

T H U R S D A Y , 1 2 M B L O G A R C

## Drame Princes – Mladinsko, Ljubljana

[seen 07/05/16]

I'm not sure I've fully got to grips with what to do with the work of Elfriede Jelinek. Or, rather, I'm totally sure I haven't. It's problematic work. We know that. It's "problematic" even if you're a fluent German speaker and are fully theatre-literate. I'm not even slightly that. And here, with *Prinzessinnendramen: Der Tod und das Mädchen I–V*, we have the extra problem that I'm watching English surtitles over a production in Slovenian by the Polish director Michał Borczuch. The five pieces are essentially postdramatic monologues alluding to Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Ingeborg Bachmann, Jacqueline Onassis, and Sylvia Plath – dense reflections on their mythologies and identities as critiques of Austrian patriarchal capitalism.

So it's heavy going. Which is fine. Indeed, regular readers might assume I'd adore it. But, well, ultimately, one can only disavow one's in-bred national tendencies so much. That very English desire to know "what's it for?" "what am I meant to think?" becomes irrepressible sometimes. And this is probably exacerbated by the fact that reading the dense text in English, which is not even meant – really – to be translatable at all, let alone the fact that the strategies it uses would probably necessitate weeks if not months of study, when they feel like they should be second nature. Added to this, is the fact that Borczuch's staging tends toward the stark, near empty stage, or else minimalise live-feed action, or other strategies of distantiating.

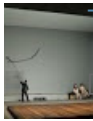
Imagine reading a third-generation translation of, I dunno, *JH Pymne* while women speak in a foreign language, their movements alienated from their words' meanings. That's where we are here.


Then there's the fact that [when translated as just meaning] Jelinek text is just so relentlessly bleak and abrasive. Which, again, I should be up for, but there, on that day, at least, it just seemed so overdone. The relentlessness, the miserablism, the endless, endless sarcasm, irony, and not-even-definitely-real attacks on, oh, everything. The only element that really stuck for me in this production was when they played Sylvia Plath's reading of her own poem *Daddy* (which is in English, tellingly), which, in the context of Jelinek's prose, and being in real central Europe, suddenly feels a bit callow evoking Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen like they were fairy tale places like Camelot. Plath's drawly, arch delivery doesn't help much either.

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P O P U L A R

 [X – Royal Court, London](#)  
[seen 11/04/16] [ contains spoilers in order to be able to talk about meaning ]  
My favourite joke in a poem defines Plutocracy as ...

 [The Seagull – Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne](#)  
[seen 21/04/16 at MITEM III, Nemzeti Színház, Budapest ] It has maybe become a bit too de rigueur to knock Thomas Ostermeier. As (st...

 [The Patriots – Serbian National Theater, Belgrade](#)  
[seen 14/04/16 at MITEM III, Nemzeti Színház, Budapest ] Jovan Sterija Popović's *The Patriots* is brilliant. Nominally, it deals wit...

ainstream

I mean, it's still fascinating. I'm glad I saw it. I'd want to see a performance again of it again. But perhaps in English, next time, and with live commentary on it. Do I think having staged footnotes would be bad? No. Quite the reverse, I think they'd be excellent. I wonder, in fact, if the ideal UK solution to staging Jelinek is as a symposium or choreographed panel discussion.

It's worth stating, however, that Damjana Černe as Jackie has won a national award for her performance, and was indeed strikingly good.

I really wish I'd liked the whole more, but somehow something didn't click for me. Trust me, I'm as annoyed about this as you are. I don't like not liking things and the most articulate reason to hand being that they're too cynical. That doesn't even sound like me. It sounds like Charles Spencer, FFS.

Anyway. Enough.

Onwards.

P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 5 A : Y 3 D 9 O N  
N O C O M L M K S S T  P O S

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## Ristić Komplex – Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana

[seen 06/05/16]

It's fascinating how much ground can shift between a first and second viewing of a show. The first time I saw *The Ristić Complex* (at [BITEF'15](#)) I remember watching it \*incredibly closely\*. Really concentrating on it, working at it; trying to dig out meaning, and interpret "accurately". In one way, this was something of a fool's errand; without an incredibly detailed knowledge of Ljubiša Ristić's body of work – which stretches back to the Yugoslavian sixties or seventies – there's an iconography at work here that is simply unavailable at its primary level. If you want an easy comparison, imagine watching a piece about, say, David Bowie, in which his life and times are obliquely critiqued but almost all the symbolism is taken from his album covers and videos etc. Simply asking "what does the Pierrot mean?" is the wrong question. On one level, it maybe meant \*something\* specific in its original context, but without knowing that there even is an original context, you'd have no idea why it had cropped up in the [hypothetical Bowie-]piece. And so it is here. Most of the most striking images are adaptations or bastardisations or references-to scenes from the plays and films he directed, reworked into reflections on his own life and strange political trajectory; from an "art terrorist" director at Mladinsko in Yugoslavia to Milošević's Minister of Culture during the ex-Yugoslavian civil wars.

So, that all sounds quite hopeless, yes? Wrong. Watching again, having had the dramaturgy really fully explained, instead of "getting it" better, I actually just watched in a more relaxed way. Watched it just



16 ] When the National Theatre announced their new season in February, I joked that this was the day that I'd officially ...



Tonight I'm Gonna Be The New Me – Forest Fringe, Leith

[seen 25/08/15 ] Tonight I'm Gonna Be The New Me is brilliant. It's also going on from Forest Fringe to the Soho from 7th September...

as a piece of theatre, without worrying at all about specifics-of-meaning, or a “proper reading”. And the revelation was, if anything it worked even better just watched as an expression of abstract art. That’s not to say it suddenly felt like some sort of floaty free-for-all (as if anything ever does). But instead, watching trajectories and tendencies of scenes and exchanges rather than details and interpretations made the whole seem far more fluid. You could be impressed by the commitment and physicality of the performers rather than the intellectual rigour of the dramaturgs, for instance.

What was also interesting was how the piece \*felt\* different. Yes, I was sitting in as wildly different a vantage point, in a different building, with a different view (pretty much eye-level some way back in Mladinsko’s main space rather than an almost bird’s-eye-view from the balcony of the BITEF theatre), but that doesn’t even begin to account for it. Perhaps there was the total different in audience too – a smallish crowd of locals, rather than a rammed International Festival première. There was also maybe something more comfortable than confrontational in this performance. The dynamics for watching were probably more friendly across-the-board, and I wonder if that even feed back from the company on stage; like they were presenting Art here and not A Fight. I honestly don’t know. Perhaps they’d be entirely surprised by this assessment, perhaps not at all. The “gender politics” of the casting also felt far less problematic this time round – maybe due in part to being paired with Jelinek’s *Drame Princes* (five women, one (somewhat perfunctory) bloke).

But, yes. While feeling less \*intense\* – the upside of that concentration that I’d brought to the piece the first time round – this time it struck me almost as this incredibly vivid, moving almost dance-like meditation on cycles of entropy and collapse. Motifs from art repeatedly collapsing into the horrific carnage of civil war.

P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 4 A : Y I D I O N  
N O C O M L M N K S S T  P O S

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## Butnskala – Prešernovem gledališču, Kranj

[seen 06/05/16]



By way of direct contrast [see *previous review*], the next piece in the Mladinsko repertoire showcase, was a co-production with the Prešernovem theatre in Kranj. Now, Ljubljana is probably the quietest, prettiest, most unspoilt capital city in Europe, but the little town of Kranj, about twenty-five minutes outside Ljubljana is something else entirely. We arrived early into what looked reliably like the town centre. There was, after all, the theatre, a massive church, and some sort of square. All heart-breakingly lovely, and all almost completely empty and quiet. Look, I took photos.



So that's where we are. Now, believe it or not, all this formed an ideal backdrop to \*getting\* *Butnskala*. Emil Filipič and Marko Derganc's *Butnskala* started life as a radio play in 1979(?). It has subsequently – much more recently – been turned into a graphic novel. And now it's on stage, directed by Vito Taufer.

This information about it starting life as a radio play also felt crucial to finally "getting" the thing. And we didn't learn it until the interval. Up to that point, I'd definitely been \*enjoying myself\*; the allegorical story is easily entertaining enough just to keep you engaged, but I had previously been quite surprised by the entirely \*straight\* treatment. Much more like something you'd see Michael Grandage do with Shakespeare (but not boring) than the overtly art theatre I was more used to seeing in Slovenia.

But, no. When you get that it's an adaptation of a late seventies radio series (and graphic novel), then it all falls into place. The Pythonesque/Goon Show/Hitchhiker's Guide... humour, the dialogue, the incredibly unlikely antics... (I mean, bear in mind until the interval, I'd been watching not even knowing when it had been written, whether it was an updated production of a classic, anything...)

So, the basic plot of *Butnskala* is that a musician, Ervin Krajc (Matija

Vastl), down on his luck and contemplating suicide. A professor (Blaž Šef) advises him to go up the mountain and chat to the people up there. (I think?) Either way, Kralj meets the people up the mountain. They're a large community and they meet up their to run fast, head-first, into a special boulder they've got up there...

