

(Up)Setting the Scene

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(Up)Setting the Scene: *Open Court* as Staging and Spectating Intervention

Vicky Angelaki

Transitional Stages

When Dominic Cooke announced, in late 2011, that he was stepping down as artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre there was inevitable buzz, especially as the Royal Court's period of transition happened to coincide with that of other major theatres. Moreover, British theatre was performing a noticeable turn outwards to developments beyond the UK, as its role in the narrative of contemporary European performance was ripe for re-examination. British venues were frequently hosting international productions and practitioners, matching the increasing popularity of certain British writers and directors in Continental Europe and even further afield. A question was forming as to how this newfound flexibility could be further reflected in the theatres themselves. When it came to artistic organisations – especially those focusing on new writing rather than the work of performance companies – sometimes seen as set in their ways, rigidly laid out and serving a specific agenda, how much room was there for deviations from the norm? Alternatively, of course, there was the possibility of the norm being redefined from within and of the new directions this could generate for contemporary theatremaking. It was in this context that in spring 2012 Vicky Featherstone was announced as the Court's new artistic director, the first ever woman to land the job.

Featherstone had been, since 2006, the inaugural artistic director of the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), following an established record with Paines Plough. Given the cultural remit and regional significance of the NTS, Featherstone reached out to new audiences and fostered inclusion. She was also attuned to

experimentation in repertoire planning, attacking the assumption that anything novel and/or adventurous would alienate a broader audience base. As she stated, “I didn’t want us to create an elite theatre but I also didn’t want to create something that was so overtly populist it didn’t have a debate merit”.¹ Featherstone’s observation is reflective of the work she commissioned at the NTS, but also of the approach that her early period at the Royal Court revealed. At the NTS, as Lyn Gardner notes, Featherstone pioneered a “theatre without walls” practice.² As Gardner also observes in a context where theatre, including new writing, the kind of work Featherstone considers her natural creative environment,³ is moving away from traditional playhouses, Featherstone’s background rendered her the ideal candidate to maintain the Court’s ‘radical edge’.⁴ Another key appointment on the directorial team was Lucy Davies, herself familiar with the challenges of retaining rigour while programming for diverse audiences. At the National Theatre Wales (NTW) formed in 2009 Davies had a similar experience to Featherstone of leading, as executive producer, a major new regional company. Like the NTS, the NTW is a young, outward facing theatre supportive of new work as much as of establishing links to local cultural sensibilities and revisiting tradition from a fresh perspective. If Featherstone and Davies had been tested at ‘start-ups’, the Royal Court was as far from that as it got: an established company, housed in an iconic if seemingly inflexible building whose main auditorium lacks malleability and carrying a long tradition that arguably also imposes certain repertoire expectations. Since its inception

¹ David Pollock, ‘Vicky Featherstone: London Calling’, *Independent*, 8 January 2013, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/vicky-featherstone-london-calling-8441751.html>> [accessed 24 July 2013].

² Lyn Gardner, ‘Vicky Featherstone Can Help the Royal Court Keep Its Edge’, *Guardian*, 11 May 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/11/vicky-featherstone-royal-court-edge>> [accessed 24 July 2013].

³ *Ibid.*; see also Pollock, ‘London Calling’.

⁴ *Ibid.*

in the 1950s the English Stage Company has been linked to socially astute, often experimental new writing, with a taste for the occasional classic revival.⁵ Through its ongoing investment in new talent, the Court has had an implicit ‘youth’ built into its narrative. It was crucial to show that this still resonated so that a venue boasting cutting-edge new writing could continue to be seen as ‘new’ by its leadership as the theatre transitioned from one forward-thinking artistic director to the next, challenging both established and emerging playwrights to produce adventurous work.

Opening up the Court: Cultural and Spatial Interventions

Featherstone’s first step at the NTS was a multi-site project called *Home*: a foray into the heartlands and outposts of Scotland, bringing prominent artists together with new talent.⁶ It is not possible or purposeful given the length and scope of this article to extensively discuss Featherstone’s innovations at the NTS.⁷ For this reason I shall concentrate on *Home* as indicative of the imagination through which she boldly tackled the challenges and advantages of running an organisation that lacked a permanent ‘home’ itself. I suggest that this has afforded Featherstone a flexibility that she has also applied to the Royal Court. *Home* accommodated a range of performances aimed at different age groups, local cultural specificities, as well as physical and emotional geographies across Scotland. It attacked venue conventionality by stretching to ten seemingly incongruent locations which included,

⁵ For a detailed overview of Royal Court programming and leadership changes impacting artistic agendas see Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (London: Oberon Books, 2007).

⁶ See <http://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content/default.asp?page=home_showHome> [accessed 24 July 2013].

⁷ For an insightful analysis of Featherstone’s early period at the NTS, including *Home*, see Robert Leach, ‘The Short, Astonishing History of the National Theatre of Scotland’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23 (Spring 2007), 171-83 and Trish Reid “‘From scenes like these old Scotia’s grandeur springs’”: The New National Theatre of Scotland’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17 (Spring 2007), 192-201. For further information see also Trish Reid, *Theatre & Scotland* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

indicatively, an empty tenement in Aberdeen, a journey to a secret location in East Lothian, a tower block in Glasgow, and the NorthLink Ferry serving the Shetland region.⁸ The diversity and sheer extent of the event became a pivot for involvement. It was not farfetched to imagine Scotland coming together under the unifying thread of this new organisation that was attempting to extend outwards and cater to the needs of the people on whose support it depended. *Home* was the physical manifestation of hands-on theatremaking driven by a vested interest in the spectator and aiming at instigating a sense of shared implication between audience and artistic organisation. It also destabilised the concept of one predictable urban centre around which all activity and production revolves. This was a different, yet comparable challenge to the one Featherstone faced in her new role, as it was crucial to continue to assert the Royal Court's resonance, maintaining but also enriching its existing outreach initiatives and focus on new talent.

