist convention in which the maverick's antisocial personality is considered central to their greatness/brilliance. Parsons represents more specifically the *upper-class* maverick – the 'eccentric' aristocratic figure who, because of their wealth/status, is free to act like a radical outlier. Just as crucially, Dillon's interview with Brendan Parsons, whose official residence is Birr Castle in Ireland, underlines the extent to which *HEATON!*'s history is informed by the present-day aristocracy.

Consequently, *HEATON!* can be considered a biography or genealogical study as well as a cultural history. Brendan Parsons attended the performance of *HEATON!*, and Dillon explains that afterwards, 'he and his wife […] stood in the car park […] and they just said, "As we understand it, that was what Uncle Charlie was like, and we are just knocked for six." So I said, "Well, I'm very pleased!"' (Dillon). While *HEATON!* is clearly not written exclusively 'for' Brendan Parsons, the Parsons family still receive significant representation in the play, and Brendan Parsons validates the accuracy of Dillon's depiction. Though *HEATON!* is preoccupied with the history of the suburb, it can be equally thought of as a self-contained piece of Parsons family history.

This can be further observed in the extent to which *HEATON!* commits much of its historical enquiry to the Parsons family more broadly – Charles, Lady Katharine, and daughter Rachel. Charles is already an entrenched figure in Newcastle and indeed national history (undermining his portrayal as a radical 'outsider'). Even before his canonisation in history, he was a member of the landed gentry. But by including the lives of Katharine and Rachel Parsons, and their work as both suffragists and engineers, the Parsons family history overall is expanded. Charles no longer monopolises the history as its lone male 'genius' but is considered part of a family of pioneers. In this regard, *HEATON!* keeps it in the family in the literal sense of centring the Parsons family within the history of Heaton.

HEATON!'s interest in the figure of suffragist campaigner and socialist Florence Bell, however, indicates that the production is more than a celebration of a single aristocratic family. Florence perhaps possesses the greatest claim to 'outsiderness' among the play's historical figures. She is a woman in an official history dominated by men; neither landed nor titled; and is the only figure involved in direct forms of political activism. In addition to her work as a suffragist and socialist campaigner, for instance, she was also the first secretary of the Independent Labour Party. Michael Proctor writes that 'despite the lasting impact of some of the changes she was instrumental in achieving and the currency of some of the issues she championed, she remains virtually unknown, without even a Wikipedia entry to her name!' – an omission which has since been rectified. Florence is therefore slotted into Heaton's own 'family,' once monopolised by the aristocratic Parsons family, which Dillon now opens up to include Heaton's middle-class women. Though the Parsons family undoubtedly remain central/influential, a modest opening in the history is made 'downwards' to allow entry to Florence as a woman and a member of the bourgeoisie.

While Florence is historically an outsider in the sense of being left out of the history, she now becomes an insider, a member of the family, a household name. While *HEATON!* expands the Parsons family history by representing the lives of Katharine and Rachel, which further secures the family's position as authoritative/ dominant, the play also extends historical representation and inclusion to Florence Bell, previously discounted on the grounds that she is a woman. The fact that the middle-class Colin Veitch is already known in the history, for instance, demonstrates that Heaton's men need only be middle-class in order to receive representation. But Florence, despite being middle-class too, was left out of history. *HEATON!* seeks to right this historical wrong. In effect, Dillon speaks up for both the middle-class generally and Heaton's middle-class women specifically by writing them into a

history that was previously owned by the male aristocracy. Nevertheless, the play's emphasis upon distinguished middle and upper-class individuals does make it seem that while gender is no longer a condition of entry to this history, entry is still subject to class criteria.

Regarding the idea that *HEATON!*'s historical figures are all outsiders, Dillon notes:

> I've always found it interesting to write about people who were against or find themselves, for whatever reason, outside the mainstream, and then suddenly discover they're in the middle of the mainstream. That sort of journey is always quite interesting. You know, they're always knocking on the door saying, 'Actually, the party's here, not there.' […] So yeah, I'd say that what I discovered, to my glee, was that they were all against. You know, it's the Groucho Marx thing, 'I wouldn't belong to a club that wouldn't have me as a member.'

Dillon's assertions invite further consideration. To what extent can the figures he selected be considered genuine outsiders? In the case of Charles Parsons, he was a member of the aristocracy – hard to imagine anyone more official – yet Dillon positions him as being 'against' British society. Rather, Parsons is not an outsider in any meaningful way, but is made into an outsider by Dillon. In this regard, 'being an outsider' (an anti-establishment figure) becomes outwardly performative – a matter of one's individual personality, traits, attitude, and lifestyle – rather than an actual material position from which the individual agitates for institutional or societal transformation. Here, we might also reflect on the possibility that the contemporary 'left' white middle-class consider a performative or identitarian understanding of iconoclasm central to their own identity. While Parsons is not comparable to right-wing populists – blatant establishment figures who depict themselves as anti-establishment or salt-of-the-earth representatives of 'the people' – he is still an undeniably establishment figure depicted by Dillon as anti-establishment. Framing Parsons as an outsider in this way authorises Dillon to claim Parsons on behalf of the contemporary 'left' white middle-class, who see themselves as both progressive and official, awkwardly squaring that circle.

There is perhaps more legitimacy to the idea that *HEATON!*'s suffragists were 'against'. But even this is somewhat skewed in the sense that the play still depicts suffrage as a white middle- and upper-class pursuit. The white middle- and upper-classes still maintain an overall position as the leading lights and masterminds of progressive change. Now, these figures are canonised, which protects their position, but also expands the scope and authority of official history. This points to a difficulty regarding the commemoration of individuals in history more broadly. While necessary efforts exist to expand the canon, and thus understandings of

what we conceive of as canon, there still seems to be something unavoidably tricky about canonisation itself, of how to honour individuals and their contribution without reinforcing a hierarchy of value or depicting history as the work of individuals rather than social movements or forms of collective/ unionised activity.

HEATON! is caught between propaganda and counterpropaganda in this regard. On one hand, *HEATON!* seeks to retrieve an iconoclastic past, populated by socialists fighting for progressive change or radical innovators who won trophies and built steamships. But at the same time, *HEATON!* reinforces the authoritative position of the white middle- and upper-classes and the narrow view of history made possible by legitimised forms of evidence. In effect, Dillon (intentionally or not) attempts to take up a dual position as both conserver and reformer, valorising both the authority of 'top-down' history and challenging such history. Citing the work of Niloufer Harben, Paola Botham writes that:

> In the first systematic account of the modern (as opposed to early modern) 'English' history play, Niloufer Harben describes what may be conceptualized as a move from propaganda to counterpropaganda, with the latter understood positively as resistance to official history. Iconoclasm becomes a vital characteristic running from George Bernard Shaw to Edward Bond, both of whom take the stance not 'of detached critic and observer, but of passionate reformer and participant', using humour to address 'deeply serious moral concerns' (88).

HEATON! takes up a fraught position on 'both sides' of such a conception of history – the official history and the history of individuals who have been left out, attempting to speak from competing positions, or, alternatively, on behalf of a dominant group (the white middle- and upper-classes brought under the single heading of exceptional individuals) and a group which traverses dominant/subaltern positions (Heaton's 'elite' women) – historically marginalised but now considered part of the club. This underpins *HEATON!*'s internal complexity and the tensions it represents between culture, class, and tradition. *HEATON!* seeks to preserve the heritage of Heaton's white middle- and upper-classes while trying to avoid making history the preserve *of* those classes.

The play's representation of suffrage enables further exploration of this internal complexity. Florence Bell stands in for a period of our history which is deemed shameful. In a chauvinist tirade, Stanley cries out to the audience, 'Ask them to make a choice? Tsk. That's our job, we do that for them. Us men! Come on, face up to it; women, lovely as they are, they're inferior creatures. Too precious, too innocent to make an intelligent contribution' (Dillon 13). On-screen, anti-suffrage propaganda is displayed. As Florence argues for universal suffrage,

members of the cast take up positions in the audience. A man shouts, 'Are you one of them socialist bitches?' while a woman shouts, 'You're a disgrace to womankind,' while a second man shouts, 'If you were my wife, I'd give you a dose of poison,' to which Florence retorts, 'If I were so unfortunate as to be your wife, I'd take it' (Dillon 14). Stanley's comically overblown misogyny represents the official position of the time while depicting that position as cartoonish and outdated by contemporary standards.

While these moments are meant to be amusing by virtue of their exaggeration, *HEATON!* is not afraid to show the more harrowing moments in the history of suffrage. Freddie describes the force-feeding of suffragists, documented in the likes of E. Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette* (1931). In attempting to dissuade Catherine from militancy, Freddie exclaims, 'they ram a tube down your throat and drive liquid mulch into you […] You'll think you're dying. They won't care if you do,' as we see the silhouette of a performer being strapped to a chair behind a screen. Consequently, *HEATON!* represents not only the opposition suffragists faced by members of the public but also the violence of the state. The effect is to further underline the sacrifice made by suffragists in pursuit of a noble cause, which opens up the historical reality of the suffrage movement while paying tribute to individual suffragists in Heaton who contributed to the movement.