I mean, it's such a simple allegory it's brilliant. The group are pretty hardline, or fundamentalist, about running headlong into a rock. They have a spiritual leader, who leads them in appreciations of the joys of slamming head first into a massive stone (and who remains noticeably free from running into anything hard himself). In fact, the first parallel I thought, before I knew it was a radio play from late-seventies Yugoslavia of was with *People, Places & Things*. There was something oddly similar about the set-up of misfit amongst fanatics (fanatics trying to help themselves, at that). Here, however, the allegory is that bit more on-the-nose. I mean, it's about people trying to achieve peace and subsequent dominance by bashing their heads against a rock. It couldn't spell it out any more, could it?

After this set-up, the narrative gets a lot more specific. There's a rise to power, a rival faction, suspected double-agents/spies, and ultimately a violent power-grab but the head-against-rock gang. Without ever specifically saying which period, or which country, the story speaks pretty clearly to almost any cynical view of revolutionary and post-revolutionary politics. Think also: the relevant strand of Chris Thorpe's *There Has Possibly Been An Incident*. Of course, being \*a comedy\* the brutality is massively underplayed – but still omnipresent. Not knowing the genre or what might happen \*at all\* is really exciting. As it turns out, the violence never gets amped-up to make a point, but even feeling it could is effective.

After the interval, there's a \*really long\* extended skit on State Entertainment, which \*I think\* includes some very fine pastiches of Slovenian counter-culture from the seventies. There's a punk band (one of the best-sounding ones I've ever seen in theatre), and an incredibly good take-off of *Scipion Nasice Sisters* (the theatre bit of *NSK*), and some other stuff I couldn't begin to tell you was satire or just fun. But, again (as with *ÜberŠkrip* before it) it's primarily great just because of the lovely relation established between music, performance, satire and the main narrative. I love the idea of taking twenty minutes out of a show just to hold a mini- satirical – concert/gig.

So, yes. I won't wring out the rest of the plot details, suffice it to say that the story has a pleasingly familiar shape to it, and you get all the satisfactions of a "proper story" from it, with added bite, and historical interest. What was most interesting to me, though, watching this deeply strange, absurdist play in a tiny town in Slovenia was getting the faintest hint of what it must have been like hearing it in somewhere like Kranj on the radio back in 70s Yugoslavia. To be fair, Slovenia hardly wanted for subversion – indeed, the only art I know about from pre-independence Slovenia is the subversive stuff, and there's a lot of it – but, even so, *Butnškala* feels like a powerful reminder that art isn't just useful when it's trying to change things, it's also incredibly good at just being a beacon for discontent and cynicism. And that the value of something silly and snarky cheering everybody up when things aren't great is fondly remembered. Even when it first happened nearly 40 years ago. That the piece still resonates astonishingly clearly today also suggests that Filipčič and Derganc may have also tapped some far more enduring truths about how societies malfunction.



P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 3 A : Y 2 D O N  
N O C O M L M K S T  P O S

W E D N E S D A Y , 1 1

## ÜberŠkrip – Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana

[seen 06/05/16]

Right. So. As I understand it, *ÜberŠkrip* is a \*kind of\* remake of the show that made the Mladinsko theatre's name when it premièred in 1975. Up until that point, Mladinsko had been more officially a youth theatre (indeed, Mladinsko means "youth"). However, thanks to tightening of official restrictions in Yugoslavia, in the wake of the 1968 student protests, most subversive and/or avant garde and political theatremakers were effectively blacklisted by any main, "adult" theatres. As such, anyone with any real ambitions would seem to turn up at Mladinsko, making work with and for young people, which effectively passed beneath the government radar – not considered worth a censor's time, I guess.

*[As an aside: what a fascinating situation. Of course, it's important to recognise that as a country of only 2 million inhabitants, and with only maybe 250,000 living in Ljubljana itself – even when it was a part of Yugoslavia, it apparently felt incredibly federalised and remote from the concerns of Belgrade – there is not much that can necessarily be directly transposed to UK with it's 63 million in habitants and capital city with four times the population of this entire country. But maybe it's worth thinking about a bit...]*

So, what the original thing was was a piece called "[NAME?]" and was a kind of devised piece incorporating critiques of fashion, the Vietnam War, and Yugoslavia's own (near-)foundation stories of the anti-fascist partisans in WWII.

None of that would be immediately obvious if you came to this piece blind. (But then, how much contextual information ever is? What actual sense does any event make without its immediate and historical artistic and social contexts? Yes, even British ones.)

The form of the piece is largely musical. Indeed, in a different venue, or without seating, you could maybe even claim it as "concert-theatre". (Yes, all the music is actually pre-recorded, but since [Sleaford Mods](#), I reckon even that distinction is up-for-grabs...) The thing the piece is most influenced by is pretty transparently the work of Slovenian band extraordinaire Laibach. Not just the music, but the incredible video-projection onslaught. I mean, it is \*really\* full-on. Like watching a strobe light for an hour, but with pictures. And pictures superimposed over the performers/performance so that everything feels part of the same machine.

A Slovenian colleague said this aspect of the piece caused him most intellectual distress. This onslaught of very modern, new video technology being used to evoke/re-create a much art movement's aesthetic, to unearth an even older theatre piece, and to explore even older conditions of warfare and economics.

Oh, yes, the piece is basically about "the military industrial complex", in case you were wondering.

"Songs" (or \*scenes\*) include: an incredibly comprehensive list of wars, listing all the antagonists (and, my God, the British Empire features in a shameful number of them); something that's maybe a cut-up of different speeches and slogans by politicians that's the best one of those I've seen; and some industrial music made essentially by slamming bits of the metal framed set around.

If I'm blunt/honest, I could probably tell you that I'd seen a fair few of these devices before, sometimes even in indifferent student devised work. However, that would be grossly unfair. This is a powerful bit of work that also manages the neat trick of being enormous fun at the same time (as long as you like industrial music). It reminded me most powerfully that we in Britain tend to relegate music in theatre to "atmosphere" and scene changes (Mitchell's [Cleansed](#) notwithstanding). Or, perhaps: we rarely foreground anything that sounds like this in "musical theatre". Imagine if we had "musicals" that sounded more like post-punk than easy listening...

As you can probably see, I've fallen a bit in love with the Slovenian way of doing things...

P O S T Æ N D R E W A Z H 1 A : Y O D S O N  
N O C O M L M N K S S T  P O S

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## The Stage: Should theatre critics need an 'intellectual background'?

[written for The Stage]



In which I say you don't need an intellectual background to be a critic, and then quote Slavoj Žižek to prove it.

[cover image from Ion Grigorescu's *Boksar*, 1977, about which there's a nice short film [here](#). Essentially, the artist has filmed himself twice, throwing punches and receiving them, and superimposed the two films. As a bleak image of futile self-conflict, it seemed apt, somehow.]

P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 4 A : Y O U D E O N  
N O C O M L M N K S S T  P O S

F R I D A Y , 2 2 A P R

## The Seagull – Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne

[seen 21/04/16 at MITEM III, Nemzeti Színház, Budapest]



It has maybe become a bit too *de rigueur* to knock Thomas Ostermeier. As (still) the UK's only regular German import, I've certainly become more than a little impatient that The Barbican – and now EIF, FFS – move beyond this default Germany = Ostermeier programming and maybe get out a bit more. Deutschland ist größer als Ostermeier, ja? But that's hardly fair on the man, or his work, is it?

This new production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* provides a perfect opportunity to reconsider the man and his work, as the production itself is not from the Schaubühne, and is performed in French. As such, it feels like the director might have been taken sufficiently away from his comfort zone, or his default settings to make a difference.

And, the opening scene of this *Seagull* is possibly the best I've ever seen (of not as many as I'd have liked – didn't see the Mitchell NT one for a start, goddammit). But, I mean, no, fuck it, it's one of the best opening twenty minutes or half hours of *anything* I've seen in a theatre for an aeon. It's properly, properly beautiful.

It starts with the cast ranged round the walls of designer Jan Pappelbaum's massive grey box (it's basically a Bruno Schultz set by someone else). At the back wall the performers who turn out to be Dom (Sébastien Pouderoux) and Nina (Mélodie Richard) play David Bowie's 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide'. A painter – Marine Dillard – armed with a big sponge on a stick, begins to etch \*something\* on the back wall. Now, a) we'd all [just discovered Prince had died](#), and b) I'm evidently [a sucker for Bowie in Chekhov](#), but, FUCK, it really was incredibly moving. I don't think it's going to stop being for a while. (It's interesting to think how that's changed since *Volksfiend*.) And, well, the song doesn't not fit the play, does it? Good old Konstantin and his *Todestrieb*... So, yeah. Kicking off with a now-even-more-loaded anthem for doomed youth seemed like a master stroke. It's a beautiful arrangement, too. Played on one guitar, they just leave pauses for \*all the other instrumentation\*. And your head does fill it in. And Dillard continues to paint the back wall, eventually sketching out the



picturesque outline of a mountain... Yes, in a way it's unashamedly sentimental (although, y'know, fuck it. Why not?), but also astringent enough not to feel soupy or soapy. It's good. It's textured. It's layered. It's modern and atavistic. It's Bowie and a painter in a grey box. What, frankly, is not to like?