As one critic put it, with Featherstone's announcement of her first summer season came the anticipation of retaining the momentum of the Cooke era,⁹ but also of 'immense change', since '[h]aving done amazing work galvanising writers, exploring forms and reaching out to different communities as head of the National

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ I have discussed Dominic Cooke's successful tenure at the Royal Court at length elsewhere, arguing for the effectiveness of his repertoire choices, from the early productions of modern classics such as Eugène Ionesco and Max Frisch to his emphasis on programming work by contemporary authors that served both to depict and thoughtfully criticise contemporary middle class lifestyles and obsessions, inviting the spectators to partake in a process of self-reflection and critical evaluation. As I have argued, Cooke's contribution to the ongoing social resonance of the Royal Court has been crucial, despite the fact that it has sometimes been overshadowed by the boldness of his statements regarding the modern middle classes, which have been occasionally misinterpreted as indicating a disassociation from traditional Royal Court principles relating to depicting working class lives. On the contrary, the variegated narrative of Cooke's tenure consistently demonstrated an active interest in what it means to be an individual and a citizen in a complex historical junction. See: Vicky Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 18-47, 153-76; Vicky Angelaki, 'Politics for the Middle Classes: Contemporary Audiences and the Violence of Now', in *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground*, ed. by Vicky Angelaki (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 57-78.

Theatre of Scotland, Featherstone [...was] effectively creating [...] the National Theatre of Sloane Square, hugely upping the activity count and unleashing a festival spirit [...].¹⁰ Featherstone had to negotiate the space and all that it symbolised in contemporary playwriting and tradition – but at the same time there was the imperative to consider how she might further ‘open up’ the Court. With ‘The Writers Have the Keys’ as tagline, a nod to the fact that Featherstone planned her first season in consultation with 140 playwrights, *Open Court* delivered this.¹¹ Reflecting on Featherstone’s beginnings, Robert Leach mentions the groundbreaking writers she collaborated with, including Gregory Burke (whose hit *Black Watch* began its international course at the NTS), David Greig, David Harrower, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill.¹² An invitation to the writers made sense as Featherstone’s first move. Leach argues that at the NTS ‘[s]eeing actors as more than just interpreters of scripts’ was ‘integral’ to the agenda.¹³ I would add that for Featherstone so was seeing the writers as more than producers of scripts, or, as Matt Trueman also argues, *Open Court* ‘forced us to reconsider our understanding of a playwright as someone who write[s] plays’.¹⁴ As another critic notes, this was the Court’s “‘Occupy”” moment.¹⁵ In previous years, Cooke had been active in promoting

¹⁰ Dominic Cavendish, ‘Will Vicky Featherstone Turn the Royal Court into the National Theatre of Sloane Square?’, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 April 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10005887/Will-Vicky-Featherstone-turn-the-Royal-Court-into-the-National-Theatre-of-Sloane-Square.html>> [accessed 25 July 2013].

¹¹ See *Open Court* official announcement, <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/news/articles/vicky-featherstone-announces-summer-2013-at-royal/>> [accessed 24 July 2013].

¹² Leach, ‘The Short, Astonishing History of the National Theatre of Scotland’, p. 175.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.

¹⁴ Matt Trueman, ‘Open Court: Did It Change the Face of New Writing?’, *Guardian*, 1 August 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/aug/01/open-court-royal-theatre-new-writing>> [accessed 4 August 2013].

¹⁵ Liz Hoggard, ‘Reinventing the Royal Court: Vicky Featherstone Interview’, *Evening Standard*, 5 June 2013, <<http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/reinventing-the-royal-court-vicky-featherstone-interview-8644971.html>> [accessed 25 July 2013].

the internationalist agenda of the theatre, commissioning work by non-British and indeed often non-European playwrights. He keenly fostered new talent at home too – among others he gave successful commissions to, indicatively, Bola Agbaje, Mike Bartlett, Rachel De-lahay, Lucy Kirkwood, Nick Payne, Penelope Skinner, Polly Stenham and Laura Wade, while continuing to showcase the work of established authors that already had an association with the theatre. Now, with *Open Court*, Featherstone was bringing many playwrights (not exclusively the Court’s as she cast a wider net) together: it was a collective act expressing itself with an intervention on a building representing an institution, however progressive. The variables of the creative process were conceived afresh, imbued with festival flexibility, meaning a mentality of ‘branching out’ while nurturing emerging artistic visions. Other than unpredictability, *Open Court* also came with the promise of injecting discomfort.

The festival ran from 10 June to 20 July 2013, comprising ‘The Big Idea’, ‘Found Plays’, ‘Lost in Theatre’, ‘Playwright @ Your Table’, ‘Soap Opera’, ‘Surprise Theatre’ and ‘Weekly Rep’, as well as the continuing ‘Theatre Local’ scheme.¹⁶ ‘The Big Idea’ accommodated different sub-themes of events: ‘Friday Night’, ‘PIIGS’, ‘Collaboration’ and ‘Kids Court’. Parts of *Open Court* were live-streamed and subsequently uploaded on YouTube (a limited number of ‘Surprise Theatre’ events also appeared on the *Guardian* website), even though they only remained accessible for a limited period due to copyright restrictions. Despite such technicalities these were shrewd outreach moves, enabling access for a broader audience base without the usual geographical limitations. The recognition of the advantages in bolder e-publicity signalled a new era at the Court, where video resources had been underused except for – predominantly – short promotional production trailers. This increased presence

¹⁶ *Open Court* announcement.

fostered a further ‘opening up’: a democratisation of the event and the dialogue around it. Participation was further encouraged by low ticket costs; ‘Found Plays’ were of course freely accessible; for ‘Lost in Theatre’ and part of ‘Kids Court’ admission operated on a free but ticketed, or ‘pay-what-you-like’ basis.¹⁷

