

# STATE OF THE NATION

## New British Theatre

Joshua Abrams

*You keep saying that England's cosy; But it's not England,  
It's art that's cosy . . .*

Alan Bennett, *The Habit of Art*

As I write this, the confluence of global crises and national pressures in the UK has produced a perfect storm of “State of the Nation” questioning. With Labour now into its thirteenth year of government, a natural dissatisfaction arises with the status quo. Wide-ranging scandals over MP’s expenses threaten any faith in government. Gordon Brown’s status as unelected Prime Minister (and one who has made a variety of seemingly bad political—not policy—decisions) yields poor approval ratings, and the newspapers have readily dubbed David Cameron the “Prime Minister-in-waiting.” While current poll numbers show a Tory lead, a clear-cut conservative victory is far from certain; with a narrow 6% gap between the two leading parties, a hung parliament looks fairly likely (although with an election necessary no later than June 3, 2010, the situation may be drastically different as this appears in press). Unhappiness over wars in Iraq and Afghanistan remain in the news, with the death toll of British soldiers steadily increasing in Afghanistan, and public hearings into the Iraq war under way. The credit crunch hangs over everyone’s heads, and with the UK’s 0.1% economic growth in the last quarter of 2009, it just barely squeaked out of recession. Brown’s tenure as Chancellor is read as having produced Great Britain’s precarious financial state, with the past year seeing both the largest devaluation of the pound since the 1930s and an increasing trade deficit.

European elections last June demonstrated the public’s lack of ease with the current situation, best exemplified by the British National Party winning two seats; while not as disturbing, the UK Independence Party placed second to the Tories in the overall EU Parliamentary vote. UKIP’s primary policy is the advocacy of Great Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. The BNP is the successor to the fascist National Front, seeking to “return England to the English” and blaming most, if not all, of the nation’s ills on immigration. Their policies call for “an immediate halt to all further immigration, the immediate deportation of criminal and illegal immigrants, and the introduction of a system of voluntary resettlement whereby those immigrants who are legally here will be afforded the opportunity to return to

their lands of ethnic origin assisted by generous financial incentives both for individuals and for the countries in question.” A five-minute video on the front page of their Website purports to show how “horrific” Wembley—“the home of English football”—is. This video largely shows the view out of a car window of a vibrant multicultural society, claiming that it’s “not British,” and ends with a long diatribe that is given in Welsh as the speaker claims that it might be dangerous for him to express his views in English in Wembley.

In the midst of such “interesting times,” the theatre turns naturally to examining the state of the nation. The arts become the location of popular expression in the absence of a vote and the individual voice. Antony Gormley’s project for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, “One and Other,” purported to show a democratic view—a “portrait of the UK now,” with 2,400 people chosen at random to present an individual “living sculpture” for one hour on an empty plinth in the center of London.

What does it mean to “be British?” What is the role of the UK in today’s world? What is contemporary British identity? While these questions are always implicit within the arts, recently both the National Theatre and the Royal Court have produced a number of plays explicitly focusing on what Shakespeare called “this happy breed of men.” Focusing on both present-day England and its history, these productions raise questions simultaneously about how the UK has gotten to its current position and where it goes from here.

The year 2009 began with controversies over the depictions of race and religion and accusations of bias leveled at Richard Bean for his new play *England People Very Nice* at the National Theatre. The play, which might be subtitled “East End Story” traces a history of immigration from the seventeenth century through the present. The play is framed metatheatrically; in an immigration center, a group of asylum seekers are rehearsing a devised production set in the Bethnal Green area of London while they wait to hear from the Home Office if their applications for asylum have been successful. The narrative of the sketches they create is fairly straightforward: a generation of stereotyped immigrants comes to London and settles in Bethnal Green; they’re ridiculed by the local community; a pair of star-crossed lovers from the established and newly settled cultures meet, fall in love, and stay together, despite the obstacles, to produce a new generation of anti-immigrant citizens. Beginning with the Huguenots, moving through generations of Irish, Jewish, and finally Bengali immigrants of the past fifty years (although there’s a suggestion in a brief scene towards the end that the Bangladeshis have been replaced by Somalis, who are “forcing them out” of social housing), the play relies on caricature to differentiate, but ultimately shows the repetition of the story.