And the first scene – Masha and her black clothes and why – is INCREDIBLY FUNNY. Cédric Eeckhout's Semyon wearing a yellow cardigan almost twists it inside out talking to Masha (Bénédicte Cerutti) about his *Welt-Angst*. This sequence is brilliant supplemented by the addition of a live translator from French into Hungarian, as Semyon worries about the global situation, with Syrian refugees, and everything else. It's \*so good\*. Incredibly funny characterisation, and, well, y'know, \*urgently contemporary\*. It's knocking spots off all the other Chekhov that thinks its modern... And then Konstantin (Matthieu Sampeur) comes in, and his both beautiful and brilliant, and also incredibly funnily earnest. I love this Konstanin most of all of them. They have to get the translator back on for Konstantin to explain his(very funny, very satirical) vision of A New Theatre. (\*Of course\* we love Konstantin at this point in the play, bless his earnest experimental socks).

After this, the inventions calm down a bit. Arkadina (Valérie Dréville) and Trigorin (François Loriquet) are both pretty normal. A. is interesting because she mostly manages to do away, or at least underplay, all the normal stage-trappings that come with the character, and Trigorin looks particularly un-prepossessing – oddly reminiscent of Richard Herring, in fact (leading to some really having to believe \*very hard\* in talent-crushes later on). But, y'know, fine.

THEN!!!! Then there's Konstantin's "New Theatre Piece"! And, HA! How brilliant it is! My guess is that the tension for translators and directors here is how much credit you give Konstantin for his efforts. What you put on stage to represent his attempts to invent a new symbolist theatre. The compromise here struck me as generous and perfect. On one level, K. is kind of hung out to dry for his gender politics, putting Nina in a see-through slip, and tying her – Jeanne d'Arc-style – to a stake, while an upside-down live-feed is projected on her as she is covered in blood while speaking into an effects-riddled microphone, as Konstantin suspends a deer carcass high above the stage, cuts its throat, and lets the blood pour over him. I mean, it's so on-the-money. It's twenty-year-old boy-theatre at its best and worst. You'd see this show at the Edinburgh Fringe and both love it and hate it. It's a motorway pile-up of clichés, but \*really great\* clichés. It's one Throbbing Gristle/Cabaret Voltaire soundtrack short of \*exactly\* why I should never be a director. (No, okay, I'd be better on Gender, but, come on, he's twenty and it's 1895 or something, live-feed notwithstanding...) So, yes. It's all awesome. When A. takes the piss, K. stomps off and listens to 'People Are Strange' by The Doors in his room... Ha!

Then Act Two. Where suddenly everything just gets significantly more normal. From being this elegant multi-level circus of invention – if mostly very *text-based* invention – it suddenly flatlines. What's left of the invention is the occasional musical interludes – now mostly [Doors songs](#), and [one Hendrix](#) – and the painter. Which is fine. I promise it's fine. You concentrate a bit more on the performances. Except that isn't always a good thing. If I'm brutally honest, I wasn't really at all sure about Nina, Arkadina, or Trigorin. There was a kind of nothingy-ness about the situations. Like, no one much cared about the lines they were saying, or the things that were theoretically happening "to them". Or to their characters, if that's the remove at which the actors were from the action. And I couldn't quite work out what sort of performance style it was. That said, it didn't not work. The story moves along. The relationships develop. Occasionally, at moments of great intensity, A

Lot Of Acting kicked in. But, more generally, it drifted past while I watched the painter, who was easily the most live, present and consequent thing happening on the stage. I mean, watching someone paint on this scale is awesome. And Ostermeier must have known that this would be the commanding visual motif of the piece, so let's give credit for that, and think our way into wondering what it means. I think actually \*a lot\* of how the show did work, and I do think it worked. It was compelling on a load of levels, not all of them immediate, and maybe not all of them aimed at me...

So, yes. Something I did find strange was the motif of The Doors and this one Jimi Hendrix song. For me, that's my record collection in 1990. At least, the "vintage" bit. Is this a lament for the sixties, or a lament for the lament for the sixties that constituted Oliver Stone's The Doors? Is it instead my generation's feeling of lateness-to-the-party? [*I should expand this, taking into account The Beach Boys in Hedda, the Bowie in VF, and, what others?*]

Certainly the next huge, crucial visual/sonic moment is almost canonical music history writ large. Dom/Pouderoux plays [Venus in Furs](#) (with Nina/Richard on Moe Tucker duties) and Dillard TOTALLY OBLITERATES HER PAINTING. It's genuinely upsetting. The painting was \*really good\*! And she just paints black over it (yes, shades (again) of [Ein Volksfiend](#)). The black is brilliant, though. It's necessary for the next scene – a dark night outside with snow falling visibly against it, rather than a daylight pastoral scene – but even so... And, more than that, it feels like The Death of The Sixties(!) Aw! Poor Sixties! All that Peace and Love for nothing. Oh well. We've probably all read the version of music history that has the Velvet Underground symbolise White Western Rock giving up on Peace 'N' Love, right? (It the version where it's not Altamont, or The Stooges, or MC5, or all the other things/people...) But, yeah, it's weirdly compelling and \*readable\* anyway. If also The Most Hackneyed Version of Music History Ever. But this seems to be a production unafraid to deal in big dumb symbols. And I'm not sure it's a problem that it does.

And, the last scenes – Act Four – \*are\* gripping (bleugh. Who says "gripping"?). No, really. They're properly good and properly, properly sad. But, no, it doesn't help that Nina's not really been given much by way of an interior life. Can she ever really claw one out of the stage time she's allotted? I mean, you can't not watch this ending through the lens of both [People, Places & Things](#), and [Ophelias Zimmer](#), and wish that feminism had already caught up with the production. I mean, yeah, fuck, it's sad about Konstantin, but there are some \*other tragedies\* going on here too, y'know? It's awfully hard not to think Nina is just being punished by Chekhov for letting Konstantin down, even though she never particularly asked for his shit in the first place. Maybe, in other productions, Chekhov gets let off a bit more for simply observing that shit does tend to happen to people in general, but this feels like a Boys' Own production where the sentimentality and romance conspire to make it look like the secondary meaning of the play – after "boys are misunderstood heroes" – is "aren't women just the worst?". \*Maybe\* – big leap – it's this sort of creepy, weepy, sentimental, male self-justifying that the production is ultimately critiquing, but, YET AGAIN, White, Male, Western Culture, it does so by mostly focussing in the men. So, GAH.

So, yeah. Some good bits, some great bits. And then this awful unresolved feminism fail.

Ends.



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Tracklist!

P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 1 A : Y 5 D I O N  
N O C O M L M K S S T  P O S

S U N D A Y , 1 7 A P R

## The Raven – Alexandrinsky Theater, Saint Petersburg

[seen 16/04/16 at MITEM III, Nemzeti Színház, Budapest]



[The structure of this review is as follows:

- i programme notes
- ii my half of a messenger conversation last night
- iii conclusions, if any.]

i) The drama *The Raven* is based on a “fiaba” – a theater tale with a tragic-comic story – of the same name [*Il Corvo*], written in 1762 by Carlo Gozzi, the famous Italian dramatist, a contemporary and rival of Goldoni. The director, Nickolay Roshchin, has produced dramas by Gozzi before. In 2001, he directed *The Stag King*. The production was praised as one of the most striking interpretations of a work by Gozzi ever to have been performed in Russia. It won the Smoktunovsky Prize and the Award of the Moscow Critics Association.

This production of *The Raven* is free of superficial “Italian” clichés and the playful, carnival, improvisatory style of the commedia dell’arte. Instead, it reveals the deeper interpretive layers of the play, bringing its dramatic quality to the surface. Like Gozzi’s other dramas, *The Raven* ushers the audience into a world that is rich with complex and fantastic events and unusual passions. The story presents a cavalcade of love, devotion, friendship and magic that is sometimes mirthful and amusing and sometimes oppressive, a procession that is seasoned with scenes involving characters hidden behind masks, strange spectacles, and expressive movements and gestures.

ii) So, plot:

There’s this bloke...

(Oh, this might make it quicker, [Wikipedia has the plot...](#))

Ok, that is \*incredibly coherent\* compared to what happened on stage... Especially if you don’t speak Russian.

So, there’s a bloke on a boat. which has a skeleton crucified on the mast, and skulls on spikes all over it...  
All the set is made of metal frames like the photo at the top...  
And all the cast (male and female) are wearing suits and papier mache half-masks.  
They’re on this ship...  
And then the bloke gives an animated comic-book power-point lecture which possibly ties in to the fairy tale above...  
Except that it’s all wildly unclear (to non-Russian-speakers, with Hungarian simultaneous translation)...  
Then he goes and visits what appears to be a man he’s got tied up in his cellar or something...  
(Maybe that’s his brother?)  
((Oh, before all this there’s a long introductory business with a translator speaking Italian with a voiceover in Russian...))

So then he meets this guy, who is with a woman in a burqa?

Maybe...

And the bloke invites him to kill some animals in metal boxes!

But as an assassination attempt...

\*Large\* metal boxes. Not real animals...

He emerges from the first box with a comically giant chicken's foot,  
and then the second box opens to reveal a horse carcass...

A ridiculous one.

It's all basically comic...

If a bit on the morbid side.

Oh, way before this he's executed some woman.

And it seems like this woman is maybe haunting him and trying to get  
him killed?

Maybe?

So, he's killed the animals...

and then that bit stops...

And then the woman in the burqa turns out to be the man who was the  
band leader who was in the pre-show intro bit...

(Oh, yes, sorry, there's a live brass band and drum kit, and they had a  
conductor who was also in the intro...)

IT DOESN'T EVEN SLIGHTLY HANG TOGETHER AS A STORY.