‘The Big Idea’ covered everything from existential concerns about sexuality, aging and mortality to Europe and financial austerity. ‘PIIGS’ particularly stood out for its interculturalism, not only because it reached out to Europe, bringing different national perspectives on the Royal Court stage, but also because it delved into the core of those identities today while posing resonant questions relating to the recession, mobility and belonging.¹⁸ ‘The Big Idea’ also probed the ways in which contemporary performance can emerge through playwright-led devising and encouraged school-age children to explore their writing imaginations. For ‘Found Plays’ audiences were invited to think flexibly of both what constitutes a narrative and where it originates, as the ‘discovery’ of plays began and ended with them: from submitting dialogical snippets to perusing these as they were pasted on cards dispersed all through the theatre building. ‘Lost in Theatre’ challenged the belief that adventures linked to site-specific performances and less conventional spaces could not be brought to the standard venue: spectators, equipped with headphones, participated in a promenade inside the theatre with a pre-recorded piece acting as the trigger. To prove the Court was truly ‘open’, for ‘Playwright @ Your Table’

¹⁷ Ibid. The possibility to watch shows remotely (online), as well as the option of buying tickets well in advance ensured outreach while maintaining the element of intrigue and surprise.

¹⁸ ‘PIIGS’ (the acronym indicating the countries most affected by the Eurozone crisis: Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain) took place from 25 to 29 June 2013, bringing playwrights local to these countries together with UK-based authors and thriving on the topicality afforded to the festival, as material could be edited until the day of the one-off performance. In the Greece-focused show by Alexi Kaye Campbell and Andreas Flourakis (28 June 2013), for example, references were made to the – then – highly topical state closure of ERT, the national television and radio broadcaster.

audiences were not only taken to familiar, public spaces within the building, but also to private, formerly off-limit locations where a playwright soon joined them. The element of the unexpected was key to ‘Surprise Theatre’ for which spectators came to the Theatre Upstairs to watch a performance they had no prior information on. ‘Weekly Rep’ created the ground for a model of repertoire theatre formerly associated with UK regional theatres and still in place (albeit in a rotational rather than one-off weekly pattern) in some Continental European theatres: in a swift turnaround process, one play would be staged at the Theatre Downstairs for each of the festival’s six weeks, allowing for more new work to be given a production.¹⁹ Finally, in Peckham ‘Soap Opera’ revisited the territory ‘Theatre Local’ had begun to explore when Cooke took productions outside of Sloane Square and into less affluent parts of the city.

In this article I am arguing that the elemental characteristic and driving force behind *Open Court* was the sense of surprise: the need to recalibrate our spectatorial expectations while being taken on a journey. This required reciprocity – if the Court were to bolster its narrative, historically associated with contemporary experimentation but also reliance on the groundbreaking plays of the past, it would do

¹⁹ See Caryl Churchill’s comments on <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/season/weekly-rep-open-court>> [accessed 30 January 2014]. Though widely praised as an initiative, the event also attracted minor criticism pointing to a lack of context or textual effectiveness for some of the work, which was however seen as supported by strong casts and direction. See Catherine Love’s otherwise enthusiastic review of the festival at <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/open-court/>> [accessed 30 January 2014]. It could be argued that aspects of ‘The Big idea’, ‘Surprise Theatre’ and ‘Weekly Rep’ link back to George Devine’s ‘Sunday Night productions without decor’ or ‘Sunday Nights Without Decor’ developed in the mid to late 1950s (Little and McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, p. 35), though that initiative was actually rather different to *Open Court*. ‘Sunday Nights Without Decor’ ran during the standard Royal Court season and the event was focused on the development of new work over the period of two weeks, before it received a minimal show, trying it out for a potential future staging (ibid.). *Open Court* components ran on a tighter timeline and as part of a six-week period, when the usual ‘business’ of the theatre was disrupted for a coordinated effort to gear its practice towards different ways of staging. Whereas the rationale behind ‘Sunday Nights’ was to test out new texts and artists (ibid.), the concept *Open Court* emphasised, rather, was a focus on the audience; the event worked to ensure that during the run of the summer festival spectators were continuously confronted by changing repertoire.

so by directly involving spectators in the process and drawing from their experiences, a path that Cooke had already begun to explore during his tenure. The flexibility of the programme allowed the theatre to both influence and be influenced by what its audience members were experiencing in 2013, not least as citizens negotiating local and global challenges. *Open Court* was precipitated by the vibrant and timely feeling that acts as stimulus for spring and summer festivals across Europe. The atmosphere of exciting renewal was always contingent on maintaining audience involvement: spectators' opinions mattered over critics' – traditional reviewing was a practical impossibility, except for shows that were given a somewhat longer run, mainly 'Weekly Rep'. It became increasingly clear that there was more power in blogs or Twitter, which offered the option of response in real time (or close enough), than in mainstream publications.

The article further argues that for a festival with the motto 'The Writers Have the Keys' it was urgent to question what the writer *could* and *ought to* mean in our time, when notions of artists working in isolation and theatres running on hegemonic structures are becoming obsolete. I will discuss how re-instating playwrights under the limelight was not a step backwards to assumed hierarchies, but a step forward. Being a playwright on *Open Court* terms meant identifying own expectations, visions and shortcomings; responding to the social climate and making timely repertoire decisions; becoming an artistic director; a curator; a director; a storyteller; a performer. Writers were assigned multiple responsibilities, becoming accountable and integral to the spectating community.

It is not possible for this piece to provide an exhaustive analysis of all events in the festival, therefore in the next section I will purposefully concentrate on two pivotal components that most embodied the principle of opening the doors and

inviting the audience in, engendering the promise of an affective theatre: ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ and ‘Surprise Theatre’. These events stood out, because they eschewed theatre-going conventions; they contained an element of risk and unsafe interaction; they were one-offs, precluding any possibility of building familiarity through live repetition and therefore held the potential of achieving stronger artistic, but also intellectual and emotional impact on a spectator unprepared for what they were about to see.