As such, *HEATON!* uses suffrage to 'prove' the idea of progress. Suffrage is now part of 'our' (national) heritage – the story we tell about our progressive roots – into which Florence in particular is written. Suffrage is no longer a 'controversial' history i.e., it no longer threatens official culture. Resistance to suffrage functions as a leading example of a wrong which 'we' righted: our contemporary triumph over history. While *HEATON!* engages with the great struggle required to right this wrong, the fact that it was righted comes to prove the idea of progress; that we have become a more just, equal, 'modern' society. In claiming these people and their causes, they become an integral part of official culture's legitimacy claim in the present. Official history now frames these uncomfortable moments in our history as a step on our march towards modernisation.

The play seems to suggest that the working classes have not had a leading role to play in achieving this progress, however. Working-class Freddie, for instance, is used as a dramatic counterpoint to the middle-class Colin Veitch. As Veitch weighs up his decision to go into the family business (teaching) or pursue a career as a footballer (a profession that his father

argues is dishonourable), Freddie acts as the voice of persuasion, invoking his own ordinariness in order to push Veitch to embrace his talent:

> FREDDIE: I'm just a lad on the terraces, nowt special, haven't even figured meself out yet. I've got dreams mind, but not much hope. But you, what are you playing at, born with a ball at your feet, a flippin straight down the line genius. It's not fair. You're denying yourself, and the rest of us. So dump them books and get on your boots on. Howay, now!'
>
> (Dillon 34).

Freddie is presented as Geordierama's everyman in deference to Veitch, which underlines Veitch's talent and brilliance. Freddie is the only character who actually speaks in a Geordie accent. Veitch, and indeed all of the play's historical figures, speak in a 'refined' voice, which serves to perform their middle/upper-class identities. Freddie is 'just a lad on the terraces,' ordinary, stuck, unsure of what he wants in life or how to get there. Freddie has 'got dreams mind, but not much hope'. Veitch, meanwhile, is framed as a genius, born with a ball at his feet, whose 'natural' talent bestows on him a kind of duty – he has talent and ought to use it. Veitch's gift must in turn become a gift to the people – people who would jump at the chance Veitch has, but, like Freddie, have no hope. For Veitch to have the opportunity but not take it would be seen as an affront to all those without the opportunity. The idea of playing football is therefore elevated to legendary status. 'We' (the masses) 'need' the likes of Colin Veitch – geniuses who, in realising their potential, do it 'for us.'

Elsewhere, *HEATON!* uses Catherine to evidence a militant tradition which is widely documented in history but absent from the play's official history. Where middle-class Florence and upper-class Katharine operate within official (legal) frameworks – writing letters, organising meetings, and using nonviolent forms of protest to advance the cause of suffrage – Catherine breaks the law. Florence and Katharine accuse Catherine of starting a fire at Heaton Park Railway. Katharine argues that 'incidents like this do great damage to our cause. Sympathisers turn against us.' Florence claims, 'It's even worse. You run the real danger of diverting our campaign and reducing it to a law-and-order issue' (Dillon 52). *HEATON!* stages a perennial historical debate here regarding 'legitimate' forms of activism, lobbying for change through official channels versus engaging in acts of law-breaking and civil disobedience. Catherine, then, is used to provide a dramatic counter-point to Katharine and Florence along class lines, which makes the history more dramatic, but also represents

the fact that militancy played a part in winning suffrage, which cannot be represented through the lives of Florence and Katharine alone.

Consequently, Catherine exhibits what Siân Adiseshiah, citing Rancière, calls 'the ways in which working-class participation in middle-class scripts challenge visions of social totality' (154). When Florence argues that 'when they go low, we go high,' Catherine responds, 'That's easy for you to say. You're rich. You get enough to eat, go on holidays, your husbands won't hit you, throw you out. Why d'you want the vote? You're sitting pretty' (Dillon 52-3). Again, *HEATON!* uses Catherine to present the historical reality of suffrage – which was both obedient and disobedient – but at the same time intervenes in its own official history dominated by the middle and upper-classes. Militancy is presented as a working-class trait and propriety as a middle- and upper-class trait. The working-class are presented as rule-breaking/rebellious, while the middle- and upper-classes are presented as rule-following/deferential.

Catherine and Freddie therefore function as both protagonists and counterpoints – on one hand central to the narrative, who receive just as much stage time as the play's real-world historical figures, but on the other hand constantly reaffirming and underlining the historical figures' position as authoritative and/or dominant. They seemingly possess their own dreams and ideas, yet they serve largely as mouthpieces for a highly generalised working-class. While Catherine and Freddie can be read as 'insiders' to this world, characters with agency who influence events and with whom we are encouraged to sympathise, they tend to function as either disruptive forces or passive observers of a foreign world that is not their own, a story of 'famous folk' into which they are cast as intruders. At times, they embark on a kind of historical safari where they gaze from afar (in reverence and respect) and at other times cause conflict and friction in the lives of the play's real-world figures.

Because we see the world through their eyes, they stand in for we the audience as members of the unremarkable masses. Just as Catherine and Freddie, we are encouraged to gaze upon the famous figures with a sense of awe and respect for what they did in the past. Yet, Catherine is herself inspiring and rule-breaking as a suffragist, but also framed as *too* radical, potentially sabotaging the suffrage effort. Freddie, meanwhile, is a lad on the terraces who we are meant to look upon as unremarkable, yet for whom we are encouraged root. At the same time, they provide some comic relief. Freddie, notably, is chased throughout the play by a policeman in true panto style. At times, it seems very clear that the audience are meant to laugh *at* them,

which frames us as superior. This speaks to the complexity of how Catherine and Freddie are used in the play. That being said, they still exist largely for our entertainment in contrast to the play's pioneers. These tensions make it difficult to pinpoint *HEATON!*'s particular allegiances – from whose perspective the play is told.[103]

6.4.1 Class, Culture, Tradition

HEATON!'s use of music also highlights the complexity of its relationship to class, culture, and tradition, as explored through the lives of Catherine and Freddie. The play is filled with traditional English dances, elegant garden parties and processional hymns performed by the band and choir. As the play's suffragists enter, for instance, the choir sings 'The Women's Battle Song,' a popular suffragette anthem, to the tune of 'Onward Christian Soldiers.' In a section dedicated to the founding of the People's Theatre in 1911, couples swirl around the stage dancing to an upbeat musical number. In another section dedicated to Ove Arup, the scene begins with shots of Sydney Harbour Bridge in the 1960s set to Waltzing Matilda. The mood of the piece is generally light-hearted and festive, but the play's soundtrack of ballads, marches, and hymns does a lot of heavy lifting in terms of world-building. Official notions of religious service and national pride are coded into the music. Consequently, *HEATON!* valorises a specific image of English ruling-class gaiety.

Yet, we also hear indigenous folk music of Newcastle in contrast to the official hymns and marches. In a section dedicated to celebrating the sporting achievements of Colin Veitch and Newcastle United, the house band plays the music to *The Blaydon Races*, as lyrics appear on-screen, encouraging the audience to sing along, who Veitch stands up and 'conducts.'[104] Beal notes that George (aka 'Geordie') Ridley's popular folk song, which chronicles an eventful coach ride from Newcastle across the Tyne to the Blaydon horse races on the 9th June 1862, 'has long been acknowledged as the 'national anthem' of Tyneside' (343). A tension emerges here over whether or not the singalong in *HEATON!* constitutes a form of jovial recreation for the middle-class – what David Harker, writing in the 1972 reprint of Thomas Allan's

[103] There appear to be numerous parallels between *HEATON!* and Jack Shepherd's epic *Holding Fire!*, a play about the history of the early Victorian Chartist movement performed at Shakespeare's Globe in July 2007, down to both plays' emphatic titles. *Holding Fire!* also used a large cast; a young couple to galvanise the fiction; narrators to address the audience; performed from within the audience; and staged the divide between reform and revolution. The difference lies between *Holding Fire!*'s concentration on a working-class political movement as opposed to *HEATON!*, which focuses on the lives of the middle- and upper-classes.

[104] This singalong section recalls the earlier critique by Lanigan, who cites a review by local arts and culture publication, The Crack, of Plater's *Shooting the Legend*, which 'applauded the play but said that the crowd singalong section was cringeworthy and embarrassing' (112).

Tyneside Songs, called 'a fashion among the Tyneside middle classes for doing the stereotyped party-piece of being more Geordie than the Geordies' (qtd. in Beal 353). In response, Beal argues that:

> What Harker fails to appreciate is that middle-class Geordies are still recognizable in their speech as Geordies and would certainly consider themselves Geordies […] The middle-class networks built up in, for instance, the private day-schools of Newcastle are just as powerful a force for the preservation of this version of 'Geordie' identity as were and are the working-class networks of the shipyard, the pit and the social club. *The Blaydon Races* is sung by Geordies of all classes at St. James's Park, and was sung by working-class soldiers in the First World War as well as by middle-class gentlemen with their pianofortes (353-4).