WHY WOULD ANYONE EVER TELL THIS STORY?

AND, I'm only about a quarter of the way in...

But... the rest of it can be summed up with: "More of the same."

More of the bloke killing women...

And more of everyone else killing the bloke.

The bloke gets killed approximately eight times...

(Bizarrely, \*EVERYTHING\* that happens in *Cleansed*, happens to  
him...

Needles, limbs chopped off, tongue pulled out...

PLUS SOME MORE THINGS THAT SARAH KANE CLEARLY  
THOUGHT WOULD HAVE BEEN \*TAKING IT A BIT FAR...\*

Like, when he's gassed...

And when he's immersed in concrete...

Or when a giant mechanical bird appears to vomit acid on him...

FOR EXAMPLE

Oddly, it did actually drag a bit in places...

And I have literally no idea what it says about the world.

When I was watching, I did think this is probably the result of what the  
world feels like when Putin's in charge.

All the times he died did seem kind of fair enough, since he'd kept on  
killing all these women...

And then it keeps turning out he's not even the worst bloke in the world  
of the play.

It does feel like we're apparently meant to feel for his situation.

This was maybe stretching things a bit.

I mean, he is, at root, just a psychotic misogynist, maybe?

*Ophelias zimmer* eat your heart out...

The way he kept on being revealed to be a really minor offender,  
though, compared to these ever worsening figures he encounters did

mean I spent a lot of time thinking about Assad and then ISIS, and how there's this media cycle of always discovering that there's "something worse"

But, yes.

Technically, it's incredibly accomplished.

Brilliant actors.

The design is really beautifully realised.

And the lighting design was noticeably spot-on...

I mean, it had a lot of moving lights, and they were all bang on target throughout, which always feels impressive given that they'd only had a day to plot it in this theatre/auditorium...

(and something else had to get out first...)

I reckon I might just cut and paste that and call it my review...

iii) So, yes. A breathless account of quite the maddest thing I've seen a long while. I imagine it's a good deal less mad when you know what's going on, but then, I think seeing just the action without the justifications for it does make it easier to condemn the treatment that women receive in the play.

It's the sort of show that I think will do blindingly well wherever it's played. It reminded me of a cross between AKHE and Derevo, but \*as actual theatre\*. It feels, somehow, more like "a theatre ensemble" than "a company". Dunno if that's right or not. Maybe like a(n even more) off-the-wall version of Krymov's *A Midsummer Night's Dream (As You Like It)*. But no little dog in this one, sadly...

I'd love to say this was "just knockabout fun", and be able to leave it there, but it did feel like there more than that there, but \*more\* that I wasn't unable to unlock. Still, very glad I saw. Names worth remembering.

(It's really worth going to the MITEM site and looking at [the rest of the production photos](#), it really is a lovely-looking show...)

P O S T A E N D R E W A T H 7 A : Y 3 D B O N  
N O C O M L M K B S T  P O S

## The Lower Depths – Vaso Abashidze Music and Drama State Theatre, Tbilisi

[seen 15/04/16, at Nemzeti Színház, Budapest]



I've only seen one production of Maxim Gorki's *The Lower Depths* before – Alize Zandwijk's production at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1999. I don't think I even particularly enjoyed it at the time, but, my God has it stuck with me. The relentlessness of it, the faultless naturalism of it, the violence, the nakedness, the tonnes of water being hosed onto the stage. For some reason, I remember more about that production than anything else I saw that year.

[I didn't catch [Phil Wilmot's 2007 Finborough version](#). I really did think the Hytner-regime NT had done a production, but can't find any trace of it by Googling in Hungary...]

Meanwhile, for reasons that I can't locate on this blog right now, I have a firm and unaccountable conviction that Georgia (the former Soviet State, not the current US one) is amazing at theatre. I can't believe that this solely stems from ISDF2012's *Our Town*, but maybe it does.

Anyway, suffice it to say that, expectedly and unexpectedly, I found David Doiashvili's production for Vaso Abashidze Music and Drama State Theatre \*really\* tough going.

I should try to describe the production. Not least, because I do think there's more than a fair possibility that I'm not \*right\* to have found it hard going. I will say, though, that it felt like a really fascinating mismatch of national expectations and understandings as much as my own personal tastes (but definitely those too).

It seems likely, given the lack of recent performances in the UK, that you don't know the play. [Have a look at the Wikipedia synopsis](#), it's really very good. Short version: 1902 Russian play. A lot of homeless people live in a basement. The play itself is slow, character-based, almost non-narrative, but A Lot of Things Happen. Rob Icke or Katie Mitchell would do it brilliantly; it's that sort of a play (on paper). (For example, Ellen McDougall would also do it brilliantly, but her version would be more surprising to Maxim Gorki...)

Now, for my money, Doiashvili seems to have transformed the thing into something more like Magical Realism. Which, though it's not my favourite sort of thing, is a fascinating proposition. Now, I don't know if this is because magical realism is a default position of Georgian theatre, how Doiashvili himself reads the play, or a misunderstanding of what I was looking at on my part – or a mixture of all three. But, here, instead of "life" just rolling by, it felt as if the character of Luka had been afforded some sort of mystical significance, the pronouncements he comes out with accorded some new level of respect. All this seems to have been underscored with some Very Underline-y lighting and music. If I were prescriptive/mean, I might add that skills with lighting and sound design don't seem to be big priorities in Georgia on this showing. Sound desks appear not to have a fade-in/out function. And recording sound without bits of stray dialogue accidentally included also apparently not an urgent priority. Similarly, occasionally lights seem to snap on suddenly, sometimes even half-way through a scene, a bit like someone's suddenly remembered that they're meant to be on for this bit... I could all pass for charming if you were in the right mood.

A further problem was that, for me, the performances just didn't seem to add up to anything. They didn't strike me as remotely realistic, nor deliberately UNrealistic to any real end. There was some urgency, sometimes, or sound (if rarely fury), but even the "good" performances felt like perfectly good cogs just going round and round without the teeth connected to any other cog in the wider machine. And, again, not like this was a sought-after effect with a discernable purpose. It was perhaps telling that in the few moments where a microphone was used for non-naturalistic moments, the whole thing worked much better than at any other point. But largely, this seemed just to be flailing quietly. And, blimey, the lighting design really didn't instill any confidence either. There seemed to be three main lighting states: red, yellow and blue. I think blue was night time, yellow was daytime, and red was "other". Which, y'know...

Suffice it to say that me and this production really didn't even meet



halfway. Which is a shame (obvs). I think, in retrospect (i.e. happily out of the hot and pointedly dusty auditorium – the stage design was mostly dust, to the extent that they handed out those face-masks surgeons wear...) I quite respected the decisions, but couldn't do the mental gymnastics to fully comprehend where it was going while reading surtitles at the same time. And I really don't think the aesthetic was every really going to be my bag.

Sorry. :-/

[Not kidding about those lighting states, though...



P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 7 A : Y 3 D I O N  
N O C O M L M E K T S T  P O S

**Iliad – Polyplanity Productions, Athens**

[seen 12/04/16, at Nemzeti Színház, Budapest]



Thanks to a delayed flight, and the narrowest of hotel transfer windows, I missed the first half of this stage-version of Homer's *Iliad*. And I was a bit hot and knackered [*poor me, I know*] for the second half (2 hours after the interval), so this \*might\* have impacted on my feelings for said show. That said...

Pretty much flat-out [the most memorable production I saw abroad last year](#) was [the production of \*The Iliad\* made by Jemej Lorenci in Ljubljana](#). What's interesting here (at least in the half I saw) is how much is nominally similar, and yet how much, much less I liked it.

Stathis Livathinos's production also opts for a largely undressed stage – although here undressed apparently requires a large metal spiral staircase (*à la*, [The \[Berliner Ensemble\] \*Suicide\*](#)) and a huge amount of car tyres, strewn all over the place, also built into a kind of Walls of Troy thing towards the back. The aesthetic sometimes also sees the large ensemble seated on chairs in a semi-circle for a bit, like the Slovenian one. There's even a passing similarity to the vests and trousers costumes, and to the use of one single Ancient Greek-style helmet. And both versions incorporate live music.

That's pretty much where the similarities end. Nevertheless, it felt striking how much I took against this production. Was it the radio mics and shouting? Was it the horrible *Cats*-meets-*Mad Max* costumes (by way of Brecht and the RSC)? Was it just the shouting and a-bellowing? It might well have been the Epic lack of characterisation, and the apparent complete lack of of tonal feel for any of the words that were actually being said. (There were English surtitles, so I was at least within the ballpark of understanding...)

I mean, there's definitely an argument that I know less about the *Iliad* than \*some Greeks\*. It's their national heritage; they can do what they like with it, and if that's *Mad Cats*, so be it. Nationalism is certainly one aspect of this production. In his production notes, the director pointedly says: "I consider language perhaps the toughest oil pipeline we have. It traverses the ages yet never seems depleted. The Greek language is the only thing that can't be sold off or mortgaged." And, yes, it's difficult not to sympathise with anyone from a country being sold-off, piecemeal, by some forgone neoliberal conclusion reached in Brussels or Berlin.

Sadly, I'm just not convinced that this production made much of a case for itself, either at the level of national-culture, or simply as theatre. One hopes, for Greece's sake, that this was a one-off. (Although, as usual, disclaimers apply; what do I know? Maybe it was really popular here in Hungary, and even more wildly so at home, and maybe I'm just the wrong person to have seen it.)