‘Playwright @ Your Table’: Close Encounters in Unlikely Spaces

‘Playwright @ Your Table’ was a ticketed event with advance sales, for which demand remained consistently high throughout the festival. The playwrights participating included the younger generation, some of whom, such as Mike Bartlett, Duncan Macmillan, Nick Payne and Laura Wade already with substantial hits behind them. ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ also drew some of the country’s most established authors, many of whom with long histories of collaboration with the Court, including: Leo Butler – who also made the initial suggestion for ‘Playwright @ Your Table’,²⁰ Richard Bean, Martin Crimp, David Eldridge, Robert Holman, Stephen Jeffreys, Dennis Kelly, David Greig, Tanika Gupta, Joe Penhall, Philip Ridley and Simon Stephens. ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ also featured iconic playwrights Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker.²¹

The event ran on Saturday mornings and spectators were asked to be at the Court for a prompt 10.00 a.m. start, which, on the occasions I attended, was taken as seriously as any standard ‘no admission for latecomers’ stipulation. On those

²⁰ *Open Court* official announcement.

²¹ Playwrights’ names were made available on Twitter as well as at the Royal Court box office post-event, when the playtexts of the day were on display.

Saturday mornings in June and July, passers-by could see eager audience members gathering early outside the theatre – which only opened on or after the stated start time – in the atypically quiet Sloane Square. ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ was conceptualised as a tombola: a staff member initiated a lively game at the Downstairs bar – itself reinvigorated through colourful summer décor, even including the optical illusion of a garden extending through the walls. There was an atmosphere of general playfulness and community that brought a summer festival feel to the basement space, inviting spectators to form a queue and exchange their ticket for one that they would draw at random. The only note on the new ticket was that of the space each spectator would need to follow the ushers to. The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed, as participants were invited to have breakfast before they met with ‘their’ playwright. There was a coordinated attempt, reinforced by the humorously performative experience of the tombola, to cultivate a non-intimidating, informal feeling. The relatively low capacity facilitated this: on a given Saturday an average of seven playwrights would take part, each of whom would join a small group of spectators (normally four to seven, while certain locations allowed for higher numbers, if necessary) in a room inside the theatre. The spaces ranged from the obvious – the Theatre Downstairs, the Balcony bar – to the unexpected: the artistic director’s office, the fifth floor meeting room, the International cubbyhole, the basement, the ladies’ room. No part of the building was closed to the public and even if we had seen it previously, this time we were coming to it from a different perspective. The playwright became our guide, in a sense.

The act of ‘opening up’ meant that the writers’ festival also blurred the line between the private and public aspects of performance and its experience. The intimacy of the event – from numbers of spectators to room layout, namely small

circles of chairs even in the larger spaces – applied further pressure on rigid categorisations. ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ became a foray into how our experience of intimate spaces comes to be constituted: the potentiality it carries, as well as its tentative fulfilment or failure. The event invited us to revisit our sense of the theatre as open forum and what this may mean. Other than access, this involved for the participant the prospect of interaction or even intervention. After all, the theatre had asked us to attend at a time not typically reserved for theatregoing, considered, for many, ‘private’ time. It had invited us to breakfast. In each room being used for readings there were even biscuits on the table. The set of expected theatregoing behaviours was being quietly and playfully – yet effectively – subverted from within.

‘Playwright @ Your Table’ was full of surprises: the fact that different playwrights had the freedom to handle their events in their preferred way, selecting texts of varying length and scope, meant that readings cultivated a different climate; spectators might be invited by ‘their’ playwright to coffee or tea and conversation at the Downstairs bar afterwards – or not. Moreover, audience members coming to the event with friends or partners were most likely not to partake in the same reading, unless they coincidentally drew tickets to the same location. Participants might happen upon playwrights and plays suited to their sensibilities, or entirely different from what they might typically select and pay for. Walking out was a particularly difficult dilemma, as the act was laden with a more personal meaning than in a standard situation, crossing over, beyond conventions of theatregoing, to a direct dismissal: not merely a rejection of the play, but of the playwright themselves, both as author and storyteller. For those unwittingly ‘drawing’ a playwright they normally found uninspiring or a play they found insignificant, the atmosphere would be at best indifferent and at worst tentative. Unless, that is, the theatre had the power to perform

a transformative act in that intimate setting, of inspiring the spectator to identify resonance in a piece of theatre that had previously left them unaffected. In one of my participatory experiences in 'Playwright @ Your Table', for example, I came face to face with a play I was unlikely to have knowingly chosen. Through the course of the reading my view of it was not drastically altered, but I developed a new appreciation of what the play stood for and had the potential to achieve. When the ideal situation occurred, of course, where a spectator found themselves in a room with a playwright whose work they had knowledge of and interest in, the experience, other than unique, held tremendous power – and the promise of an almost transcendent moment in the theatre.

It was fascinating to observe how spectators handled the challenge of 'Playwright @ Your Table', from the shared experience part of the event at the Downstairs bar to the actual readings. The majority of audience members attended with another person and in those situations the reaction when they happened to draw tickets to different locations was mainly one of awkwardness. This was followed by hurried attempts at 'secret' ticket exchanges with someone who happened to have drawn a ticket to a matching location. Others in the same situation – fewer, on the occasions I attended – accepted that they would attend different readings. This was also my experience. The first time I followed the usher through the stage door entrance and took the elevator, with three other spectators, to the fifth floor meeting room. We were soon joined by Leo Butler, who read us his first play, *Redundant* (2001). The person I had come with followed the usher to the same part of the building, but, as per the tombola, stopped at the International cubbyhole. Moments later, that group of four spectators were met by Caryl Churchill, who read her play *Far Away* (2000). For my next 'Playwright @ Your Table' I formed part of a larger

group of ten, invited to take a seat at the impromptu reading area set up on the Royal Court's main stage – at the edge of the set for 'Weekly Rep'. Stephen Jeffreys delivered a reading of his play *Lost Land* (2005). Having an altogether different interaction, the person I was attending with was asked to take a seat in Vicky Featherstone's office to hear Duncan Macmillan's rendition of *Lungs* (2011).