Charges of racism leveled at Bean are too easy; the play wears racism on its sleeve to explore these repetitive patterns. Bean questions multiculturalism, but ultimately tries to force the audience to engage with histories of prejudice. Having all the characters played by contemporary immigrants, who take on the same roles throughout each era draws the emphasis to the repetitions (Sacha Dhawan and Michelle Terry

as the lovers and Sophie Stanton as the irascible Cockney barmaid stand out). The contemporary asylum seekers are caricatured as well—a Palestinian who repeatedly bursts into anti-Israeli venomous tirades, or a chain-smoking Eastern European, but the overall sense is that despite the tiffs and individual personalities/histories, England is a nation of immigrants. Despite the lack of a melting-pot mythology akin to the United States, Bean contends that it has historically been interbreeding that has both made England great. So, while it is easy to note that the play makes references to the Irish as incestuous pig-rearers, or the French as prolific farters, or relies on numbers seemingly scrapped from *Fiddler on the Roof* to caricature Zionist, rabble-rousing, Communist Jews, it doesn't dwell on those stereotypes. Instead, it moves through them quickly, relying on the audience's recognition of the repetitive cycles, evident in Stanton's character's references to "F'ing Frogs," "F'ing Micks," etc., or in the renaming (after a dominant figure in each of the previous immigrant generations) of the apartment building that forms the block of the set, or in the repurposing of the church onstage (like the actual *Machzike Adass* on Brick Lane) from a Huguenot church to a synagogue to a mosque.

*England People Very Nice* is a funny play, but this humor is disarming—you don't always want to laugh in the way it wants you to. The production presents a cartoonish veneer; Pete Bishop's animations range from a version of the opening of soap opera *EastEnders* to caricatured time-lapse representations of changes in Bethnal Green from the Iron Age to today. The animations are Monty Pythonesque, with a very British sense of "potted history," as in *1066 and all that* or the recent children's book series *Horrible Histories*. These are paired with Grant Olding's "folk-style" music that continuously keeps the audience laughing—sometimes at, and often with—the stereotypes, as in an airplane soaring over Tower Bridge to bring Bangladeshi women (after legal changes permitted them to come to the country in the middle of the last century) that reveals all the women dancing on the wings of the plane in the manner of a Bollywood film. The end of the play sounds a slightly discordant history, as the first generation of assimilationist subcontinental arrivals leads to a generation of young Islamic teens, who are easily roused by a Wahhabi imam (with hooks for hands) towards a more isolationist and radical Islamist view. The reason for these shifts is unclear, although the white, liberal, middle class couple St. John and Camilla, who have moved into the gentrifying east end, particularly for its "gritty" realism and sense of cultural melange, seem perhaps equally at fault. Bean's play sounds a discordant tone on multiculturalism and racial blending in the twenty-first century, while showing that the view from afar has smoothed out many of the historical edges; its near-term extreme pessimism hopefully bleeds into long-term optimism.

Taking the English countryside as his purview, rather than urban London, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (after the Blake poem) stages the dying gasp of a bucolic "green and pleasant" England. Mark Rylance's masterful portrayal of the ne'er-do-well Johnny "Rooster" Byron is at the center of this play, a one-time town hero, motorcycle daredevil, who remains heroic to the children of Flintock, a small Wiltshire village. This Byron is a romantic anti-hero; his mobile home trailer on the edge between

town and forest has for years been the site of Falstaffian all-night revelry for which Byron has provided music, whizz (speed), weed, and tall tales to fuel generations of teenagers. The play takes place on St. George's Day—April 23rd. As the town prepares to elect the May Queen at its annual fair, Byron has just been served with an eviction notice because his caravan is an eyesore for a new urbanized housing estate. Byron is blamed for the disappearance of a young girl and demonized for all the ills of the town.