[But it did look like *Mad Cats*:



P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 7 A : Y 2 D 5 O N  
N O C O M L M E K T S T  P O S

F R I D A Y , 1 5 A P R

## The Patriots – Serbian National Theater, Belgrade

[seen 14/04/16 at MITEM III, Nemzeti Színház, Budapest]



Jovan Sterija Popović's *The Patriots* is brilliant. Nominally, it deals with a very specific episode in Serbian national(ist) history in 1848-50 (it was written three years later in 1853, but not performed until 1903). Actually, it presents an excoriating comedy of hypocrisy and doublespeak that would resonate as strongly in Brexit-UK, 2016, as it does through Serbia's own history.

What's especially appealing about this performance – the Serbian National Theatre of Belgrade playing the stage of the Hungarian National Theatre in Budapest – is that the subject of the play is a war between these two countries. (It's also worth knowing that Jovan Sterija Popović (1806-1856) is pretty much Serbia's Molière in terms of both importance and scabrous satirical approach.)

In 1848 a wave of revolutions swept across Europe (and elsewhere). The list of countries not involved (including of course Britain) is much shorter than the list of those that were. Hungary rebelled against the Habsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire and during that struggle to secede the relatively small Voivodeship of Serbia and Banat of Temeschwar attempted to gain their own Serbian independence from Hungary.

On paper, with this sort of historical distance (if not currently geographical distance for me), it might seem like a bit of a trifle, but Popović's script in András Urbán's modern dress production manage – with great economy – to make the conflict seem as brutal and bloody and horrible (and “relevant”) as anything since. There is a moment late on in the play where the Serbian nationalists are singing a violent, rousing song about how their leaders are right, and how the Hungarian oppressors must die, where they point their AK-47s at the (almost entirely Hungarian) audience and name-check Slobodan Milošević, which must rank as perhaps The Most Confrontational Thing I Have Ever Seen In A Theatre. I mean, sure, we trust that the guns can only fire blanks, and they don't really mean it about Milošević, but, fucking hell...

And \*of course\* recent history has left a pretty sizeable elephant in the room. How many days is it now since [the Hague sentenced the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić](#)? It is impossible to have lived through the nineties without [a pretty strong impression of nationalism in ex-Yugoslavia](#). The effect of the play, in the light of that recent history, is all the more bitter and dizzying. I can't think of another play that so accurately predicts a cycle of history repeating itself. The vocabulary of nationalism feels completely contemporary, and the futile violence and vainglorious warmongering has precisely the same effects. And not just to Serbia. Again and again I was struck by how much of the play could apply to Britain.

The real coup of the production, however, is that it actually makes you understand the nationalistic urge. It isn't finger-wagging or preachy. It doesn't just show a straw target for the audience to dismiss out-of-hand, it offers rousing music, and a terrifying glimpse of how, actually, blaming a bunch of other people for your problems, painting yourself as “the oppressed”, and maybe overthrowing your oppressors with a revolution, might be a lot of fun. And how an armed revolution might be the most fun of all. Imagine the Occupy movement with charismatic leadership and Kalashnikovs for everyone...

Of course, ultimately the play/production is a chilling, bitter satire on the tragedy of nationalist thinking, but for something that seems so obvious, the real achievement here is that this revelation still manages to feel like a rug-pulled out from under you.

I should say, there's also something incredibly refreshing about how well the play works on stage. It doesn't have almost everything we're taught that plays should have, and a load of the things it does instead feel like they'd get Popović barred from most “Playwriting” courses, but it completely works. Perhaps this is in part down to the focus, energy and commitment of the actors (of course it is), but it's genuinely revelatory to have historical facts/events interspersed with popular song, and for that to feel like more than enough narrative drive, without ever even really getting a grip with who any of the characters are...

So, yes. If I were Rufus Norris, I'd get \*this production\* on at the NT of GB, PDQ. (No. [Please, please, please don't get \\*a writer\\* in to change all the specifics and make it “about Britain”.](#))

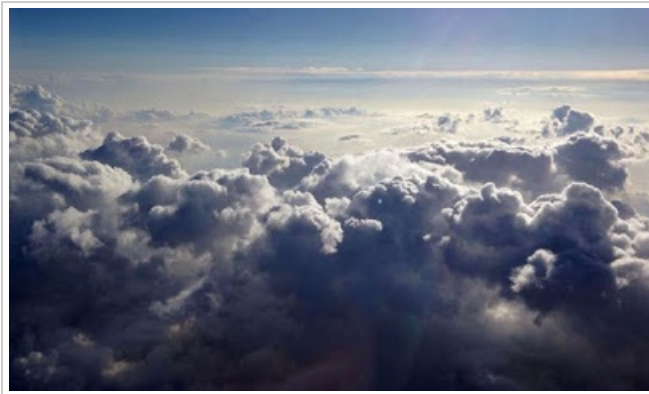


P O S T Æ N D R E W A T H 2 A : Y 1 D 5 O N  
N O C O M L M E K T S T  P O S

T H U R S D A Y , 1 4 A

## X – Royal Court, London

[seen 11/04/16]



[contains spoilers in order to be able to talk about meaning]

My favourite joke in a poem defines Plutocracy as “rule by the coldest and farthest away” (from [Luke Kennard's \*The Wolf in Commerce\*](#)).

Ali McDowall has described his new play, *X* as “*The Cherry Orchard* on Pluto”.

It's a brilliant way of letting fans of his previous play, *Pomona* – a high-octane spiral into the dark underground of a city – know that they can expect a few more pauses in this one. As it happens, I think you could contend that *X* actually does much the same sort of thing; except where *Pomona* winds into the guts of a city in search of meaning, *X* drills down inside a person's mind. *X* is incredibly difficult to pin down as a play. And we should differentiate between *X – the play*, and *X – this production*.

Vicky Featherstone's production offers a pretty clear, fairly faithful reading of the play, but it is necessarily a version, an interpretation. Yes, I know. Intellectually we all know that there's no such thing as “a definitive production of a play”, but if you think of, say, [Katie Mitchell's production of \*Wastwater\*](#), you'll understand when I say that some plays lend themselves more to that sort of perception than others. This production – directed by Vicky Featherstone, designed by Merle Hansel, lit by Lee Curran, sounded by Nick Powell and video-designed by Tal Rosner – puts plenty on the table, but also leaves a lot space to imagine other versions. You could stage *X* at every major theatre round the country, and never once have even remotely the same production.

And artistic directors all over the country really should; it's a genuinely fascinating, brilliant play. seeing it once doesn't feel like nearly enough.

The nominal set-up is not unlike a whole raft of famous science fiction; the small crew of a space station on Pluto haven't heard from earth for weeks, and now one of the crew thinks he's seen something outside the base... We know this story, right? In this instance, the thing that Ray (Darrell d'Silva) has seen is a little girl with an X instead of a mouth.

The scenes appear to occur out of order. Short, slow scenes. *Aliens* or *Ringu* meets *Darkstar* or *2001*. One of the reasons we imagine they're out of order is that there's a digital clock on the wall showing different times; backwards and forwards. Then there's a scene in which Cole (Rudi Dharmalingham) mentions that the clock has malfunctioned. That it keeps losing time. Or resetting, or glitching. In the script, it says it keeps going back 1hr43, which I suspect, wasn't a bad estimate of the running time of the whole piece without interval. Or maybe it's the length of McDowall's favourite film... Later, the thing that starts glitching is the language. Words are replaced by the speaker saying "X". At one point this effect becomes so pronounced, that there are two whole pages of the script simply printed with the letter X

Maybe we're reminded of Caryl Churchill's *Blue/Heart*, a pair of one-act plays from 1997 – in *Heart's Desire* a scene keeps skipping back to the beginning, while in *Blue Kettle* words are randomly, gradually replaced with either "Blue" or "Kettle". Or perhaps we're reminded of Dieter Roth's 1974 play *Mummel Mummel*, in which the whole of the script is just those words arranged across 176 pages. At the same time, we're still completely "in the play"; in the world of the play; interested by the compelling action of the play – both the situation that's been unfolding, but also in the wider game of "what it all means".

I have a theory about how meaning works in this play, and it's similar to how it works in *Wastwater*. You are led towards certain conclusions. Scenes have implications. Your mind leaps to conclusions. Then you're shown something new which effectively scraps the possibility that your theory is "right". But, actually, I think the accumulated theories which build up while watching X all hold good. I think the play \*is\* about all those things too. Just as *Pomona* built that sense of a city, of walking past snatches of conversations, of incremental meaning; I think X does something like the reverse. Building a picture of a mind in decay. Or perhaps how a mind stores information. Or perhaps how a consciousness exists.

There was one point where I was ready to swear that it was a play "about" modern communication. Someone, I think, said "XO, XO, X O", which is txt-speak for "kiss hug, kiss hug, kiss hug". The sheer strangeness of writing it, let alone saying the abbreviated version out loud in the same room as the person you're "kissing" and "hugging"... The way that perhaps feelings have become abstracted... (I mean, not the actual feelings. This isn't that reactionary play saying "mobile phones have ruined everything".) Gradually, though, in this production especially, it \*feels\* like the ultimate revelation is that all this action has been taking place in the mind of a woman – a mother (Glida – Jessica Raine) – in a hospital(?) who is suffering from dementia. Her daughter is visiting, both as an adult (Mattie – Ria Zmitrowicz) and as the child the mother sees in her mind's eye (young Mattie – either Grace Doherty or Amber Fernée). At the time, it has something of the same fractured hallucinogenic quality of Dennis Potter's final two series for television, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*, a cryogenically frozen head of a writer in the future, dead but dreaming. Or perhaps it's more helpful to think of *Life on Mars* (*Death on Pluto?*), replacing the coma with dementia.