In this regard, we might consider that the act of communal singing in *HEATON!* indicates what Lancaster calls 'the dominance of regional over class identity' among Geordies (66), which cultivates solidarity and maintains a link to the homeland in a way which cuts across class difference. This underlines the idea of the proud homeland as a place with a distinct, indigenous culture that can be always seen as 'ours,' regardless of class distinction, which cannot be taken away or appropriated. Yet, as I mentioned above, Veitch, and indeed all of the play's historical figures, speak in a 'refined' tongue, which might serve to distance the middle-class from this Geordie identity, and which the act of communal singing might therefore in fact serve to underline as 'other.' So, this moment of communal singing might reinforce a sense of regional consciousness, contributing to social bonding, but also potentially a division between working-class and middle-class cultures within the region.

The singalong in *HEATON!* also reproduces a long-standing ethical dilemma of audience participation. Where is the line between inviting or encouraging an audience to 'join in' and demanding participation from, or coercing, an audience? If an audience member chooses not to join in, not only might they be perceived as a killjoy (whose decision not to participate actively *harms* the production) but they might also not be considered a 'real' Geordie (and thus shunned). Audiences find themselves in a bind in this regard where participation can be at once an entirely 'natural,' communal, generative act, but also a kind of threat: participate *or else*. Why are you here if you do not want to join in? This also raises questions about who feels 'authorised' to sing. Are only 'true' Geordies allowed to sing? If we sing, do we validate the history, towards which we might feel a sense of ambivalence? In other words, does participating in fact shut down agency, and limit the possibility of nuance, sweeping audiences up in a way which rehearses regional cohesion?

HEATON!'s internal complexity is further represented in a number of subversive interruptions throughout the play, which challenge the idea of uninterrupted progress. When Will Lacey (a vocal socialist who was an original member of the People's Theatre in 1911, played by Tony Sehgal) enters in a section of the play dedicated to the founding of the People's Theatre, he argues with Colin Veitch over the company abandoning its socialist principles. Veitch contests, 'It's not a question of drama *or* socialism,' to which Lacey snaps, 'Yes, it is. Half of them round here have got their heads stuck in Stanislavski instead of Marx and Engels. We're already contaminated. And this move to the Royal Arcade – *Royal*, I ask you – we're losing momentum' (Dillon 54). In a separate scene hosting a fundraiser for the early People's Theatre society, Lacey casts a sceptical eye and announces, 'not sure many of these are socialists' (54), which brings a ripple of laughter. The importance of roots hangs over these moments, infused with a sense of critique and playful irony.

Lacey's comments refer to the People's Theatre's relocation to the former Royal Arcade in 1915 discussed above (Veitch 18), a now-demolished commercial shopping mall in Newcastle city centre. Norman Veitch, brother to Colin Veitch represented in *HEATON!* and fellow co-founder of the People's Theatre, notes in his history of the Society's first three decades that Lacey was vocal in his protest against the company's move away from its socialist principles and towards making art for art's sake (Veitch 19). Lacey left to fight in World War I, where he was killed in action.

Lacey then forms part of a broader section of the play dedicated to World War I remembrance – a section which adds further complexity to the play's interest in celebrating distinguished individuals. Lacey and Veitch step out from behind a screen dressed in First World War army uniforms. Stanley enters and calls the Clarion Dramatic Society to '*attenshun!*' before marching them off to war. The band strike up 'Good-bye-ee,' R.P. Weston and Bert Lee's popular folk song performed by music hall stars during the War, as the choir sing 'bon soir old thing! Cheerio, chin-chin!' Catherine, now a munitions worker, enters as images appear on screen of female munitions workers in factories interspersed with paintings by war artist Paul Nash. The names of casualties from the local area who died during the War appear on screen; the 'ghost' of a soldier appears on stage, standing under a spotlight. Individuals are named on-screen, but details of their lives do not otherwise feature. Again, *HEATON!* sets up a duality between the voiceless masses and the play's official figures, elevating forgotten groups while still maintaining their position as marginal.

6.4.2 Performing the Amateur

Some aspects of the casting of the production also invite reflection on the relationship between exclusion, inclusion, class, and representation in the piece. Heckels explains that Stephen Sharkey, who plays Freddie, had only recently joined the People's Theatre's ensemble prior to *HEATON!*. Sharkey read for Freddie only when the original actor set to play the role dropped out. Heckels' reflections on this casting decision provide insights into the company's sense of its own status, as well as the artistic aspirations and preoccupations which informed the development of the show. She notes that because the People's Theatre is an amateur theatre, 'we can afford to take risks, sometimes, as we did with *HEATON!*, with our leading man, Stephen… because he'd never done anything before' (Heckels). Heckels' comments suggest that the People's Theatre has a reputation to protect, which it maintains by casting experienced actors within the company in lead roles. Yet, the People's Theatre is an amateur theatre where experience is not a prerequisite. So, Heckels weighed up the 'risk' of casting an unknown actor who might potentially threaten the credibility of the theatre production with the qualities that he embodied in the reading.

Dillon's recall of the casting process indicates Sharkey made a significant contribution to the piece. He notes:

> When I walked in and I saw him, I just thought, 'Oh, yeah, he's fine. He's it.' And in fact, Paul, the other guy, no disrespect, would have never 'got' this part of him. He'd have got all the kind of [*long pause*] energy of him, but he wouldn't have got [*long pause*] that authenticity. Steve is a working-class guy. And it's there […] It's why Ken Loach casts entertainers from working men's clubs and things. Sometimes, he doesn't get it right. But there's just that authenticity that somehow an untrained actor, a middle-class kid like I am, I was […] It just isn't there. But in the way he stands, in the way he talks, everything, he's just 100% Freddie. And he's a ne'er-do-well and he's an apprentice of Parsons. Got him! […] [T]he whole thing about where Freddie comes from is in that actor. You can't fake it (Dillon).

These insights into the casting process indicate that it was informed by the selection of an actor whose working-class 'authenticity' would in turn make a play which prioritises the lives of middle- and upper-class figures paradoxically more credible. In their article, "Theatre, Performance, and the Amateur Turn" (2017), Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson note that Jen Harvie:

> describes one approach to theatre-making as using 'delegated art practices' in which the unaffected qualities associated with untrained performers bring a particular texture or meta-theatricality to the event. Other professional productions, she suggests, 'celebrate amateurism, doing art for the pleasure of it', and yet she goes on to observe that this entails amateurs accepting that they have 'sufficient expertise' to

> contribute. This suggests that theatre's amateur turn inhabits a paradox. On the one hand when professional artists perform amateurishness their alterity and 'real' expertise is affirmed, and on the other, when 'real' non-professional or amateur performers are included in professional work their affective value rests on the audience's perception of the 'authenticity' that untrained bodies bring to the stage (13-14).

In the case of *HEATON!*, a further sub-division between trained and untrained bodies exists *within* amateur theatre. Heckels and Dillon as members of the white middle-class take up a position as self-appointed arbiters empowered to altruistically decide to whom they will give a big break, further supported by Dillon's reference to Sharkey being 'plucked from the chorus line' (Dillon).

This is underlined by the ending for Freddie as a character. He must 'better' himself. Catherine and Freddie's (professional) dreams come true at the end of the play – Catherine lands a job working for an architect designing social housing, while Freddie earns a place at Newcastle University to study marine technology (i.e., maintaining a link to the North East's shipbuilding heritage and maritime culture) – and so they are granted access to forms of work and education from which they are historically excluded. But their dreams are underpinned by social mobility. Catherine and Freddie erase their working-class status to enable *HEATON!*'s vision of middle-class social totality. Catherine and Freddie are therefore paradoxically central yet tokenistic characters. They are both written into history and positioned as arbiters of middle/upper class achievement yet end up suffering a form of erasure in the sense that they are subsumed into the ranks of the professional middle class.

It is only by moving 'up' in the world – into a legitimised, professional world of employment and education – that they become active in it. Where previously they were simply left out (outsiders looking in on a world in which they could never truly participate or acquire agency), they now become official participants in and legitimised members of society. Perhaps put another way, they become *citizens*. But consequently, Catherine and Freddie are made passive once again as they must surrender to forms of social and class hierarchy. It is only by complying with the rules that they are given the chance to succeed. In effect, their previous position as disruptive forces (with some agency) is replaced by their 'true' role as rule-following (for which they are rewarded), as opposed to their middle- and upper-class counterparts, who are both rule-following and rule-generating.

6.4.3 Consummating History

Catherine and Freddie's successes form part of a romantic epilogue in which characters

announce their various triumphs. Colin Veitch proclaims the formation of the People's Theatre. On screen, an image of George Bernard Shaw appears and printed across it the words 'I like this People's Theatre' – a quote following Shaw's revered visit to the People's in 1921 (Veitch 44), who Michael Coveney calls the 'spiritual godfather of the People's, as he was for so many other amateur companies between the wars' (53). The play's suffragettes enter to announce the formation of the Women's Engineering Society and the National Health Service, which gives the impression that these institutions were their own creations. It is in part a 'magical' ending, full of reconciliation and wish fulfilment, the founding of liberal institutions, where dreams come true, and order is restored. *HEATON!* has shown the friction of history but is now keen to smooth it back out – evidence of a kind of cognitive dissonance in which history is shown as never settled but ultimately resolved.