As these indicative examples demonstrate, 'Playwright @ Your Table' was not merely a singular event. It was, rather, a constellation of dramatically diverse, suspenseful experiences in the theatre grouped under the same ticketing option. Even though playwrights had prior understanding as to what each other would be reading, there was no attempt at a homogenisation by adding a theme to the experience, no contrived consent on any aspect that might diminish the thrill, no pre-decided line as to drama, comedy, or format of the plays read out. Playwrights were fully free, that is, to play to their intimate sensibilities as theatremakers, which would in turn help foster a genuine point of interconnection with the audience. Similarly, there was no stipulation that the plays chosen ought to have had a link to the specific theatre, even if a number of them actually were Royal Court plays. As Jeffreys put it, *Lost Land* received its UK premiere as he read it out on the stage of the Theatre Downstairs.²² In the context of a contemporary culture of repertoire programming that feasts on the 'new' (often seen to coincide with 'young'), with revivals of recent plays being extremely rare, 'Playwright @ Your Table' was an act of defiance in itself. It was a vehicle and collective proposition for how things might begin to change, as these plays returned to a public forum, complete with the opportunity for an intimate conversation at the end, a test, even, for how they withstood the test of time. Such

²² The date was 13 July 2013.

exchanges, removed from the conventions and limitations of traditional post-show discussions, were injected with a stronger sense of immediacy and impact.

The event extended beyond a playwright reading their script; Butler, for example, asked one of us to read out the stage directions while his rendition was animated and highly performative,²³ as he alternated between the voices of numerous characters in a play that focuses on the life of an underprivileged young woman in Sheffield, tracing her steps ‘through violence and addiction towards the grey light of limited self-determination’.²⁴ In a room filled with female spectators (however different from Butler’s lead) the play became poignant – an attack on the facile assumption that a male playwright might lack the necessary insight to depict female protagonists, especially in a social-realist play that thrives on detail and exposition. In the context of the reading, the play became a forum for the broader phenomenon of contemporary male playwrights displacing male characters from the centre of their plots to delve inside the female character’s psyche. A text that could be dismissed as safe Royal Court repertoire suddenly began to appear as groundbreaking for contemporary theatremaking that combines the realist with the conceptual, allowing space for the imagination. Removed from staging clutter, Butler’s play revealed its inner landscape and the nuances that mean its protagonist, Lucy, is indeed more than a mere victim of circumstances. Twelve years after its premiere on 12 September 2001, a text plagued by its original sociopolitical context was shown as strongly resonant in a contemporary cluster of plays with similar premises, relatively neglected in their time and now re-emerging. A notable example is Simon Stephens’s *Port* (2002), revived at the National Theatre in 2013. Stephens, who would go on to frequently focus on female sensibilities in his work, cites *Redundant* as an influence

²³ The date was 15 June 2013.

²⁴ Little and McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, p. 407.

for this early play.²⁵ Hearing Butler's *Redundant* in 2013 highlighted the importance of artistic organisations fostering a commitment, over time, to (once) new writing and writers rather than sidelining them for the prioritisation of constantly new plays, however crucial these may also be. It revealed the need for theatres to daringly revisit work with enduring influence – not only measurable in terms of box-office – before a certain period of time has elapsed, which will have rendered our relationship to the play safely reverential. This, too, proves an investment in the longevity of new writing, not as much a contradiction in terms as might seem at first.

Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, returning to a tiny room in the Court for a brief moment on 15 June 2013, was a strong argument against the neglect of contemporary plays by the organisations who commissioned them in the first place, by theatres with similar 'new writing' agendas, or indeed by even more prominent venues. *Far Away* is a beacon for affective theatre, as urgent today as it was in 2000 when its (in)famous, laconic stage direction demanded of the Royal Court a leap outside the comfort zone. For the oft-cited prisoner parade scene Churchill suggested that when it came to performers: 'five is too few and twenty better than ten. A hundred?'.²⁶ The direction, discussed by Churchill in her reading in terms of how theatre companies tend to deal with the challenge, was the *pièce de résistance* in a play that broke new formal and textual ground, signalling a major moment in contemporary political performance.²⁷ With *Far Away* Churchill, who already had a remarkable history of testing the boundaries of expression, communication and representation, delivered yet one more language for the theatre, not littered by exhaustiveness and familiarity. The

²⁵ Simon Stephens, 'Simon Stephens: Stockport State of Mind', *Guardian*, 23 January 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jan/23/simon-stephens-port>> [accessed 22 July 2013].

²⁶ Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (London: Nick Hern Books), p. 8.

²⁷ My observations are informed by extensive post-event discussion with the participant in Churchill's reading mentioned earlier in the article.

play is enduringly popular, performed and taught internationally; it is constantly referenced in scholarly discourse; it is a paradigm. Still, prior to its quiet return for ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ it had not been featured at the Royal Court since its premiere production, with the exception of a staged reading directed by – tellingly – Martin Crimp for the event honouring Churchill’s seventieth birthday in 2008.

The occasion of Churchill’s reading was all the more notable since she famously refrains from interviews or related publicity for new productions of her work. The fact that Churchill was both instrumental to *Open Court* (particularly to ‘Weekly Rep’ and ‘Surprise Theatre’) and willing to interact with the audience on an intimate platform such as ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ suggests far from a withdrawal.²⁸ In fact, it reveals a playwright committed to theatrical innovation, dialogue and debate – and a constant search for how these acts can remain substantive, eliminating the fanfare and returning to the raw experience. The phrase ‘letting the play do the talking’ acquired new meaning with Churchill’s rendition of *Far Away*, which was enriched by her frank, generous conversation during and post-reading. For those unknowingly drawing the coveted ticket from the tombola, it was difficult to miss that sharing an intimate space with one of Britain’s greatest authors, in the context of the particular play no less, was a formative experience.