Surrounding Rooster are a collection of recognizable townspeople; Mackenzie Crook is strong as Ginger, Byron's hanger-on, a plasterer and wannabe DJ without any claim to a past as wondrous as Rooster's. Danny Kirrane's Davey, an abbatoir worker whose "ears pop" when he leaves Wiltshire, provides a contrast to Tom Brooke's Lee, who has destroyed all his worldly possessions and bought a one-way ticket to Australia, despite the audience's feeling that like the Prozorovs, he may never quite make it. Alan David's absentminded professor ambles on and delivers lectures about England's history and dragons; he is a tolerated and slightly more sober version of Byron's storyteller, while Gerard Horan is delightful as the pub owner and "responsible" town dweller who participates in a brewery-sponsored troupe of Morris dancers.

There has always been a Rooster just outside of town; this England has always celebrated its village life and folk mythologies. The town's inhabitants have always had a Puckish merry-maker in the forest to host their revels, yet as England further urbanizes in the twenty-first century, this licensed space is under threat from the commercialism and control of the town. Fears of a "nanny state" abound in Butterworth's play, as he reminds us that Rooster is not a new phenomenon—we can see him even in the positioning of the theatres, brothels, and other entertainments on the South Bank, outside of the city, in Elizabethan London. Rooster's gift is his love of life; he regales all with exotic tales, ranging from the boasting story that all Byron boys are born with full heads of hair and full mouths of teeth, to the adventure of his kidnap by Nigerian traffic wardens for public urination, to the fairy tale of his meeting a giant just outside of town who told his of his remembrances of having built Stonehenge (which Rooster himself once planned to leap on a motorcycle). Ginger's probing question of why a family of giants would not have been covered by the BBC is a key moment in the play. Butterworth reminds us of the centrality of England's folk histories, encouraging a view of the nation broader than media-produced newsclips and brewery-sponsored Morris dances.

Butterworth lines the play with allusions to England both topical and timeless. The issues here are not focused on assimilation and multiculturalism or on the question of what makes an individual "English," but instead on a national mythology and the broad question of what makes England English. The play turns on the recognition of Byron's "actual" gypsy blood and the (unique) legal position that this grants his encampment. Butterworth's mythos ultimately imagines England as a nation of storytellers, a country built on the backs of individuals and the interplay between town and country. Although this Rooster is confined to his cage and no longer perhaps cock of the walk, his survival is a necessary ingredient in the survival of a



Top: *Nation*, based on a novel by Terry Pratchett. Adapted by Mark Ravenhill, directed by Melly Still, National Theatre. Bottom: (left) *England People Very Nice* by Richard Bean, directed by Nicholas Hytner, Olivier Theatre. (right) *The Habit of Art*, by Alan Bennett, directed by Nicholas Hytner, Lyttelton Theatre. Photos: Johan Presson.



vision of England, rather than being beaten down by political posturing and the tensions and pace of twenty-first century life.

Two further state-of-the-nation plays, one each at the Royal Court and the National, focus more explicitly on the place of Islam in the UK today. Perhaps, the biggest “ripped from the headlines” issue facing a changing demographic, the UK’s adaptation to the spread of Islam seems to be the most pressing issue in imagining what England will look like in fifty years. Young playwright Alia Bano, in her first play *Shades*, and Hanif Kureishi, in his adaptation of his early novel, *The Black Album*, explore the changing place of young Muslims in late-twentieth and twenty-first century Britain.

Bano’s play centers on Sabrina (played by Stephanie Street), a well-adjusted Muslim woman in her mid-to-late twenties who works as a party planner and lives with her semi-closeted gay Pakistani friend Zain and his white boyfriend Mark. The play begins at a Muslim speed-dating event where Sabrina is hoping to find a nice Islamic boy, but only finds the sleazy Ali (Elyes Gabel), who’s out for a good time with “fun-loving” but “inappropriately forward” Islamic girls, before ultimately wanting to settle down with someone more reserved and appropriate. Through a twist of fate, after volunteering to help organize a fundraiser fashion show for Gaza, Sab is paired with Ali’s friend Reza (Amit Shah), a seemingly quiet and reserved proper orthodox Islamic man. Although the two seem at first drastically different, as the play goes on, they realize that these differences are largely surface, with similarities that run much deeper. Although family and friends threaten to derail the burgeoning relationship, Bano ultimately ends her play on a hopeful, Hollywood romantic comedy note.