Resolution is also expressed in the reconciliation between Parsons and Freddie. Throughout the play, Parsons regularly berates Freddie, calling him 'slovenly and slipshod' (Dillon 16). But at the end of the play, Freddie encourages Charles Parsons to gate-crash a Royal Navy Review to which he did not receive an invitation to showcase the Turbinia (a snub to which Parsons takes great offence).[105] Upon winning the recognition of the Admiralty, Freddie and Parsons call each other by their first names. Their class antagonism crumbles: they now 'respect' each other. Dillon notes that 'there's quite a bit of romance in this show, but I think the real romance is between Parsons and his apprentice Freddie, which comes to some sort of consummation when they show off the Turbinia at the naval review' (Dillon). But Freddie only earns the respect of Charles by helping him get what he wants i.e., their consummation only comes from Freddie 'proving' himself to Charles, which thus maintains Charles' position as dominant, who 'accepts' Freddie.

Freddie is also used quite explicitly to represent the play's 'heart' (another classic trope where the working-class are sentimentalised and presented as honest and authentic). The play starts with Freddie in hospital awaiting the result of an angiogram (i.e., he is at risk of a broken heart). But he is given the all-clear at the end of the play – he keeps his 'heart' which

[105] The Birr Scientific and Heritage Foundation writes, '[i]n an audacious sales-pitch, [Parsons] arrived uninvited at the Navy Review for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee at Spithead on June 26th, 1897. Among those present would be the Prince of Wales, representing the Queen, Lords of the Admiralty, as well as a complete cross section of the British establishment of the time. Also at the event would be foreign dignitaries and ambassadors. With its ability to reach speeds of 34 knots (60 kilometres per hour) Turbinia was so much faster than anything else on the water that she could not be caught. Charles hoisted a red pennant and took off in a high speed burst between two lines of large ships' (Birr Scientific and Heritage Foundation).

in turn comes to be expressed in his marriage to Catherine. Their union serves to underline traditional values, but at a broader level, *HEATON!* is all about performing the love of the suburb, which Freddie as the working-class lad with heart comes to embody.[106] The wedding as ceremony stands in for *HEATON!* as a play which performs a kind of cultural marriage.

The play's finale marks the beginning of a new world, cementing an origin story for audiences. After Parsons and Freddie storm the Naval Review, the cast all climb 'aboard' the Turbinia and perform a final song together. Another painting by Paul Nash appears on screen – this time the aptly titled *We Are Making a New World*. Catherine appeals to the audience:

> CATHERINE: In 1918, Paul Nash, a War Artist suffering from the trauma of the trenches, painted 'WE ARE MAKING A NEW WORLD'. One hundred years later, you tell me, are landscapes like this still familiar? Putting aside Nash's irony, are we closer to his vision of the Great War or that of a 'home fit for heroes'?
>
> (Dillon 70).

Using Nash's ironically titled painting, which shows a sunrise over a devastated landscape of burst trees and shelled earth, *HEATON!* suggests its dissatisfaction with the present. Stanley announces that 'time enough has passed for an assessment. These Heaton men and women we have seen represented tonight by their brilliance or determination left this earth a better place than they found it' (Dillon 69-70). *HEATON!* delivers its final verdict – enshrining the position of these individuals in history. Yet, *HEATON!* also tacks on a plea for us to continue their work. Stanley remarks, 'We may not think we have the ability to change things as they did. But we share their ground, their home. So let us continue their legacy' (Dillon 70). Samuel argues that following in the footsteps of others 'was fundamental to the whole literature of Victorian self-improvement, where the impulse to admire […] was seen not as a way of inculcating deference, but on the contrary as a means of what would today be called 'empowerment'. The imitation of greatness gave high ideals to strive for' (225). *HEATON!* closes with the preservation of such tradition, maintaining a link to the past.

[106] Backing up *HEATON!*'s love of the suburb is Heckels' director's note in the play's programme: 'What a privilege! We've learned about our theatre and its community now and in the past, discovered wonderful and fascinating characters and, in the year of the centenary of women's suffrage found, in Florence Bell, another local hero to accompany George Stanley, Ove Arup, the extraordinary Parsons family and the famous Colin Veitch in our hearts and minds' (Heckels). Searching for heroes and the role of centenaries and anniversaries continue to be considered important, providing regular opportunities for consolidation.

Commenting on Stanley's remarks, Dillon reflects on how this constitutes a direct appeal to audiences' political convictions and, by extension, a sense of duty to continue their work:

> It's like, through whatever world they were living in, they changed things, and I would say for the better. So, it's now our turn to take the mantle on, really. NHS, definitely, with Florence. Yeah, there's all sorts of resonances. #MeToo is in there big time with suffragettes.

Dillon's comments suggest his framing of *HEATON!* as a play which looks to the past for inspiration and moral guidance in the present – searching for what Keating calls a 'usable past', a set of historical referents which can guide a regional society on its distinct road to modernization' (84). While this is arguably true in a highly generalised sense – as we might look to follow in their footsteps in a way which might 'empower' us, albeit with a sense of great deference to the past, *HEATON!* is also preoccupied with the idea of *returning* to an idealised, heroic past founded on popular mythologies of innovation, genius, virtue, valour, and honour. Contemporary links and associations feel awkwardly bolted on to an overall 'moral,' which at the last moment reaches for a sweeping grand narrative designed to connect the lives of Heaton's pioneers to present conditions.

The sheer amount of social friction depicted in *HEATON!* not only makes this ending seem somewhat unsatisfactory, but it makes looking back at the short film played at the start quite puzzling. The film presents an image of Heaton as a harmonious, frictionless, diverse, thriving place, which goes against what we then see in the play, but which is nonetheless reaffirmed at the end of the play. So, *HEATON!* is topped and tailed with an image of both history and Heaton that is all but falsified by the complexity exhibited in the body of the play. We begin with harmony; witness disharmony; then 'discover' harmony once more. In this respect, it seems as if *HEATON!* undoes all the work it puts into showing the idea of a place as the product of a number of tensions, of numerous competing voices, views, and experiences – impossible to simply tie up with a bow.

An ethical concern here relates to the extraction of value under cover of 'inclusion' which goes into producing this 'positive' image. Dillon is obviously aware of this. An example of this can be observed in his comment that 'when we had the penny farthing man riding his penny farthing across Armstrong Bridge, a little Asian kid on his little bike came in behind him. And we got him. Good! More diversity!' (Dillon). Dillon's comment raises the question of whether it is better to include tokenistic representations of 'diversity,' or to leave out non-white faces altogether, thus erasing them completely. After watching the short film, we find out that we are in fact here to see a play about Heaton's white middle- and upper-classes.

Herein lies the problem with claiming to represent an entire place. The film attempts to present a God's-eye view – Heaton in all its thriving diversity – which risks flattening complexity and difference. This might in turn underline Dillon's problematic position as The Author, empowered to represent and speak on behalf of Heaton as a whole.

Dillon was obviously aware of the difficulties inherent in his position as author. During our interview, he talks about how it was a 'shame' that there was little 'diversity' in the film (Dillon). He tells me that he approached a local Chinese takeaway in Heaton which did not wish to take part, and a Muslim grocer on a nearby high street who refused to be filmed on religious grounds. Dillon notes that 'maybe my approach was wrong […] I should have laid the ground, gone and talked to them […] But it's a shame the debate didn't happen, or the issue couldn't be sort of aired' (Dillon). Dillon is aware of his own potential shortcomings – the issue of a white man parachuting into the lives of people from non-white ethnic groups, which might ignite fears regarding exploitation and tokenisation. Dillon's awareness of the limitations of the film point to a broader issue regarding the representation of 'other' individuals and their lives produced through a white middle-class gaze, albeit one which is still sensitive to the need to try to ensure that the work they are creating captures racial and ethnic diversity more fully.

When talking to the Muslim grocer, Dillon says he argued that because the local mosque allowed him to film worshippers in prayer, this undermined the logic of the grocer's refusal to take part on religious grounds. Within this, we might observe the extent to which western 'reason' is deployed as a yardstick for participation – where an invitation is rejected by non-white groups who are thought to 'unreasonably' or 'illogically' refuse to take part. Dillon still sought the grocer's authorisation to film his shop's frontage, so in a sense still got what he needed for the film, enabling Shoe Tree Arts to show Heaton as a culturally diverse place but potentially problematically extract value. An issue raised here is the extent to which Dillon might risk conflating individuals from the same ethnic group who are seemingly, in his eyes, not allowed to disagree, who he might unconsciously think of as a single community who speak with one voice or possess a consistent set of beliefs.