In order to further establish what constituted this event richly significant, it is helpful to consider Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, his seminal study of the individual’s interconnection with a place in the process of becoming personal and our power of perceptual response to the sensation that it instigates; the state of reciprocal impact. Bachelard writes of the ways in which the individual has the capacity, through a certain trigger, to experience both the intimate and the vast simultaneously, to

²⁸ For Churchill’s involvement see *Open Court* official announcement.

conceptualise of different planes of existence and activity. He discusses daydreaming, which transcends the concreteness of a specific situation – we could say a room, an object – to transport the subject ‘far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*’.²⁹ The evocative and primal that coexist in Churchill’s chosen text furnished it with the capacity to operate on that level in her reading. Bachelard further notes:

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. [. . .] Immensity is the movement of motionless man [in the sense of ‘human’]. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.³⁰

Such comments resonate both with the event of Churchill’s reading of her play and with the world of the play itself, the *noemata* it gives rise to and the methods through which it produces them. Bachelard speaks of the ways in which we can become activated anew, perceptually, imaginatively, through a kind of reverie which takes place in stillness. This transpires, in an example such as Churchill’s reading, as both we and the theatre slow down to enter a different exchange from the one we traditionally expect. A happening like this holds the potential to reactivate the spectator and perform a transformative act through the conjuring, by means of words that become more than signs, a world that lay latent, revealing the immensity of imagination.

In a moment like this, then, ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ met its utmost potential by becoming a theatre of enduring affect that extends past the immediate

²⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 184.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

realm of performance, into influencing heightened perceptiveness in the everyday. This kind of intimate happening has the ability to reactivate us as citizens, in the sense of becoming more keen observers of and participants in our lives beyond the theatre, appreciating the significance of becoming active agents – as we were during the event. It is evidence of the creative mutability of a theatre that blends with our experience, as the space that was not personal is suddenly transformed into such. Vivified play-telling becomes the medium through which barriers collapse and the text achieves a state of complete, unimpeded immediacy. As one participant in Churchill's reading additionally noted, the tone of the playwright's voice, inviting and exploratory, created a depth of images that was both rigorous and absorbing, adding yet more layers to the text. The play took flesh. It was a process of mystagogy, in which intersubjectivity leapt out from theoretical premise into reality.³¹

Surprise! Facing the Unknown at the Theatre Upstairs

On Mondays and Tuesdays during the festival, *Open Court* offered a double staging of a performance piece programmed for two shows on the same evening, at 7.30 and 9.00. Spectators took their seats in colourful chairs arranged in an auditorium layout at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, while our usual climb up the stairs leading to this intimate space was made into a journey of discovery courtesy of 'Found Plays' hanging from the banisters. When audience members walked inside the theatre, they saw a red curtain concealing the stage, with 'Surprise!' projected onto it. It was a quaint setting, where colour added a playful feel to a space often reserved for the

³¹ Further to the source I mention above, another participant in Churchill's reading also emphasised 'a sense of shared intimacy amongst the group' adding that 'everyone left feeling that we had experienced something precious and unforgettable', see <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/news/blog/playwright-your-table/>> [accessed 30 July 2013].

Court's 'edgier' repertoire, typically accompanied by stark, minimalist palettes in the auditorium to reinforce the atmosphere, as well as our immersion in the spectacle. Immersion seemed to be the desired effect for 'Surprise Theatre' too, except this time fostered differently, as the Court revelled in the summer, bringing an outdoor effect to an otherwise conventional space. The organisation played to its smaller theatre's strength of transformation during the festival, encouraging a feeling of community gathering for a touring show. As in 'Playwright @ Your Table' the transience created anticipatory vigour and even a heightened appreciation for the one-off event, attacking the safety of standard theatregoing. There was an implied sense of fun – as in the tombola, there was no telling what we might happen upon – and on the occasions I attended this extended outwards to the audience. Spectators also seemed more reluctant to walk out. They always had the option, of course, but the layout of the space was such that it meant disrupting the performance (one had to walk in front of the stage to exit), the other spectators' viewing and even the quality of the live streaming – the latter point relates to the second show, which was the one directly available on the Internet and subsequently uploaded on YouTube. The surprise element, then, acted in two antithetical ways: as *carte blanche* to leave if the show were not to our liking, but also as indirect appeal to our adventurous nature – if we chose to see something we had no information on, would that not imply we were willing to take a risk and remain for the entire piece? Some spectators still walked out, of course and in such cases, particularly when it was during the first show, there was a polite request from staff to those departing not to tweet about the piece. This could ruin everyone else's surprise.

'Surprise Theatre' featured a mix of old and new work and show lengths varied, even though most pieces came within the one-hour mark. From dramatised

lectures, hybrid forms between staged reading and performance and actual off-script stagings, over the course of the festival we became exposed to an interesting, if dissonant range. For the most part, the seams were showing. As the makeshift, wood-plank proscenium arch also betrayed, what we were about to see was a little rough around the edges. The common denominator of ‘Surprise Theatre’ was a mix of good intentions, spontaneity and enthusiasm. There were still pieces such as, indicatively, the Clint Dyer/ David Eldridge diptych *Muses: Actors and Poets* (15 July 2013) or the Martin Crimp/ Katie Mitchell piece *Into the Valley* (16 July 2013), which were not only off-script, but also entirely accomplished and easily imaginable as part of a longer run. Conversely, a piece such as the dramatised lecture ‘Cakes and Finance’ collated and delivered by Mark Ravenhill could arguably only be viable as a reading since it featured extensive verbatim text and, being the first ‘Surprise’ event on 10 June 2013 with Ravenhill’s material taking shape in the ten days prior to the performance, rehearsal time was anyway limited.³² Overall, ‘Surprise Theatre’ was an important initiative and key component of *Open Court*. It held the promise of taking spectators into the unknown as it invited us to be perceptually open and untainted by expectations, allowing ourselves to be riveted by performance.