As I say, I don't think Vicky Featherstone's production is "definitive", whatever that means. But what's odd is that it did feel suggestive of a definitive production. What I mean is, while I was watching it, I (irritatingly) kept thinking of things I wished were different about the set (too high), the sound (too musical), the video design (too much like video design), but at the same time, it felt like the Platonic forms of these elements were only just around the corner from what was there. That the elements present were actually suggesting the perfected versions of themselves. Which is maybe better for a play like this. Perhaps it would be incredibly annoying to see a version of *X* any more definitive-feeling than this. Part of me would have been interested to see a version with Less Acting; the Forced Entertainment version, if you will. Or a version that made more of a virtue of the play's potential for slowness (there's a stage direction, not observed here, where someone scrubs a wall for "as long as it takes". I'd also like to see that version. Maybe at NSDF next year?) I guess I'd also be interested to see a more full-on horror version, and a more full-on bored-of-space/in-a-hospital version. Which is my roundabout way of saying that perhaps this is actually a production of genius – that it lets you fully imagine all these possibilities while looking at it, and while still communicating the play itself incredibly clearly.

So, yes, hard to sum up. The idea of Pluto here seems to stand in brilliantly for all sorts of different states of remoteness. And also for exploring some very English ideas about failure. In fact, in a lot of ways, it strikes me that *X* is actually almost the same play as *People, Places & Things* – one woman's Odyssey through a hallucinatory state to discover the reality of her situation. And while outwardly *X* appears to offer less by way of direct social commentary, it nonetheless also speaks to a need for care, and about some of the most necessary levels of human interaction. It maybe even begins to (inadvertantly?) hint at why so many of these sci-fi archetypes are archetypes in the first place, maybe. What they're \*really\* all about.

Of course, the best joke in the play is that *X* is named as the unknown property in an equation. Finding out what *X* is is the entire point. So the simplest explanation for what *X* is is: it's the thing we don't yet know.

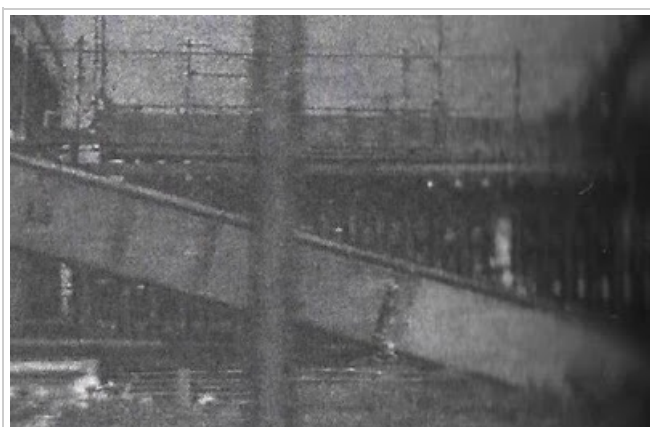
*X* = ?

P O S T A E N D R E W A T H O A : Y I D O N  
N O C O M L M K S S T  P O S

W E D N E S D A Y , 3 0

## People, Places & Things – Wyndhams, London

[seen 23/03/16]



"I'd like to believe that my problems are meaningful. But they're not. There are people dying of thirst. People living in war zones

and here we are thinking about ourselves. As if we can solve everything by confronting our own defects. We're not defective. It's the world that's fucked. Shouldn't we feel good for all those who can't? Don't we owe it to them to say 'fuck this, let's drink'? If I deny myself choice then what am I? I want to live. I want to live vividly and make huge, spectacular, heroic mistakes. Because what else is there? This? Shame and boredom and orange fucking squash? Let's have a real drink. One drink just to know that the world won't end."

"Emma", *People, Places & Things* (p.95/137)

*People, Places & Things* is a fascinating play. Yes, yes, it's very good, and Denise Gough is excellent at acting, but [the chances are, you've read that review.](#)

The other day Michael Coveney wrote a grumpy little article [suggesting that online criticism was mostly about criticism](#). And I daresay he's right to think that my reviews are maybe a bit specialist. Which is rather like complaining that not everybody's going to get much out of reading *The Lancet*. (No, ok, I'm not \*that\* good, nor that unreadable, but you get the point.)

One of the most striking theatre reviews I've ever read is [Charles Spencer's attack on a revival of David Hare's \*My Zinc Bed\*](#).

It's not that it's particularly well-written, or even that it prosecutes its case very well [*"In his defence I can imagine Hare loftily declaring that his entrepreneur, Victor Quinn, is merely a character with a point of view, and a flawed character at that. At the end, we learn that he has been killed in a car crash while three times over the permitted alcohol limit..."* Well, yes. And it would be a pretty sound defence]. No, it's the force of feeling in the review. Force of feeling and the fact that it has fucked \*that review\* for the rest of us forever. Spencer, admirably in many ways, cornered the market in alcoholism-confessional-criticism. Indeed, at times, it felt like a director only had to pop a glass of wine on stage and Spencer would *courageously* tell us the story of how he beat his alcohol dependence with the help of The Priory and the AA. Again.

Because *People, Places & Things* is so very acutely observed, so rousing, and so intelligent, I think it possibly engenders exactly this sort of Spenserian response, and ducking it would just feel like cowardice. So, [**people who dislike me-journalism; look away for the rest of the paragraph**] for the record: I'm an alcoholic. I haven't had a drink in one year one month and seven days. And I'm not going to have another one. I didn't go a clinic. I haven't been to AA. I just stopped. Theoretically, this puts me in a slightly weird position in relation to a play which places such emphasis on programmes. Like "Emma", I'm far too bloody minded to submit to AA's "higher power"; unlike Emma, I only had alcohol to contend with, so just stopping (albeit with medical supervision) seems to have worked. (If I have one other issue with AA, it's its slightly annoying raised-eyebrow implication that if you're not with AA, then you're not really admitting to the problem. I know plenty of alcoholics who have stopped drinking permanently without AA. It is also possible and valid.) In the event, though, I thought the play was very good, what it said was very intelligent, and I didn't have the slightest problem that its main character didn't have precisely my life. (well, while watching, maybe occasionally, but we all over-identify, right?)

What I found absolutely fascinating about the play [**you can come back now, I'm done with the icky stuff**] is that while being absolutely brilliant on the subject of addiction, it takes those specifics and cunningly transforms them into part of a three-way, co-dependent metaphor for theatre and precarious life in advanced-neoliberal society,



(The “advanced” there refers to how far the neoliberalism has got, not some spurious idea that such societies have some objective quality of advancement. They absolutely don’t. If anything, the reverse. Why it’s not called liberal-feudalism is beyond me. Presumably because that would detract from the West’s rhetoric about ISIS being “medieval”. Sorry, back to the play...)

Watching the play, I was continually struck by how closely the [pre-publicity West End Transfer interviews with Denise Gough, and her narrative about “nearly giving up acting”](#), chimed with the contents of the play. I have to say, I found the way that these interviews were written up incredibly naïve. I don’t deny for a second that Denise Gough is an incredibly talented actor ([WE KNEW THAT](#)), and it would have been a loss to the profession if she had given up. But is it really responsible to suggest that the ridiculous, anti-art, capitalist marketplace really catches everyone who “deserves” catching? For every Denise Gough who does survive long enough to get a break like this (and, Christ, can we emphasise just how well she’d already done, and how ludicrous this situation is?) there are hundreds who don’t. And, how broken must this way of treating people be before it is declared unfit for purpose? So this journalistic exceptionalism is incredibly damaging, and promotes a completely idiotic narrative where an individual triumph somehow justifies a completely fucked system.

“Emma” in the play lives inside the exact same system. And, in part, I think the play is an argument with how damagingly theatre treats its employees. This is as much a play about how precarious labour damages people, as it is about “addiction”. Addiction and mental illness are just the symptoms, neoliberalism is the disease. In that speech that I quoted at the top, it would be completely plausible to substitute “theatre” for “drink” (although you’d have to choose your own analogy for orange squash). This is another thing the play does brilliantly; precisely skewering this romantic ideal of “living vividly” and “heroic failures”. But, Christ, it reminds you how appealing those romantic ideals are. I would hesitate before actually recommending this to anyone in recovery, if only because it makes such good arguments against it. Even if you have made your peace with putting all that romance of self-destruction behind you. (Something, that I think Katie Mitchell’s *Ophelias Zimmer* will further examine, perhaps.)