There is no evidence, however, that these concerns bothered the audience for the production. Dillon comments that, following the show, some audience members asked him to 'do Jesmond next, and Gosforth' (Dillon), neighbouring suburbs to Heaton from which the People's Theatre also draws its audience. Dillon notes, however, that Catherine Ellis, who

played the part of Rachel Parsons, told him not to do Jesmond or Gosforth because 'it's full of posh people' (Dillon), indicative of inter-suburb tensions. This antagonism between postcodes also relates to authenticity. Ellis' comments frame Heaton as *not posh*, thus authentic, more 'real,' and therefore more worthy of representation than areas such as Jesmond or Gosforth. Yet, *HEATON!* still tells, predominantly, a 'posh' history. Although *HEATON!* represents the working-class through Catherine and Freddie, they exist primarily to galvanise the fiction. What is more, the history itself is retrieved using official repositories of knowledge which tend to exclude the working-class. Whether or not residents of Heaton may be able to make more of an authenticity claim based on the suburb's working-class roots, the actual history retrieved in *HEATON!* does not trace such roots.

Dillon notes that if he were to write another local history, he would be more likely to tell a history of Byker (another nearby area thought of as *not posh*) but that he is 'probably not the right person to do it' (Dillon). On one hand, this displays a middle-class 'sympathy' towards working-class areas, but on the other hand, the middle-class may use the popular perception and indeed material reality of an area as working-class to their advantage. There is also a question here of how strictly a place must be defined before a person is allowed to speak on its behalf. Is a person only allowed to speak on behalf of their own postcode? How long does a person have to live there before they can speak? Does a person need ancestors going back hundreds of years before they are allowed to speak? If so, only a handful of people will ever be allowed to speak, meaning that history will remain exclusive.

These circumstances are relevant to Dillon's interest in whether or not 'Heaton will turn up' to see the play (Dillon) as they relate to the issue of local representation as a form of validation. Box office sales reports indicate that the majority of people travelled from outside Heaton to see the play. Data show that out of 1,205 tickets sold, 18% were purchased by audiences from NE6 5 addresses (Heaton, south of the theatre); 16% were purchased at the theatre box office and so no postcode data is available; and 11% were purchased by audiences from NE7 7 addresses – High Heaton, north of the theatre (Hope). The total number of tickets from combined Heaton and High Heaton addresses was 349 (29%), with a possibility that tickets purchased directly at the box office also included audiences from Heaton and High Heaton (Hope). So, somewhere between 29% and 45% of all tickets sold came from Heaton addresses. This is not an exact science, but it is worth mentioning that a lot of people travelled from across the North-east of England (and in some cases outside the

region) to see the play, raising questions about the idea of 'our' (hyper-local, regional, or national) history and who validates it.

6.5 Afterlives

A notable afterlife of *HEATON!* is the installation of a commemorative plaque at Florence Bell's former residence in Heaton, obtained by a petition for which members of the choir collected signatures. At an unveiling ceremony in October 2019, schoolchildren from nearby Hotspur Primary School performed a version of a popular hymn, 'Refuge' (see *Fig. 15* below); members of the cast dressed as suffragettes marched up the street to Bell's former residence (see *Fig. 16* below); and Steve Robertson appeared in character as George Stanley to introduce Newcastle's Lord Mayor, who gave a speech on the life of Florence Bell and the installation of the plaque. The performance of local heritage carries over from the theatre production into the creation of a neighbourhood gathering. And so, the production is part of local community organising within Heaton and a tool of official history-making, which is indicative of a community which maintains a position as unofficial and official.

Figure 15: Local residents, schoolchildren, and cast members listen to Steve Robertson as George Stanley (far right). Photograph by Andrew Latimer 2019.

Figure 16: Members of the HEATON! *cast and choir stand for pictures in front of a commemorative blue plaque for Florence Bell, unveiled in a ceremony at Bell's former residence in Heaton in October 2019. Photograph by Andrew Latimer 2019.*

6.6 Conclusion

HEATON! undoubtedly evidences an enduring preoccupation of North East drama with the search for progressive roots – reminiscent of what Samuel calls 'ancestor worship' common in British history (272). This search underpins the play's vexed depiction of Heaton as progressive yet traditional, a place with a tradition of breaking tradition, an ordinary place full of extraordinary people, all of which articulates a tangled story about the suburb rooted in a twentieth century English imaginary. This story rehearses not only a feeling of pride among audiences in Heaton but a sense of collective identity and solidarity among audiences.

Within the local community, *HEATON!*'s celebration of an official history empowers Dillon and the People's Theatre to make claims of legitimacy, thereby building their cultural capital. In tracing 'their' roots (backed up by 'official' forms of evidence), they are able to 'prove' and therefore strengthen their claim to the place, which supports a 'right' to speak on behalf of Heaton. This right is in turn validated by the theatregoing audience who, in approving the

history, make it official, 'our' history, which 'we' own. This 'we' refers to an implicitly middle-class audience both in Heaton and from across the wider North East, whose history is shown on stage. This is not to comment on audience demography, since no demographic data is available, but to highlight that many audiences, and likely the majority, travelled from across the North East (and in some cases from outside the region) to see the play. The particular community whose history is represented in *HEATON!* refers as much to the region's middle-class as it does an audience located specifically within Heaton.

While *HEATON!* reinforces the authority of official history, the play also evidences more recent preoccupations with rewriting master narratives – in particular with making feminist revisions to official histories dominated by men. By writing Heaton's underrepresented women into history, *HEATON!* 'corrects' regional history. But while the play retrieves the lives of underrepresented women, they remain drawn from Heaton's white middle- and upper-classes, thus correcting official history without betraying class loyalties. We could say that *HEATON!* gets its own house in order, but in doing so maintains the position of the white middle- and upper-classes as the historical agents of change – the protagonists of history. Regional history is thus 'updated,' but the position of 'elites' within it is preserved.

In this regard, *HEATON!* adds detail to what Lanigan characterises as a sense among a range of cultural organisations and participants within the region:

> …that the regional identity building of the cultural 'left' in the North East is still under construction. 'Northumbria' has only just superseded 'North East' / 'Geordie', the rural and suburban present and pre-industrial past are only now being slotted into the regional myth-symbol complex. The regional community identity project is still heavily Tyneside centric, and arouses fears of 'Geordie' dominance on Teesside and Sunderland. Added to this, the direction that regional culture is evolving bottom-up in the wake of the collapse of heavy industry is still uncertain (117).

HEATON! contributes to this slotting-in of suburban history; and maintains Tyneside's dominance, but also provides evidence of how even a hyper-local history can be assembled and presented in top-down fashion. A number of familiar conventions in North-eastern storytelling can be observed along the way, such as the valorisation of 'local heroes' (both famous and unsung) who are further secured within or newly slotted into the regional canon; a 'love' of 'home'; the romanticisation of the working-class and working-class culture by the middle-class; and nostalgia for notions of past glory, civic pride, and community spirit.

Herein lies one of the central tensions which also applies to the stage as a means of production. The abundance of middle-class stories thwarts working-class self-representation. To whom do Britain's stages belong? What stories should 'we' tell? The question pertains to building-based amateur theatres as much as professional theatres, particularly in the case of the People's Theatre, which increasingly engages with questions of responsibility and representation. *HEATON!* is staged at a moment when these questions are at the forefront of public discourse. This tense state of affairs not only derives from the opening up of our national history, which cannot avoid wrestling with questions of responsibility and accountability, and feelings of shame and culpability, but because such acts of opening up also bring forth wider examinations of cultural authority, which extend to essentially everything that was (and was not) once considered 'legitimate' or 'real' – from traditions and tastes in art to education and social norms. So, not only are things which were considered 'important' or 'true' now under scrutiny, but so too are the systems which separate culture and people into 'official' and 'unofficial' (legitimate and illegitimate).

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand how North East England represents itself on stage through performance analyses of four theatre productions produced in the region between 2017-18. Each of the productions enable ways of thinking differently about the North East, which also means that the chapters can be read as standalone essays engaging with a variety of live issues in contemporary theatre and performance studies. This conclusion now brings together the productions and considers them in terms of their shared preoccupations and what their collective reading suggests about the North East's theatrical culture and the questions it raises for contemporary theatre and performance studies. I begin with a brief recap of each chapter and then present conclusions, questions raised by the research, and potential further avenues of enquiry.

Chapter Two engaged with what is meant by the North East, how it has been represented in the past, and what is already known about its theatre culture. The chapter established central themes and images both in Geordierama and the region's wider popular representation, such as working-class industrial Tyneside; the white Geordie everyman; local, national, and international politics; poverty and hardship; and conceptions of the tight-knit community or family unit (in the face of external threats). It also revealed the extent to which Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door* can be seen as instrumental in constructing and maintaining a popular, alternative, left-wing tradition in North East theatre, underpinned by its representation and celebration of the history of mining in the region. It also considered North East theatre's marginalisation in wider academic scholarship, which contributes to external perceptions of the region as culturally barren, outdated, or theatrically unremarkable, set against efforts within the region in recent years to expand its theatrical history and bring more theatre companies into the fold, in turn challenging the dominant Live/Plater model.