However, ‘Surprise Theatre’ did not always meet its potential and I would argue that there were two main reasons for this. Firstly, not all of the pieces were as poignant as they might have been for an event that held such potential and, beyond incongruous (which, as with ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ could be strongly positive) there were cases where text choices felt simply odd, especially for an event that

³² As noted on the flyer for ‘Cakes and Finance’ the piece drew quotations from Ravenhill’s recordings of April De Angelis, Howard Brenton, Tim Crouch, Chris Goode, Zinnie Harris, Ella Hickson, Gregory Motton, Philip Ridley and Simon Stephens as they discussed their ideal theatre.

stipulated an age guidance of fourteen and over.³³ Secondly, the fact that there was substantial reliance on scripts overall meant one could not help but wonder whether there were certain details that required further consideration before the event was handed over to the audience. An example that typifies both aspects of this problematic was the show programmed for 24 June 2013: the seminal 1983 play *Masterpieces* by Sarah Daniels. Three decades after its premiere the play remains relevant, prescient in its observations regarding the sexualisation, exploitation and abuse of women as endemic in Western capitalist societies. Whether it was appropriate for ‘Surprise Theatre’ is, however, a different matter: substantially longer than the average piece and certainly representing a different stage aesthetic from the minimalist work that the event had been showcasing, the piece did not quite ‘slot in’ from the start. It also contradicted one of the event’s principles – age guidance. *Masterpieces* did surprise me, though not in the way I might have preferred or the Court might have envisioned – beyond shock and awe, it also delivered frustration. Watching it with a young teenager that I would not have chosen to expose to the graphic content of the play – which, again, emerged all the more strongly in a small space and an uncluttered set that imbued speech with striking power – I felt that the Court reneged on a spectatorial contract of sorts. It is desirable, even necessary to attack conventions and the comfort zone of the average spectator, but somewhat more questionable to disregard, for whatever reason, the fact that the audience may be more diverse than average, including the spectators’ age. In a theatre that had only a few months prior rated Martin Crimp’s *In the Republic of Happiness*, not nearly as verbally aggressive as *Masterpieces*, as suitable for ages sixteen and over, with parents bringing younger

³³ *Open Court* official announcement.

children being given friendly warnings by staff prior to entering, *Masterpieces* simply did not compute for 'Surprise Theatre'. Not all surprises are fun, it turned out.

As a premise, though, 'Surprise Theatre' was ingenious and certainly worth revisiting by the Court. It is difficult to imagine this kind of initiative becoming stale, or losing its audience. As Churchill noted (in a rare and therefore oft-cited comment) it was a counteraction to performance saturated by the prior knowledge of reviews or even word of mouth.³⁴ 'Surprise Theatre' was intended as a quest for '[...] that magic feeling, as children perhaps, of waiting for a curtain to go up and not knowing what was going to happen'.³⁵ It was a matter of displacing expectations with anticipation. Despite misfires, in its stronger moments 'Surprise Theatre' felt potent. One of these cases was 'Commonwealth', the Tim Crouch/ a smith (Andy Smith) text, delivered by Crouch as a dramatised lecture/monologue. It unfolded in tantalisingly slow pace, following a model of a narrative that begins with little information, presents this and then turns back unto itself in a circle of repetition where each time a new piece is added to the puzzle. As the monologue progressed, momentum grew. Crouch's voice never fluctuated from its understated, reassuring tone, but the content became increasingly intense. The text was a clever parable emitting direct messages onto the audience but employing indirect means to do so. Not unusually, Crouch had taken a seat amongst the audience prior to the start of the performance, when he walked down onto the stage to take his place behind the lectern and began to read. Even the pace at which Crouch turned the pages matched the rhythm of his voice – the purpose was to draw in the audience, in what oftentimes seemed amiable and naïve conversationalist drama, but was in fact a carefully constructed schema. At regular intervals Crouch would pause and address spectators with a smile, so as to reinforce the sense of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

community even though nothing was essentially happening to keep the audience together, except the repetition of a story: ‘Are you following this?’ he would ask, meeting the audience’s nervous giggle with ‘Good. Great’.³⁶

The premise for the monologue was simple: in the theatre, we should not *expect* something out of the ordinary to happen, some kind of extravagance to jolt us out of passivity and prompt us into participation. The act of gathering to see a performance, especially when in a theatre with a certain social agenda – such as the Court – is already an action bolstered by choice, the piece stated: ‘in itself an act of potential’.³⁷ As Crouch developed the story of the people who, like his audience, came to a room, similar to the Theatre Upstairs, ‘to listen to a story’, the idea was coming across more intently: this decision and togetherness need to be conceptualised as ‘the beginning of the story [...] a story about some people getting together to *do* something’.³⁸ This ‘something’ was already happening, as the piece made evident and if instigating a moment of collective activity was so simple, then the energy of this ought to be carried forward, to more public actions. As it reached its denouement, the piece became almost activist, albeit still in a contained way, stimulating rather than leading. There was an appreciation of the intricacies in the relationship between theatre and politics, especially as representation has been transitioning into a new stage, beyond proclamations and rigid definitions.

In order to grasp the power of theatre that presents the promise of a politicised perspective as an audience we need to step back from our expectations to allow for performance to accomplish its affect. Similarly, political theatre needs to take a step

³⁶ Tim Crouch and a smith, ‘Tim Crouch’s Royal Court Surprise Theatre Show – Video’, *Guardian*, 4 July 2013, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/video/2013/jul/04/tim-crouchs-royal-court-surprise-theatre-show-video>> [accessed 27 July 2013].