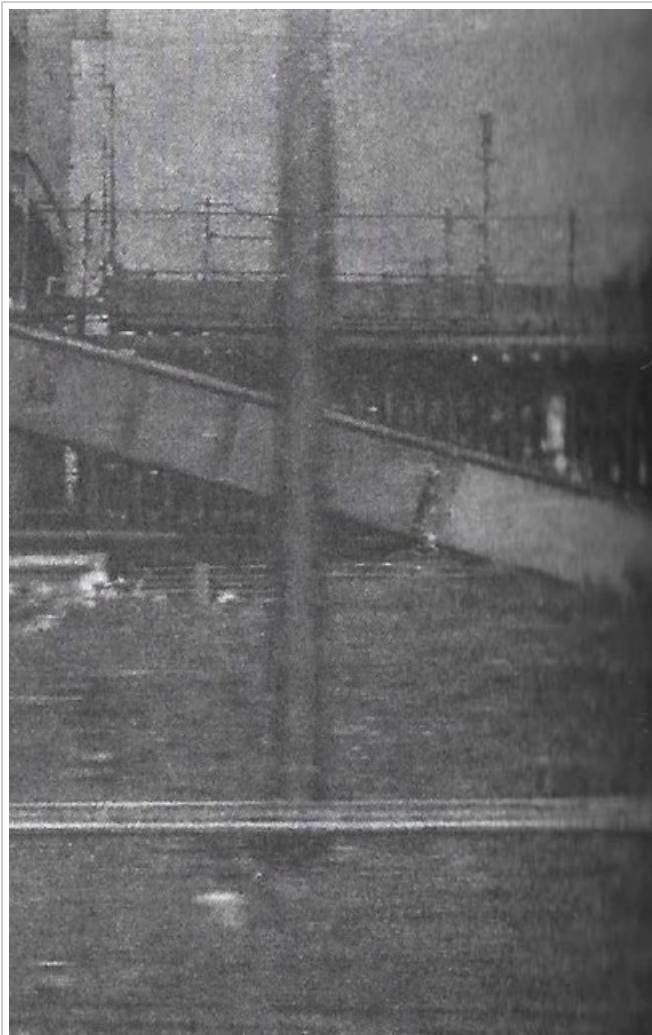
“Emma” even uses Žižek’s Wile E. Coyote metaphor for the financial crash to explain her relationship with addiction. (“Wile E Coyote only ever falls when he looks down. He runs off the cliff and just keeps running in mid-air. It’s only when he looks down and sees that he should be falling that gravity kicks in.”) Does this clinch the capitalism/addiction thing? We should learn to envisage capitalism as a kind of gambling addiction more often.

All the way through, we see how theatre relies on capitalism relies on the romance of self-destruction, triumph and how individualism (“You’re a lone wolf.” ‘Exactly’ ‘Who else here is a lone wolf?’ *Everyone in the Group puts their hands up.*”) relies on addiction, and vice versa. Having the play opening “on stage” in a performance of *The Seagull* is a masterstroke (and we might note that while “Emma” is playing Nina, there’s also a playwright in that scene who’s about to shoot himself in the head. I was fascinated to read that [Macmillan had also essentially given up on theatre/being-a-writer for a couple of years](#), feeding in again to the same phenomenon of precarity noted above.) The play quietly deconstructs theatre’s romanticisation of self-destruction. Beyond *The Seagull*, there’s a brilliant reference to *Hedda Gabler*, a veiled nod to Blanche in *Streetcar*, and even a direct quote from *Blasted* (you only have to look at the recent reviews of *Cleansed* to see how intractably Kane’s depression has been seized upon in some quarters).

Macmillan’s ultimate argument – while never explicitly made – is that

modern society is making us sick, and the idea that theatre can cure it while subject to the same conditions, is dangerously flawed.

*People, Places & Things* is a near-perfectly constructed, precise diagnosis of a sickness at the heart of everything, cleverly disguised as a wise, compassionate, warm play about addiction. Presumably so everyone involved can also pay their rent. At the end [spoiler], "Emma" returns to an audition for some commercial casting, giving a speech about the brand identity of a company called Quixotic. \*OF COURSE\* they're called Quixotic. There literally couldn't be a better name for some venture capitalists. Who could understand the-romance-of-self-destruction-of-capitalism than some Ayn Rand-toting investment bankers? The speech she's auditioning to give actually is kinda rousing. And kinda what we all think rousing speeches should be like. It is all about "freedom", and it's "Emma"s "I love Big Brother" speech; conducted so deep within the machinery of our economic circumstances that you can barely even see the contradictions. And just for a moment, right in this moment of triumph-over-adversity, you completely see where the impulse for self-destruction comes from. And there is no actual answer



It's incredibly quotable too:

**Doctor:** Do you lie to protect yourself or your addiction?

**Emma:** It's not lying. It's admitting there's no truth to begin with. Have you read Foucault?

**Doctor:** Not lately.

**Emma:** Or Derrida? Baudrillard? Barthes?

**Doctor:** You're an addict because of Post-Modernism?

"When I'm on stage I know it's all pretend. I'm not the person I'm pretending to be. Everyone else knows that. But somehow it doesn't matter. We all just sort of decide that it's real. It's the same with the programme. With everything, really. Language. Politics. Money. Religion. Law. At some level we all know it's all bullshit. A magical group delusion."

P O S T M O D E R N I S M : T H E A T T A C H M E N T S : T  
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T U E S D A Y , 2 9 M A

## Mainstream

[from 03/02/16]



When the National Theatre announced their new season in February, I joked that this was the day that I'd officially become mainstream.

Obviously that joke is multi-faceted. Part of the joke is that by most available measures, I'm already a living definition of what "the mainstream" is: white, male, middle-aged, middle-class, and university-educated. And the other part of the joke is that my tastes have repeatedly been characterised as niche, rarefied, otiose. The idea of me being not-mainstream is ludicrous. The idea of me being mainstream is ludicrous, too. *[Which should put me in an excellent position from which to look at "the mainstream", but it doesn't.]*

So, what do we mean when we talk about "the mainstream" in British theatre?

The short answer to this, I suspect, is that the answer will vary from person to person, from taste to taste, from age-bracket to age-bracket, maybe race to race, gender to gender, etc.; or all of these things. What's perhaps strange is that it's not a thing that many particularly aspire to be, or profess to "being really into". No one staggers out from seeing their new favourite piece of theatre praising its centrism. At the same time, there is [still a problem of exclusion](#).

I do wonder if "mainstream" is a peculiarly Anglophone expression? And when did it become common currency? How did calling things "mainstream" become mainstream?

I guess like anyone (anyone white, male, middle-class who was **emphatically not-mainstream**) my age, I probably picked up "mainstream" as a term of abuse somewhere in the pages of *NME* or

*Melody Maker* where the ironising of unreconstructed indie-snobbery wasn't anywhere near a powerful enough disincentive from practising it. \*Of course\* we also took the piss out of anyone who actually \*said\* "I was into Nirvana when they were still signed to Sub Pop," but that's because we \*really\* were, right?

Back then, music snobbery at least had available measures. In basic terms: "obscure" music really was obscure. You couldn't just open Amazon on your phone and order pretty much anything ever recorded, much less find whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted, on YouTube. But then, as you get older, you realise it also had other inbuilt, paradoxical elements: getting in at the beginning of something (a band's career, a musical movement, whatever) was clearly important, but so was not being old. In short, the perfect music fan, circa 1990, had seen The Clash live when they were roughly four-years-old.

Of course, music fandom was just a pantomime of pledged allegiances and invented antipathies masquerading as deeply reasoned political rationales for liking what you already happened to like, so it's nothing at all like theatre, right?

One way that considering music instead of theatre is useful is the way it illustrates something about the lack of (necessarily) inherent qualities ascribed to form, content and intent. When I was growing up in the late eighties and early nineties, The Smiths and Joy Division (say) were both still relatively obscure. Wilfully so, in the eyes of non-goth/indie types, who were sometimes even moved to violence by how much they didn't like that kind of thing. Fast forward twenty-five years, and The Smiths have a song in Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's Desert Island Discs (what could be more mainstream or "establishment"?). That its inclusion is widely assumed to have been a cynical measure of good faith/evermanism is possibly more remarkable. But now they're the soundtrack of adverts. They're \*obvious\* choices for [an arthouse jukebox revuesical](#). Nothing about them says "weird" or "obscure" any more. The media explosion surrounding the death of David Bowie could maybe stand as the pinnacle of this phenomenon. The death of the most successful, popular, mainstream "outsider" imaginable.

In the same way, we might think of all the things in theatre that were once deemed non-mainstream – Frantic Assembly, Kneehigh, puppets, live-feed cameras, Live Art Lite – that are now a part of the National Theatre's core programme. Things that it now seems impossible to imagine once being championed as "alternative", "subversive", or "challenging".

But none of this really answers the question of what makes something "mainstream".

In music it seemed to be a simple matter of popularity, of sales, of visibility. Subversion was pretty much always trumped by success – i.e. it scarcely mattered what a record \*said\* if it sold/made millions. The money would drown any message. (Even while it would be snobbily suggested that "normal people" didn't even "get it".)

Or: if everyone just likes it, then it's irretrievably flawed, because \*everybody\* is clearly a bunch of bastards. Looked at more charitably: people who want their art to be "subversive" are put in a difficult position when it turns out that lots of people find their work likeable and entertaining. Particularly if those people who like the work continue to buy the Daily Mail and vote Conservative. The Art that the artist wants to change people's minds hasn't.

I think this paradox comes from some seriously stupid thinking conducted right in the heart of capitalism itself.