Chapter Three examined how *Beyond the End of the Road* might be considered authentic in terms of its depiction of rural farming life in present-day Northumberland. November Club gathered the testimony of local audiences and represented local people in both the creative process and final show, partly with an intention of strengthening social bonds within rural communities, which can be considered to support Artistic Director Cinzia Hardy's belief in the authenticity of the company. Equally, the accuracy of the depiction was balanced against a desire to present a sympathetic portrayal and the artistic interests of the creative team. I also found the show's articulation of a Northumbrian way of life to be fraught with tensions

regarding the creation of insiders and outsiders (which is a potential problem with the notion of 'community' itself) and the preservation of white middle-class social totality, indicating the extent to which authenticity can become (inadvertently or not) a tool for othering and may veer into sentimentalism for an idealised English way of life.

Chapter Four argued that *The Terminal Velocity of Snowflakes* can be thought of as contemporary in the sense that it stages the national zeitgeist of the mid-2010s, characterised by postmodern flux and the period of neoliberal fallout after the global financial crisis in 2008. I also argued that *Snowflakes*' focus on the present and future lives of its characters challenges the popular image of the North East as obsessed with its industrial heritage. At the same time, I demonstrated how *Snowflakes* sought to reconcile its staging of the contemporary with its status as a Christmas show, which led the play to retreat into the festive and emphasise childhood origins, thereby challenging its status as contemporary. More broadly, I argued that contemporary when applied to *Snowflakes* essentially means metropolitan. In importing metropolitan theatre-making styles and tastes (via Payne's *Constellations*) into a North East context, *Snowflakes* imitates London in a way which reinforces Newcastle's own entrapment and status as provincial (i.e., deferential to the centre).

Chapter Five considered what it means for Darlington Operatic Society to describe its work as lavish in relation to the company's production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. I argued that the show functions as a social safety valve, enabling audiences to blow off steam and escape the reality of austerity. I also explored the ways in which prioritising pleasure remains a political decision, which underpinned my contestation of the 'universal' and 'feel-good' experiences *Priscilla* is thought to offer. In addition, I demonstrated how *Priscilla* contests the idea of the provincial region, as the show is a global musical, and how it can be considered a colourful, camp alternative to the 'grim up North' adage, which depicts life in the North East as bleak, drab, and socially conventional (or attitudinally conservative). In doing so, I also addressed Teesside's marginalised position in North East history and amateur musical theatre's parallel position in theatre and performance studies.

Chapter Six examined the many tensions and complexities evident in *HEATON!*'s performance of official history. *HEATON!* favours Great Man Theory, which frames history as an unbroken linear line of progress led by 'distinguished' individuals (principally industrialists, reformists, and Fabians). *HEATON!* might be also used to validate perceptions

of the North East as a nostalgic region concerned with celebrating its roots. Yet, the play also presents a feminist corrective to a history which has tended to canonise the male upper-class and democratised regional history by including the lives of Heaton's middle-class. It can be also considered an unofficial history in that it is the product of a hyper-local community preserving its own heritage, operating outside of the world of 'authorised' culture (such as professional theatre or the region's civic bodies and universities). This matter is complicated, however, by the People's increasing depiction in academic scholarship as a major national institution and central figure in the history of amateur theatre in Britain.

Clearly, there is a myth-busting element to the research presented in this thesis. The four case studies reveal that the North East's theatrical culture extends far beyond the 'Geordierama' tradition (and industrial Tyneside), challenging the image of the North East as culturally barren, homogenous, or outdated. Having said that, all four productions espouse socially traditional or dominant values. *Beyond* emphasises the importance of family and maintains the image of pastoral England, and even invokes Christian gospel and the image of Heaven to underline community togetherness and the village's (holy) spirit. *Snowflakes* centres the relationship of a young, white, able-bodied, heterosexual couple – a 'timeless' story of star-crossed lovers tumbling through the(ir) universe as much as one which engages with contemporary mores and anxieties. *HEATON!* favours a Great Man view of history, though it is extended to include women and the middle-class, as opposed to conceiving of history as a fractured or divergent set of temporalities, or as a process which can be influenced by mass social movements. *Priscilla* queers convention in more ways than one but still remains highly orthodox in terms of its valorisation of family and preservation of the status quo.

Notably, all four productions end with declarations of love, which indicates the power of romance, sentiment, and emotion. They are all stories with 'heart' – a central characteristic of Geordierama. In *Beyond,* Alec watches on as his shed goes up in flames, and with it the ashes of his late wife, as he is comforted by friends and family. Members of a choir stand in the audience, breaking down the audience/performer divide, suggesting that 'we' are all part of the same community and thus emphasising social harmony. In *Snowflakes,* Rosie and Charlie discover that they can live out their relationship in an eternal solipsistic fantasy, as the pair gaze up at the sky and speak the word 'together.' In *Priscilla,* characters meet their soulmates and reunite with their families, as they settle into traditional social roles. In *HEATON!,* the play's happy ending is resolved by the formation of major liberal institutions as well as

marrying off Freddie and Catherine. Freddie is also accepted into university – achieving upward social mobility – which further maintains the status quo.

Consequently, all four productions present relatively closed endings, which intend to reassure audiences. Characters are happy, which is meant to leave audiences feeling satisfied that all the 'loose ends' have been tied up. In *Beyond*, Thomas decides that he will leave the farm and go to university; brothers Alec and Bobby make peace; and Sula reunites with her daughter who has travelled from the city. In *Snowflakes*, Rosie and Charlie return to the gate in Heaton Park where they first met, as the pair come full circle (emphasising cyclical time). In *HEATON!*, the suffragettes enter to announce the formation of the Women's Engineering Society and the National Health Service. Catherine lands a job at an architect's firm, Freddie is accepted into Newcastle University, and the pair announce their marriage. In *Priscilla*, Bernadette stays with Bob in Alice Springs, while Tick is reunited with his son, shortly before a glitter cannon rains down confetti on the stage.

There appears to be, therefore, little transformation in terms of productions' worldviews or social structures – a constancy which seeks to offer comfort (not necessarily hope or change) to audiences in restoring the balance of power. As such, the morals of the productions gravitate around social and interpersonal harmony – the strengthening of the community, romantic unions, the survival of the family unit, or the discovery of self-belief. In this regard, there is an appeal to audiences' emotions combined with a call for us to 'look within' to become more caring, empathetic, and responsible people. An appeal to our shared 'humanity' is favoured over engagement with how social norms are formed or reinforced. Crucially, each production concludes with a vision of social totality where 'we' come together – whether that be as a community (*Beyond*), a couple (*Snowflakes*), a liberal group (*HEATON!*), or a family (*Priscilla*). In *HEATON!* especially, there is a sense that we must *set aside* our differences i.e., cross the class divide, though in actuality it is the working-class Freddie and Catherine who must abandon their social position and assimilate into the ranks of the middle-class.

In a broader sense, then, class is an uncomfortable subject. *Beyond*, *Snowflakes* and *HEATON!* all work through class tensions in their own ways. *Beyond* casts humble farmer Alec in tension with his wealthier brother Bobby (though this is also about brotherly rivalry in farming families). *HEATON!* writes campaigner Florence Bell into regional history while telling its story through the 'memories' of working-class Freddie and the militant Catherine (acknowledging the history of militancy in the suffrage struggle but also questioning the

extent to which militancy does more harm to the cause than good). *Snowflakes* channels Billy Elliot into the character of Charlie and pairs him up with the more affluent Rosie, as they double as star-crossed lovers breaking the class divide (a trope which is also evident in *HEATON!* through Freddie's marriage to the posher Catherine). Ultimately, *HEATON!* and *Snowflakes* show Freddie and Charlie's desire to escape their working-class lives.

Also worth highlighting is an interplay between the community/chorus and individuals/outsiders. In *Beyond*, Sula is the 'townie' who comes to understand the importance of family and find peace in a rural way of life (she ends up staying in the village and sets up her own artist's studio). In doing so, she also trades places with her sister Evie who moves to the city, emphasising urban-rural exchange. *Priscilla*'s drag queens are clearly presented as outsiders to conventional society, but they end up assimilating into it. *HEATON!* frames its historical figures as radical pioneers swimming against the tide of tradition and orthodoxy, but who are now, ironically, canonical. *Snowflakes* focuses on the inner monologues of two anxious young Geordies who end up 'together.' All four shows also literally end with the full cast on stage. Characters announce their personal resolutions – jobs, engagements, university places. In effect, audiences are rewarded for rooting for these characters, as their successes provide an emotional pay-off. These bands of outsiders and misfits – political rebels, social underdogs, alternative heroes, industrial pioneers – have triumphed over adversity. The regional chorus is shown to be a group of outsiders who have become insiders – once marginal, now central.

Nostalgia for roots and the search for origins also appear to be two enduring preoccupations. *Beyond* engages with questions of Northumbrian ancestry and the area's cultural traditions. *HEATON!* celebrates the local area's pioneers in whose footsteps we are said to walk (and to whom we are indebted) – displaying parallel concerns with ancestry, inheritance, and historical debt. *Snowflakes* emphasises a return to childhood and cycles of rebirth (an image also expressed in the People's Theatre's emblem of a phoenix rising from the ashes). Even *Priscilla* – the 'odd one out' in that it is not set in the region – is nonetheless concerned with roots (in the form of paternal responsibility and family). This shared preoccupation across the productions indicates the enduring power of tradition and conventional social norms in the region. Often, these traditions are shown to be passed down orally and generationally as opposed to reinforced institutionally, which speaks to the importance of vernacular culture to the specific value systems of the four productions (and the extent to which theatre is itself used as a method of passing down such traditions).