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

away from its most common practices of showing through action and telling through instruction. It is an issue whose complex dimensions Alan Read takes on amongst other concerns in *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement*, from which it is only possible to quote here briefly. While Read addresses the political nature of theatre rigorously and with relevance to work like that mostly featured in ‘Surprise Theatre’, which, using Read’s terms, ‘to politicise performance [...] do[es] away with the idea of political theatre [...]’, the problematics that he even more importantly presents involves the disjunction between theatre and performance.³⁹ This is a broader observation of a risk for textual practices rather than a suggestion that the Court was guilty of this previously, especially since from the 1990s onwards the seeds of experimentation that had always been there began to fertilise more ground, noticeably so after the mid 2000s when there was a more resolute turn towards open form. As Read argues, fascinating pathways appear ‘by placing the term “theatre”, with the implication that it is there to be grasped, alongside the term “performance”, which is so interesting because of its characteristic of continuing somewhere just beyond our reach’.⁴⁰ Proceeding from Read, I argue that by including pieces like, indicatively, Crouch and Smith’s, which lacked the traditional narrative spine, or Crimp and Mitchell’s, a solo performance combining text with extended physical action and non-verbal storytelling (showing the reaction of a man who suddenly discovers a camera in a desolate landscape), *Open Court* attacked the separation of text from performance. Such hybrid forms exemplified why, in adventurous practice, text and performance are embedded in one other, not viable as binaries. In these cases, to quote Read, ‘[p]erformance affects mutate at the boundaries between those things that

³⁹ Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

are already social and those things that are not *yet* social'.⁴¹ For a theatre that has always emphasised the text, the Court was becoming more expansive as to the emerging possibilities for the shape and stage image of that text. A piece like Crouch and Smith's articulates dissatisfaction as a shared narrative, without the guise of another fictional narrative. It voices discontent literally yet poetically, highlighting the importance of collectivity and from that the potential of response. All we need, the piece suggested, was for someone to emerge from the crowd and voice what others are also experiencing, beginning to work towards some level of collectivity. As Crouch put this, we are '[a]ll together in this story' and so we need to 'ask and keep asking the question: what can we do?'.⁴² As for what happens next, the piece might not incite direct action but it certainly encourages active afterthought for this 'act of potential'. Crouch's words at the end of the performance resounded: '[...] let's just say that it's the beginning of the story' and the next part, it is implied, remains to be written by ourselves, through our everyday choices.⁴³ What caused this text to stand out in 'Surprise Theatre' was its pertinence to the very term *Open Court*: this was about the public, the *dēmos* participating and acknowledging that its role, like the playwright's, comes with a stake but also a responsibility. Crouch's character was 'standing in' for each of us: (in)action is a choice and it is as simple as standing up and speaking out – or not, it emerged from this piece.

Conclusion: Once, with Feeling

In *Performance and Place* Leslie Hill, via Walter Benjamin, discusses the “cult” value that certain iconic art objects still possess, even though constant reproduction

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 43.

⁴² Crouch and Smith, 'Royal Court Surprise'.

⁴³ Ibid.

and easy availability has rendered them readily accessible in various reduced formats.⁴⁴ In the case of the play as cult object, we could take this to mean the recycling via a review, for example, or any similar discourse; a lesser production; even the playtext, detached from performance. But as part of both ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ and ‘Surprise Theatre’, spectators had an experience of immediacy, however imperfect the rendition. As Hill observes, ‘[f]or live performance this notion of the “cult” status of the live event, the real space, real time nature of the encounter with the audience is what makes the art form vibrant while at the same time making it less commercially viable than [other] art forms [...]’.⁴⁵ The concept of “place” and its implication is key, Hill argues, both in terms of the interrelationship the event acquires to the space that envelops it and the fact that once it has happened its physical anchoring evaporates.⁴⁶ Therefore the event, however real and monumental, is fleeting – difficult, if at all possible to re-encounter in the same way and our relationship with it is somewhat paradoxical. The experience is transient and for that all the more memorable. Talking about the energy of unrepeatable performances, Hill writes: ‘[t]hey happened. And then they were over. You really had to be there’.⁴⁷ The statement could sum up *Open Court* and especially the components I have discussed here, as the intimate spatial conditions of ‘Playwright @ Your Table’ and ‘Surprise Theatre’, but also their physical unrepeatability, at least under the same circumstances, further marked their monumentality, especially when certain elements such as those I discussed above clicked together to make *Open Court* a particularly memorable experience. It should be added that the appreciation of a meaningful,

⁴⁴ Leslie Hill, ‘Mapping the Territory: Introduction’, in *Performance and Place*, ed. by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 3-7 (pp. 5-6).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

‘non-commodity based’ connection in a theatre context,⁴⁸ despite financial impracticalities, was crucial to *Open Court* and to its success in staging an intervention on performance-making.

During *Open Court* the audience was foregrounded and the appetite with which theatre bloggers, but, more importantly, spectators took to social media, especially Twitter, to communicate their experiences at the festival evidenced the ways in which they felt included in a growing community of theatregoers. The ephemerality of the festival became an additional inducement of response, with spectators eager to log comments online while the event was still recent. The temporary character of *Open Court*, that is, coalesced with the speed at which we process and disseminate information, but at the same time there was a genuine promise for a lasting affect. Over its six weeks, *Open Court* was therefore a catalyst for increasing interactivity in the post-theatre experience, presenting both the impetus and vehicle for direct and broader reaction. This, too, was a major step forward, crucial to how theatre programming might directly reflect an understanding of changing modes of not only theatremaking, but also spectating. A transformation of space occurred at the Sloane Square venue, alongside a transformation of viewing. Whether this early initiative will inform the future of the theatre, leading to more events of this kind, remains to be seen; certainly the ongoing engagement with ‘The Big Idea’ from late 2013 through to 2014 in the form of, for example, platform events that complemented the Court’s repertoire, evidences that the seeds planted with the festival may have a lasting effect of opening up dialogue. New writing at the Royal Court is transitioning into new forms of partnership between theatre and audience,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

carrying the potential for yet more creative connections, or, indeed, collisions: the kind of bold act that changes the state of play and re-sets the scene by upsetting it.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I wish to thank the editor and the peer reviewers of this article for their very constructive feedback.