



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report:

Bc. Patrik Krejčí, "Reality and Postmodernism in the Plays of Mark Ravenhill," MA thesis

Since the publication of *Plays 1* with its influential introduction by Dan Rebellato and Aleks Sierz's seminal *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* both published in 2001, Mark Ravenhill's work has been the focus of considerable attention and has been viewed through the lens of the postmodern by a number of scholars. The thesis picks up these familiar interpretive threads in order to explore the tensions between postmodernism and reality across a selection of plays ranging from old favourites from the 1990s such as *Shopping and Fucking*, *Some Explicit Polaroids*, *Faust is Dead* and *Handbag* to some of Ravenhill's plays since 2000 including *Mother Clap's Molly House*, *Product*, *Pool (No Water)* and *The Experiment*. The central argument of the project, which is substantiated through close reading of the play texts as literary works, is that Ravenhill's theatre "evolve[s] into a fully-fledged postmodern space, where reality has disintegrated." (p.vii)

The thesis is cogently organised with leading subheadings. As is made clear in the opening chapter, the aim is to group discussions according to themes and techniques – a strategy that is, on the whole, successful. Nevertheless, the opening framing of this agenda rests upon notions of development and evolution, which somewhat undermines the anti-chronological approach. Can we speak of development and evolution in a body of work if it is treated in this manner? Similarly, the title of chapter 3 "Delving deeper into the Postmodern" is a peculiar choice given the sustained theoretical emphasis on postmodernism and surface/superficiality. Is there depth in the postmodern? If so, in what sense?

Chapter 1 combines a functional overview of the project and some context for 1990s British drama, with a selective map of the theoretical terrain. The description of the 1990s offered by Sierz is reiterated here and, deliberately, not problematised. This seems a wise decision, as it is well-trodden ground. Discussion then moves on to defining postmodernism, postmodernity and what a postmodern aesthetic might entail. This complex and densely populated critical space is accounted for through Simon Malpas, Ihab Hassan, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton. Mr Krejčí handles these sources competently and reverently, however a certain lack of critical precision persists in the thesis's key terminology. On p.28, where the last section of the chapter relies solely on Eagleton to justify collapsing postmodernity into postmodernism and for a very brief account of postmodernism's 'tools,' this reverence does not pay critical dividends. Several questions arise here:

1. Is what way would Linda Hutcheon's work on the postmodern contradict Eagleton's view?



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2. Can you be more specific about the ‘tools’ or ‘techniques’ of postmodernism and their relationship with truth/reality? What about irony? Pastiche? Adaptation?
3. The central works on literary postmodernism dealt with fiction writing, is what ways does an examination of the postmodern in theatre require a different vocabulary, or demand a different focus? For instance, Stephen Watt’s 1998 book *Postmodern/Drama* posed the question “If such a thing as postmodern drama exists, how should we read it?” The relationship between these terms has been vigorously debated – one might consider how Hans-Thies Lehmann’s term postdramatic theatre has superseded these scholarly conversations. In what ways might such questions arise in exploring Ravenhill’s theatre?
4. Is Ravenhill’s work really postmodern in form – if so, how is this dramaturgically produced –or is it theatre about a postmodern condition?

Chapter 2 makes some valid points concerning *Shopping and Fucking* and *Some Explicit Polaroids* as late capitalist plays. These are lucidly drawn together around questions of choice and surrender to a capitalist narrative in the former play (see p. 38). Again, the discussion around paternal figures and parenting while not novel, is well rendered and productive within the discursive frame of the thesis as a whole. The analysis of care, children and futurity, especially the vulnerability of those outside hetero-familial norms in *Handbag* are points that would be worthy of further detailed attention.

Chapter 3 begins with analysis of *Mother Clap’s Molly House* before returning to *Faust is Dead*. Could the logic of this decision be clarified? With the former play, the question of postmodernity seems strained and only of intermittent relevance. I would like to hear more about postmodern techniques and reality here? What would we gain if we regarded this work as a history play? Or through the lens of performativity? The discussion of the most recent plays, *Pool (No Water)*, *Product*, *The Experiment* lacks incisiveness and seems loose by comparison with chapter 2. It is a pity, since these works are much less over-analysed than those from the 1990s. It would be good to hear more about the aesthetics of these plays. Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte’s collection *Ethical Speculations* might have been of use here. As it stands, the discussion repeatedly earths itself in reiterations of the relativity of truth without asking questions about the development (or lack thereof) of form, or political critique, or the fluidity of context. This brings us back to the agenda of the thesis and the extent to which we should regard Ravenhill’s work as staging states of exacerbated relativity, in which no stable truth value or reality is to be discovered.

In terms of research, the thesis demonstrates adequate skill in searching, selecting, and evaluating sources to meet the needs of the topic. Mr Krejčí has assembled a serviceable bibliography and suitably varied theatrical corpus, but many relevant works in the field of British theatre and some theoretical studies are notably absent. For instance in addition to Watt,



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Lehmann and Hutcheon, Amelia Howe Kritzer *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain*, Sarah Grochala, *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*, Peter Billingham *At the Sharp End*, Enric Monforte's work on Ravenhill, Zygmunt Bauman *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Hans Bertens *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*, Johannes Birringer *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*, Peter Buse, *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama*, Hal Foster *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, David Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*.

The use of secondary sources is generally clear however, it should be noted that regularly sources are paraphrased and footnoted but with no reference to author or context of the citation within the text. That said, some complex ideas are investigated and integrated. Secondary sources are primarily used to ameliorate points and for description, they are only occasionally considered in a critical manner, challenged or debated. Formally, some footnotes to collections of essays do not identify the specific chapter or author cited. Some sources cited in the thesis fail to appear in the bibliography. In general, though, research materials have been cited properly throughout.

The stylistic register of the work is appropriate. Mr Krejčí writing style is consistent and articulate. On the whole, the formatting of the thesis and bibliography is correct, with minor errors.

I would note that this work was not presented for sufficient consultation during the composition process; chapters 2 and 3 would have benefitted from further discussion.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "VERY GOOD" / 2.

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