Equally, this collective focus on history and the past might be considered in tension with *Beyond* and *Snowflakes*' interest in the present and future, and in relation to a lack of archival preservation by some of the region's professional theatre companies. Of course, documenting and preserving a record of past performance is never a straightforward proposition, not least because resource – or lack of it – tends to dictate how much time companies are able to spend in maintaining stable archives. Working at speed and focusing on 'the now' are also symptomatic of the firefighting reality of the subsidised arts sector. There is also a view among some theatre-makers in the region that theatre should *not* be preserved (i.e., there is value in the ephemerality of the encounter, as audiences congregate for a shared, temporary experience). At the same time, preservation clearly remains important for producing fuller, more equitable and nuanced accounts of the past.

Equally, the importance of history sits in tension with the productions' shared interest in moving on from it, as all conclude with final declarations about the importance of letting go of the past. In *Beyond*, the burning of Alec's shed symbolises his break with the past, as the choir literally sing 'let go of all your woe and care.' In *Snowflakes*, Rosie and Charlie are able to break cyclical history by (somewhat magically) coming to the realisation that there are infinite times/universes. In *Priscilla*, past dogma (in the form of regressive social attitudes and masculinity) is shown to be a blocker to social progress and tolerance. *HEATON!* undoubtedly reminds audiences of the importance of the past but it also advises audiences not to compare themselves with history's pioneers and thus become paralysed by feelings of inadequacy (i.e., agency in the present is the play's final watchword). Indeed, one of the functions of breaking with the past in all of the productions is to produce empowerment and agency, encouraging its characters (and therefore audiences) to move 'forward' – not to forget the past but to recognise that it does not hold dominion over the present.

The productions' shared preoccupation with ancestry and roots also correlates to a mutual interest in place and home. *Snowflakes* stages the lives of two young Geordies – the region's dominant group – but expands the image beyond that of the cloth-cap wearing miner. *Beyond* deals with questions of what it means to be Northumbrian or to belong in Northumberland, which unsettles the dominance of Tyneside, but is still broad in the sense that Northumberland is itself a large county of the North East. *HEATON!* celebrates the history of a single postcode (NE6), effectively contemplating what makes a 'Heatonian' (a predominantly bourgeois, sub-urban alternative to the proletarian, urban Geordie) – raising the question of whether or not there is such a thing as a 'Gosforthian' or 'Jesmondian.' Who

'we' are is directly linked to place in the productions – even in *Priscilla*, as gender and identity are explored in relation to Australian norms of masculinity and the Outback.

Regional identity is therefore a nebulous formulation – spread (or broken down), in three of the productions, across Northumberland, Newcastle, and Heaton. In this respect, I did not find a unified, cohesive 'north-easternness' but numerous sub-regional identities. As such, the North East does not speak with one voice, nor is it a cultural monolith. This adds credence to observations made by Anssi Paasi who noted that 'it is useful to distinguish *analytically* between the *identity of a region*, and the *regional identity* (or regional consciousness) of the people living in it or outside of it' (478). In this regard, the North East's identity can be considered a patchwork rather than a shared consciousness. This conclusion also reflects the fact that the North East's theatre culture is made by practitioners who were born here, who left and then returned, and who migrated to the region (and who might prioritise other forms of identification over 'north-eastern,' 'Geordie,' 'Northumbrian' etcetera).

Tensions between regional commonality and sub-regional difference likewise map onto the keywords under analysis in this thesis. The keywords can be considered regionally bound in that they have emerged from the sub-regional environments in which the theatre companies work and draw upon the performance heritage of each company. The case studies demonstrate that the four theatre companies share a regional tradition of maintaining and continually renewing their own history, which prioritises the places in which they are situated and audiences by which they are surrounded, yet the result is a varied theatre ecology with numerous layers, performance 'scenes,' and modes of art industry. Keyword analysis enables an interrogation of terms (useful in problematising the dangers of heuristics) but also acts as the beginnings of a vocabulary of North East theatre and performance, which creates a reference point from which to carry out further work into the region's performance lexicon.

An irony emerges here in that one might expect a region which is sensitive to the denial of its own agency (and which therefore prioritises cultural specificity) to avoid making claims of regional cohesion and universalism. Yet three of the four productions were described to me as universal. Berry described *Snowflakes* as 'universal'; Doherty expressed her desire for *Beyond* to have an 'anywhere type feel' (the village in *Beyond* is simply called Place); and Hand called *Priscilla* a 'universal story.' This might be said to reflect individual practitioners' marketing of their work as open to everyone – a utopian space for cultural exchange where they wish to avoid placing restrictions on who the work is 'for.' But using

the term universal also risks claiming that highly particular and conventional stories speak on behalf of collective experience.[107] In this regard, I suggest that there is a confusion of accessibility with universalism. Themes might be universal, but the narratives in which they are explored are not.

I also suggest that practitioners' emphasis that their work is universal is a distinctly north-eastern anxiety, which derives partly from working on the periphery. Hall, for instance, described his play, *The Pitmen Painters*, which went on to Broadway and the West End, as universal (qtd. in Manhattan Theatre Club). *Painters* is a story about a group of white working-class miners in North East England, but for Hall this was a vehicle through which to tell a 'universal' story about 'who owns art' and 'who gets to be an artist' (qtd. in Manhattan Theatre Club). There appears to be a recurring claim made by some North East practitioners that although a story might be set and/or performed in the North East, it has wider appeal i.e., the work might be 'local' but this does not make it culturally 'low' or 'other.' With regards to *Beyond*, this anxiety is pronounced as November Club works, in a sense, on the periphery of the periphery. These anxieties seem to resonate in the context of the North East's marginalisation in scholarship by critics based outside of the region, which maintains the North East's position as 'local' (i.e., other, detached from wider culture and discourse).

On this point, the productions exhibit varying proximities to the centre. *Snowflakes* is situated at the regional centre (Newcastle) but is also clearly concerned with imitating the art styles and tastes of the metropolitan centre (London), which emphasises its vexed centrality/marginality. This speaks to the vexed position of Live Theatre, which might be said to function as a satellite of London (with obvious strategic benefits for acquiring resource). An irony is that *Snowflakes* is framed as innovative (i.e., rule-breaking) but is highly conventional in that it imitates the metropolitan centre. *HEATON!* might appear to possess no relation to the centre, as it constitutes a local community addressing itself in a theatre that is, in some ways, self-sufficient (which is itself worthy of further research in terms of amateur theatre's resilience). But at the same time, writer Peter Dillon took inspiration from the Great Exhibition of the North, which connected the production to contemporary culture, while the People's Theatre has received funding from Arts Council England, making it a beneficiary of

[107] I take direction from Toni Morrison here for whom 'universal [is] a word hopelessly stripped of meaning'. In 'The Language Must Not Sweat,' Morrison said that '[i]f I tried to write a universal novel, it would be water. Behind this question is the suggestion that to write for black people is somehow to diminish the writing. From my perspective there are only black people. When I say 'people,' that's what I mean' (Morrison).

public funds from the centre (which raises questions about the company's civic responsibility).

The point here is that North East companies and practitioners are taking influence and inspiration from a wide range of sources within and beyond the region, combining these influences with their own interests and ideas and, at times, those of the communities by which they are surrounded and with whom they work. November Club interviewed local people, worked with community groups, and performed Northumbrian folk traditions, yet also took cues from the work of companies further afield such as Welfare State International and dreamthinkspeak. It might be also considered a type of border ballad in that Laura Lindow's script takes cues from Scottish vernacular culture. Of course, the North East is not an island detached from wider culture, despite its specific vernacular culture and regional myths, which hold great power and play a major role in the kinds of stories it tells. It also shares common preoccupations such as nostalgia for roots, a love of underdogs, and the importance of family, among others. At the same time, authorship of North East theatre is a constantly mutating assemblage of tastes, groups, institutions, value systems, and art practices.

The specific challenges, and benefits, of working on the periphery raise several potential avenues of further research. Building power on the margins might help to challenge the UK's extreme wealth inequality, driven by a highly centralised London-oriented economy, as well as elite forms of 'Englishness' principally performed and proliferated by the nation's white middle- and upper-classes. In this regard, there is a seductive quality to the idea of the margins as productive, restorative spaces for collaboration, experimentation, radical potential, and political alternatives (and thus utopian or egalitarian futures). In *Demand the Impossible* (1986), Tom Moylan wrote that an 'alliance of margins without a center [sic] anticipates in both the personal and political dimensions the new values and the new society' (200). Having said that, does accepting the North East's position as marginal also mean accepting its own marginalisation? From my own perspective, the North East is not marginal. But it is undoubtedly marginal*ised* in numerous ways, indicative of the power relation which governs its cultural status, however offensive or unjust that might be. In other words, might embracing marginality also involve, in practice, surrendering to the centre?