At the heart of this strong play is the question of whether one can be a faithful orthodox Muslim and still live in contemporary UK society, and Bano tries to offer paths forward for this complex position. Unlike Bean, she suggests neither a fully assimilationist path, nor a full rejection of modern British life, but argues that viewing them as contradictory and claiming that one must choose between them is counterproductive. The hijab’s two appearances—in a comic and disturbingly offensive striptease by Zain and as worn seriously by Reza’s sister—speak to the difficult and polarizing choices seemingly posed by orthodoxies in the modern world. Nina Raine’s direction of *Shades*, in the Royal Court’s small, but historically crucial Theatre Upstairs, is very powerful; she sets the action on a traverse catwalk between two banks of audience members, asking us to look at each other with the play. What we see staged is the complexities of life in contemporary Britain, a nation paralyzed under CCTV, as we watch ourselves watching and being watched.

At the National Theatre, in conjunction with pioneering London-based Asian theatre company Tara Arts, director Jatinder Verma has staged Hanif Kureishi’s own adaptation of his 1995 novel, *The Black Album*. A sprawling, powerfully messy novel, the play is too large for the National’s small Cottesloe space. Fast moving video projections light the walls of an oddly realist student apartment. The play revolves around a

young Muslim college student, Shahid (Jonathan Bonnici) just up from Kent to begin his studies in North London in 1989. Shahid finds himself torn between his college studies (and his love for Western music—the title refers to Prince—and literature) and a rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism. He embarks on an affair with a lecturer, Deedee Osgood, who introduces him to Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, and shares with him hedonistic and drug-fuelled pleasures, but all the while finds his home being used by the charismatic Riaz (Alexander Andreou) for debates and discussions of Islam. Shahid's older brother Chili, a failed businessman and wannabe drug dealer appears to ridicule Shahid's interest in Islam, while his soon to be ex-sister-in-law recalls the importance of family and connections to the past.

Ideas are tantalizingly raised, but then dropped; Chili hides his stash inside a copy of the Satanic verses, but there's no dramatic revelation to this linkage of "decadence." The play teases at the collision between religious fundamentalism and western hedonism, but never really gets there. Deedee's onetime husband, a Marxist lecturer, shows up, devastated over the collapse of communism and trying to use class politics to understand the position of Islam in Britain. An epilogue seems to show the 7/7 bombers as the male actors carry knapsacks on stage and a strobe flash triggers the collapse of the set, but the play doesn't take us from then to now. It wants us to engage with the life choices faced by the impressionable Shahid (a somewhat autobiographical version of Kureishi), but neither reimagines 1989 through the lenses of a post 9/11 Britain, nor leaves it firmly enough in 1989 to lay that groundwork without drawing explicit connections. The novel's strength lies largely in the whirlwind that surrounds Shahid; while that appears on stage, the piece is ultimately more filmic than theatrical, hinting at a view of contemporary tensions, without teasing them out sufficiently.

Plays at the National and the Royal Court drew on the financial crisis to measure the pulse of the UK: However, they ultimately produce more state-of-the-world drama than state of the nation, with David Hare's verbatim *The Power of Yes* and Lucy Prebble's powerful (but U.S.-set) *Enron* both dominating stages in the autumn. Hare's play is very much a living newspaper in the style of the Federal Theatre Project, with "the author" appearing as an onstage "little man" much like Mr. Buttonkooper in *One-Third of a Nation* to try and make sense of the credit crunch. Prebble's play draws on the major characters from the Enron debacle to unpick the horrors on modern capitalism. Her play sold out almost immediately and has already scheduled West End and Broadway runs.

The year 2009 ended with the National's family-friendly production of *Nation*, Mark Ravenhill's adaptation of a Terry Pratchett novel. Set on an unnamed South Seas island in 1860, the play revolves around Mau, a young islander boy-in-the-process-of-becoming-man and Daphne, the prim adolescent daughter of the man thirty-seventh in line for the throne, and currently a colonial governor. After a tsunami and shipwreck, the two find themselves (along with a crass cartoonish parrot) the only apparent survivors. Despite initial wariness and difficulty communicating, the two manage to get along and become the chief and top squaw of an island nation as the

few survivors from the rest of the island chain join them. The two learn each other's ways and the play Creolizes their traditions, as Daphne wears a grass skirt over her Victorian hoops, learns to produce the local "beer"—a sort of saliva-fermented kava drink—and to deliver babies, and teaches the "natives" to sing "Happy Birthday." Ultimately, as in all such myths, they fall in (chaste, Victorian) love.