In the 1950s, Rock'n'roll was sold to an unwitting generation of teenagers with the message that it was subversive, that it was rebellious, that it was a great way to show their individuality. Rock'n'roll was their way of "sticking it to The Man". Of course, in reality it was neoliberal ideology on a fucking stick. It's hard to think of a better distillation of capitalism's principle drivers.

Everything in the history of popular music since has been complicated by this paradox. Selling resistance ultimately benefits a system founded on selling. Asserting your individuality was always the whole point. Literally no one is trying to stop you "assert your individuality" (apart from some commies, apparently).

As such, trying to understand subversion through the model of punk music is a doomed enterprise. In many ways it would be incredibly easy to argue that punk was the musical precursor of Thatcherism. A movement with no respect for the social achievements of the post-war Labour government, with no regard for history, a nihilism that ultimately only said "me, now, alone".

Applying thinking about "mainstream" to theatre is difficult. It seems difficult in the first instance because theatre itself isn't fully mainstream. I mean, theatre is really weird. It's hitherto been the least reproducible artform (maybe now technology has caught up, the recorded live transmission may in time become a saleable cultural commodity in its own right, but even then there's a question of whether it will ever eclipse the live incarnation, at a time when all recorded media sales are tanking thanks to the internet). Sure, seeing a photo of a painting isn't the same as seeing the painting, but it counts for something. And a CD of an opera is a bloody long way from the full story, but it's allowed to stand, in a way that I'd suggest the reading of playscripts generally isn't (let's leave the fact that playscripts certainly aren't all of theatre for the moment).

So, part of why the idea of "mainstream" is so difficult to apply to theatre is that the numbers are either so small, or accrued over such a long period of time. Another aspect, at least in England, is to do with class. It is widely perceived to be the case that the National Theatre, and probably a large part of (at least) London's subsidised theatre sector, is predominantly very white and very middle class. It may also be perceived to be largely male, largely heterosexual, and possibly even largely protestant-atheist. In this, it largely reproduces the post-Thatcher, dominant "political class". And the press. And the finance industry. And the legal profession, accountancy, broadcast media, etc. As such, it is theoretically "mainstream" but also "elite". Not so much an expression of the centre, or of the majority, but as a top-down instruction to the next tier down of how and what they should like and think.

Obviously, this is both true and untrue.

The National Theatre (of where? GB? UK? Just England? England and Northern Ireland? England and Wales, even though Wales has its own?) is in a difficult position. Unlike \*basically every other "National Theatre" in Europe\* it was [founded in 1963](#). By contrast, the Comédie-Française was founded in 1680, and has been in its current premises since 1799. In Germany, the concept of National Theatres pre-dated the actuality of Germany as a nation state, and was closely allied to that drive toward unification (the 1850s unification, not the 1990 one). Indeed, it was the struggle for nationhood \*at all\*, in an era when much

of Europe was carved up and ruled over by the Habsburgs or the Russians, or the Germans (or the Ottomans), that prompted the foundation of national theatres across Europe between the 1860s and the 1890s. It is also not unusual for a city's oldest theatre to be called The National Theatre of [City]. There are Deutsches Theaters, or Deutsches Schauspielhauses all over Germany, for example. Poland also has several national theatres. Etc.

Where the national theatres of Europe could be said to have had an explicit purpose, rooted in nationalism and a determination to define a national culture, the one in London turned up at the beginning of the age of postmodernism and multiculturalism, in a country/set of countries that had been the same shape forever, last invaded almost a thousand years earlier.

Nevertheless, it seems that the model that the NT has always followed, is an (necessarily flawed) attempt to represent the whole of the nation. With theatre. (Which, for the theatre/class reasons noted above, is already a paradox).

It therefore finds itself in an unenviable position. We might formulate it like this:

The National Theatre cannot be radical, because it is the National Theatre.

It can stage work that would have been radical anywhere else, but, by virtue of it being on at the National Theatre, it is effectively (seen to have been?) made a part of official ideology. The effects of whatever radicalism there had been, whatever subversion, are absorbed by the comforting, familiar layers of concrete.

I find this idea fascinating.

(Of course, there's equally a sense that you could import something that would seem positively tame/mainstream in, say, LADA, into the NT, and it would accrue a sense of "shock" within the NT. A shock cancelled out again, maybe, by the theoretical absorption into this idea of "official art", but an initial shock nonetheless.)

At the same time, there is the sense that the National Theatre needs to represent everyone in Britain, across race, across cultures, across class, across political beliefs(?), and across gender, across dis/ability, etc. And all this at a point in time when there is no consensus/agreement on how anyone wants to be "represented". Only that there are, at present, too many white men and not enough anyone else.

[It comes to something when [David Hare says theatre is too middle-aged and too middle-of-the-road](#), and I'm sitting in the NT watching *Cleansed* going "Yup! This is what it's all about." (Even if, on paper/in theory, Sir David is only moderately more privileged than myself and I should at least flag-up my awareness this argument has all the cultural urgency of so many middle-class white boys scrapping over which is the best conker.) (see also: [Matt Trueman's piece for WOS](#).)]

So there's now a sense in theatre where the mainstream is at once being rejected and demanded.

Obviously my main point of reference for this idea at the moment is [Katie Mitchell's production of \*Cleansed\*](#). On one hand, I think it's a beautiful, rigorous, thoughtful piece of work, that is unimpeachable in its feminism (although, yes, I really did wonder about the all-white cast). On the other hand, it was also precisely the work I thought the NT should be doing (albeit with better diversity).

I suppose, for me, *Cleansed* represents the apex of my impasse. I found it completely stunning; beautifully made, beautifully realised; beautiful full stop. Intelligent, difficult, uncompromising. At the same time, it felt completely reasonable that it was at the NT. That the only horses it seemed to frighten were a couple of right-wing hacks, and it reassuringly didn't do much for Michael Billington. At the same time, it felt perfectly "contained". While it was artistically energising and overwhelming, it didn't actually break anything. And that also seemed fine to me. It was beautifully realised art. And I didn't need it to break anything. It made me think, yes. And it completely changed the way I felt, mentally, emotionally, and physically, while I was watching it. And it stayed with me until, well, it hasn't really gone away yet. I don't think it changed my mind about anything, but then (in common with most people, perhaps,) I already think I'm right, and don't think I really want to be changed (because I'm already right).

Part of that anxiety, perhaps comes from the fact that I think in Britain we're very bad at talking about what Art is For. Or rather, we're very bad indeed at accepting the idea it isn't "for" anything, in that sense. It's not necessarily meant to have an observable function. But then, perhaps this too is a generational conflict, rather than a national ideology. "Art For Art's Sake" is on one hand held up as irretrievably decadent and liable to uphold dominant ideological positions by not challenging them. But on the other hand, is the best antidote to "functional" art, measured by targets, metrics, tables of social inclusion, communities "healed", persons redeemed, souls ennobled, and revenues generated, or whatever the government of the day is hoping to get in return for its funding. While it's felt a bit to me like my generation have pushed away from functional realism toward metaphor and art, in much of Eastern Europe, it's the older generation who are their Rupert Goolds and Katie Mitchells, and the young generation who are the David Hares and Max Stafford-Clarkes.

In Norway, Forced Entertainment became the first group to be awarded the Ibsen Prize. In Britain they have yet to be shown at the National Theatre. In Europe, they are a mainstay of the biggest, most prestigious international festivals. The idea of "mainstream" is not fixed. I'm sure plenty of people (even in UK) would argue that Forced Entertainment are mainstream. Equally, others will surely still describe them as wilfully difficult, perverse to the point of self-defeating, and "definitely not even theatre" let alone in the mainstream of it.

As such, perhaps all we can conclude is that meaning and terminology is relative. Anyone so minded will probably be able to establish a case for why so-and-so are, or are not, a mainstream artist, or a marginalised artist. The facts and figures suggest that the mainstream is decided upon (disproportionately) by a white, male middle-class. And common sense adds that if that's also you, then you probably don't even notice it, even if you try. And since it's me, I'm in the worst possible position to have a personal feeling on the matter.

What's interesting, running this argument about "Art" alongside the argument about "mainstream representation" is how far apart they feel. This, perhaps, is a big problem for theatre today. Or perhaps not. Perhaps this new-found fondness for what feels like it is now the centre ground is just me becoming the dead white man I am destined to be. Perhaps the marginal, radical black, Queer, whatever work is still out there, still unlikely to be invited to the NT, and maybe I've just reached a stage where, because the narrow field of my interests is slightly represented (no, of course it's not, it's hardly like they've got Frank Castorf or a re-staging of an Einar Schleef going up in the Olivier, or a bunch of Heiner Müller in the Lyttleton), I'm just happy to sit back, and ignore the stuff made outside my comfort zone. Equally, of course, there's the very real sense, that I'm plausibly not the right [white, middle-class man] to either appreciate it or write about it.

At this point, this post runs out of steam and ideas. We know the arguments about "gatekeepers" and we know the arguments about neutralisation. If [insert whatever journalist or artistic director] is too white and middle-class to recognise the value of something, then on one hand it's plausibly succeeded in doing and saying something new and radical, but on the other its influence is massively limited.

And I don't know how to square that circle.

[cover image: Office interior, 1998 by Richard Forster, who is my new favourite hauntological artist. He basically does near-perfect reproductions of old photos or photocopies or pictures in minute graphite pencil detail. Such good copies that they're almost pointless. And of very mundane photographs. Incredibly appealing on so many levels.]

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