These questions are particularly pertinent in relation to widening inequality between centre and periphery – and more specifically North and South in England (unevidenced claims about

regional 'levelling up' notwithstanding) – which should also act as a cautionary note for the margins not to *become* a centre amid the scramble for resources (however enticing that idea might be). As long as there are centres, there will be margins, which suggests that power-building in the margins is as much achieved by divesting centres of power. This supports the case for regional devolution in pursuit of returning power, wealth, and control to regional communities. This has sparked my interest in community wealth-building and community theatre (though I believe that there is also value in sticking with the term 'grassroots' to counter the increasingly neoliberalised 'community').

Anxieties which emanate from working on the periphery also reveal tensions inherent in 'place.' Being 'rooted' often underpins value in the sense of enabling companies to build long-term relationships with audiences, embedding themselves within and thus becoming part of the local community. November Club grappled with these questions. Prior to making *Beyond*, the company worked site-specifically within Northumberland in one place at a time. But Artistic Director Cinzia Hardy wanted to reach more audiences, particularly in those rural communities which are the least well-served in accessing artistic work, which required making a piece of theatre that could be toured. This underpinned the company's extensive programme of outreach work and community engagement in each village to which the show toured in order to protect the integrity of the company's core principles, which prioritise the agency of audiences.[108] Equally, 'place-making' has itself become a neoliberal endeavour, where 'improving' a place is often fraught with tensions regarding class, wealth, race, or tied up with processes of gentrification and social cleansing.

There is a need to continue research into the North East's theatrical culture to further expand and deepen understandings of the region and bring to light the work of other marginalised groups, practitioners, and companies. As I discussed in Chapter Two, moves have been made in this direction during the period of my own research, such as Newcastle University's accession of Live Theatre's archive and work with Open Clasp as well as the doctoral thesis of Joicey, which considers the value and significance of participation activity at Northern Stage, and the extent to which it has been neglected. Adding to these projects by bringing even more companies and practitioners into the fold remains vital for the production of a more detailed account of the region's theatre culture. But it also has implications for

[108] This raises questions regarding the extent to which companies should give audiences 'what they want' or present audiences with work that might also surprise or challenge them. McGrath wrote about this issue in *A Good Night Out* (1981), noting that when a theatre company enters a space that is owned by a local community, the audience controls the limits of the form, which suggests that power is negotiated.

democratising the region's theatre culture, as the region's building-based institutions tend to obscure its smaller independent companies and large freelance sector.

There is also value in thinking more about how the research shifted from ethnography to historiography. Looking back from a position in 2022, the productions seem to belong to a different time altogether – pre-Covid, before the full effects of Brexit were made clear (particularly in the North East, which lost a major revenue source in the European Regional Development Fund), during a brief optimistic period of mass mobilisation of ordinary people in politics under Corbynism. This is not to romanticise the productions as belonging to a 'better' or 'happier' time, but to think of them as spanning numerous ruptures. They preceded, arguably, the most significant of all ruptures in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic, which threatened not only a generation of theatre artists and workers with insolvency practically overnight (highlighted by paltry financial support from the centre), but our ability to safely congregate in person and fulfil our creative and social selves. How theatre adapts to, addresses, or attempts to ignore this new reality – through continued development of hybrid digital/in-person models, or efforts to return to pre-pandemic norms – remains to be seen.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted and exacerbated a number of existing structural inequalities. Researching contemporary theatre and performance during such a time raises questions regarding care and responsibility. Primarily, is it responsible to encourage new artists to enter an industry which does not, on the whole, provide stable long-term care and support for them to develop their practices and sustain their careers? In other words, the future of an equitable, democratic industry hinges, at least in part, on the abolition of precarity and casualisation. The pandemic has also raised a number of questions regarding the *type* of work that is funded. Will the industry consolidate and programme 'safe' work by big names, which will guarantee return on investment? Does this mean support for more experimental work will dry up? Will it become even more difficult for freelancers to sustain a career in the arts? Is state censorship of artistic work which governments deem to be 'unpatriotic' on the horizon, raising fears of instrumentalisation?

Focus on the contemporary also raises questions regarding methodological temporalities and the future of the field. Should we be studying the (recent or long-term) past to understand how we got here and thus find a way out or forward? Should we concentrate all our efforts on the present due to the nature of its complexity and the urgency of immediate action? Should we abandon presentism and look to the future in the sense of building utopian alternatives to

the here and now? Does focus on the contemporary require study of all three? From a historiographical standpoint, a utopian scenario might be that these temporalities coexist harmoniously and contribute to a lively research culture generating many solutions. But who is even able to do such research at a time when university arts and humanities programmes (and whole departments) are being defunded or closed? How does this square with the flood of new handbooks into the academic market at a time when precarity and competition prohibit many early-career academics from safely entering the sector?

Continuing to speak of 'regional theatre' in this context also invites further study. There is still a need to distinguish between London and not-London (both to acknowledge differences between the centre and the regions and to add depth and detail to a 'not-London' which the centre typically treats as an amorphous mass). But at the same time, using the phrase regional theatre seems to uphold an artificial divide between centre/margins and maintain an image of 'the regions' as homogenous. Gardner made the point that if the centre had embraced, as an example, the popular work of Middle Child in Hull – a city in which just over two thirds of voters chose for the UK to leave the European Union – it might have discovered the mood of citizens which felt cut off and derided by the centre. In other words, the shock felt by the centre – whose own hubris and deference to the far-right played a part in calling the referendum – rather highlighted how out of touch and provincial it had become (in contrast with the standard formulation which frames the regions as provincial).

This research will be of potential value to scholars from a wide range of disciplines including theatre and performance studies, cultural studies, history, geography, and sociology. The study of the North East and its theatrical culture necessarily involves engagement with such disciplines, as is evidenced in Chapter Two's theorisation of Northeasternness and conventions of Geordierama. This research should also, I hope, be of interest to the specific theatre companies and practitioners whose work has been examined, as well as companies and practitioners who wish to consider their own positions regionally and nationally. In addition, this thesis demonstrates the profound limitations of our understanding of British theatre culture, which has omitted a substantial theatrical region from the national theatre record. It also offers insights into ethical dilemmas which emerge from carrying out contemporary theatre research: writing about (and from within) a marginalised region which is fraught with anxieties regarding its own agency and misrepresentation; and attests to the importance of acknowledging self-identification in the examination of artistic works.

A final narrative digression helps to bring home what is at stake in this project. In March 2018 – eighteen months into this PhD – Northern Stage in Newcastle put on a production of *The Last Ship*. In many respects, *The Last Ship* is the epitome of Geordierama: a musical starring local stalwart Charlie Hardwick, set in nearby Wallsend on Tyneside during the Thatcher era, based on songs by Wallsend-born Sting, which tells of the effect of the local shipyard closure on the community. The production centres on themes of community togetherness, working-class life, and homecoming, and oscillates between history and pageantry, lament and homage, recollection and romance, celebration and exploitation, all of which can be considered vexed dynamics (or, alternatively, primary ingredients) of Geordierama. During a star-studded gala to raise money for the Graham Wylie Foundation, fellow North East-born celebrities such as Alan Shearer, Joe McElderry, Denise Welch, and Sting himself made appearances and spoke – in self-effacing tones – about life 'back then,' the 'warmth' of the region, and, in Sting's words, the importance of staging a show 'about the people it's being shown to […] It's their story, and I'm proud of telling it,' he remarked (qtd. in Musical Theatre Review).

This collective display of wistful remembrance and declarations of pride in representing 'the people' are also emblematic of Geordierama. They reveal how nostalgia for roots and nebulous notions of community spirit (usually shown as generated and evidenced in the face of an external threat) are often central to the authenticity claim of the North East – the effect of which frames the region as incorruptibly tight-knit while, somewhat paradoxically, suggesting that 'we' have lost this sense of community togetherness in the present. In turn, this collective display raises questions regarding the extent to which forms of cosy regionalism are manufactured and propounded by the North East's institutions, leading authors, and social elite. The complex reality of Geordierama is that it cuts across the class divide from above and below: it can be considered part of North East working-class vernacular culture and equally an invention of (or a falsification by) the region's bourgeoisie.

The productions examined in this thesis clearly go beyond Geordierama, but they also share in its conventional mores and, especially, its nostalgia for roots. A month after *The Last Ship* premiered at Northern Stage, Darlington Operatic Society staged *Priscilla* – a show that could be considered antithetical to Geordierama in that it tells the story of three drag queens from Sydney. Despite its various counters to Geordierama, however, *Priscilla* is still expected to go down well with audiences in Darlington – partly because it repackages camp aesthetics into hedonistic fun for mainstream consumption, but ultimately, I suggest, because

Priscilla tells a traditional story of going back to one's roots. This is also true of the other three productions examined in this thesis. As such, they are instructive in understanding the extent to which Geordierama inflects the theatre of the North East.

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