The play is not sure what it wants us to believe: it focuses on knowledge and science, but hints at mysticism, staging ghosts and a journey to the under(sea)world. In this journey particularly, Melly Still's staging and design produce beautiful images and puppetry, now a necessity for the National's Christmas shows after *His Dark Materials* and *War Horse*. The cave of the ancestors, which Daphne visits early in the play and to which she takes Mau at the end, purports to convince us that Mau's ancestors had invented the telescope, surveyed the heavens, made false teeth, and traveled the globe, all the while early Northern Europeans remained firmly isolationist. The happy band is beset upon by two troupes of invaders: a cartoon villain drawn straight from *The Tempest*—the butler Cox (from Daphne's ship) who has persuaded the violent neighboring tribe to serve him; Daphne's aunt and retinue of shadowy "men" behind the throne, who come to reunite Daphne and her father and crown him King since a Russian influenza has decimated the nobility. Daphne faces the choice of staying with her love or returning to England and makes the impossible choice, pushed by Mau, to return to England, "where she belongs." But she makes the island a member of the Royal Society in perpetuity, and develops a cultural and scientific exchange program between England and the South Sea island.

While there is perhaps a nobility in its attempt to turn the world upside down by showing both north and south equally beholden to science and faith, the play's view of "Nation" appears ultimately problematic in ways too numerous to list. Despite the play's professing to break down boundaries, Mau remains a nineteenth-century "Noble Savage" straight out of Rousseau and Daphne a gentle and unassuming Darwin (a mere one year after the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*). Rather than some natural blending of the two kingdoms, which in itself would be problematic as well, the play's solution might be drawn from the agenda of the BNP (or the KKK for that matter)—the white chaste maiden returns to her ancestral England, while the black noble savage stays in "his place." There is, to be sure, an exchange established, and the play's final scene purports to stage a scene from the present as an astronomer shows two young children the island and the stars, retelling the story of Daphne and Mau.

What then, is "Nation"? Perhaps it wants to be a reimagining of *The Tempest* that grants more currency and power to Caliban, or perhaps a re-gendered *Lord of the Flies* about nation building. Both these classic British stories grapple with imperialism and ultimately with the question of what it means to belong to a particular country or a particular nation; yet this production, while struggling with provocative ideas at the height of British colonial power under Victoria, seems an oddly dated fable for twenty-first century Britain. It conjures up a Britain forever stuck in a postcolonial imaginary, unable to move forward without a radical break from its



own histories, a Britain drastically different from the contemporary daily struggles depicted in these other plays.

The epigraph at the beginning of this essay is drawn from Alan Bennett's *The Habit of Art* at the National Theatre. This metatheatrical play invents a rehearsal (in a National Theatre rehearsal room) of a play about an made-up reunion between W.H. Auden and Benjamin Britten. These two titans of twentieth-century British creativity provide Bennett a chance to muse on love, art, and the classical and the contemporary. In the meeting, as Richard Griffiths's Auden tries to convince Alex Jennings's Britten to allow him to write the libretto for *Death in Venice* (Thomas Mann was Auden's father-in-law), and a rent boy listens in, the imaginary rehearsal room stands in for an imagined Oxford residence and in turn an imagined England. These larger-than-life artists help us to recall that even when the country is a mess, even though England isn't cozy, art allows us to draw neat lines around the key political, moral, economic, and structural issues of the day and to interrogate past, present, and future. Today's Britain is filled with questions about the ongoing viability of its political system and ways of life. These plays, some more and some less successfully, ask us to grapple with these issues and to try to find a productive way forward.

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JOSHUA ABRAMS is a Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies at Roehampton University and Assistant Editor of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. His essays and reviews have appeared in multiple publications, including *Theatre Journal*, *TDR*, *PAJ*, *Western European Stages*, and *Slavic and East European Performance*. An American in the UK, during 2009, he successfully passed the "Life in the United Kingdom" test and was granted Indefinite Leave to Remain by the UK Home Office.