

# Dark Times

## British Theatre after Brexit

Aleks Sierz

*In the dark times  
Will there also be singing?  
Yes, there will also be singing.  
About the dark times.*  
Bertolt Brecht

The UK Referendum vote to leave the European Union—Brexit—took place on 23 June 2016, and the result was a triumph of the irrational over reason. Of course, I am conscious that it is unfair for somebody like me—an ardent European—to characterize those who voted to Leave as unreasoning and deluded. After all, I’m a white middle-class man in full employment and living in Lambeth (the London borough which recorded the highest proportion of people in the country voting to Remain in the EU). However, I did see many moments during the campaign that reminded me forcefully of an incident that the late Peter F. Drucker, Austrian-born American management consultant and educator, mentions in his 1939 book, *The End of Economic Man*. At one point during the rise of Hitler he witnesses a “wildly cheering rally” at which a speaker proclaims, “We don’t want higher bread prices; we don’t want lower bread prices; we don’t want bread prices to stay the same—we want National Socialist bread prices!” During the Referendum campaign the same tone could be detected in the often-repeated slogan “We want our country back.” Meaning what exactly? And, after the result, the new prime minister Theresa May’s gnomish statement that “Brexit means Brexit” is another example of the depressing, but now all-pervasive post-factual politics. Needless to say, the campaign also provided numerous examples of *vox pops*, which were not so much irrational as plain racist. Anyone who glances at Dominic Sandbrook’s 2010 social history book, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were—Britain 1970–74*, which covers the entry of the UK into what was then the Common Market, will recognize the distinctive voice of traditional Little Englander resentment, a snarl against immigrants and big corporations alike.

For me, it felt like the 2016 campaign was conducted during a time when reason had taken an early summer holiday, and the EU, and the UK's membership as part of it, became a kind of universal scapegoat. The main reason for this was the fact that membership of the EU stipulates the free movement of people (code for migrants). Hence the scapegoating: Oh dear, I've lost my job—blame EU migrants. I can't get social housing—blame EU migrants. My wages have gone down—blame EU migrants. I can't get a doctor's appointment—blame EU migrants. Look, prices have gone up—blame EU migrants. Little Tom can't get into primary school—blame EU migrants. His older sister Charlotte can't get into the best secondary school—blame EU migrants. What about child care?—blame EU migrants. My mother spent a long waiting time at A&E in the local hospital—blame EU migrants. The price of beer has gone up—blame EU migrants. My internet speed is too slow—blame EU migrants. My wife no longer loves me—blame EU migrants. My children hate me—blame EU migrants. My cat has died—blame EU migrants. In this atmosphere of folly, the result of the Referendum, although dismaying, was not such a great surprise. But what does Brexit mean for British theatre?

The first spasms of response felt like a bereavement. In the British theatre community, there was a sense of loss. A poll by the Creative Industries Federation in May found that ninety-seven percent of its members wanted to Remain in the EU. More than 250 artists—from Benedict Cumberbatch to Anish Kapoor—signed a letter arguing that Britain's cultural industries faced disaster if the UK left. Likewise, Samuel West, the actor and director who leads the National Campaign for the Arts, found that some ninety-six percent of creatives wanted to Remain. "Many people are mourning," he said while participating in *The Cultural Response*, a BBC Radio 4 Front Row special on 26 July 2016, hosted by John Wilson. On the other hand, another participant, Rufus Norris, the artistic director of the National Theatre, called the Brexit vote a "wake-up call," and warned that the arts in general have become "out of touch" with some parts of the country. His solution is to start a listening project, aimed at finding out more about how "British values" are perceived in different parts of the country. "If we are going to be a national organization," he said, "we have to speak to and for the nation. Our principal responsibility initially is to listen." This condescending response raises more questions than it answers: if those areas of the country which voted most strongly to Leave—North-East, South-West and Midlands—are the most socially and economically deprived, then simply listening to their fears and prejudices can surely do little to encourage either good or provocative drama. Unless, that is, Norris wants to find and develop a "Brexit play," whose heroes are nostalgic patriots articulating expressions of resentment, racism, and anti-foreigner prejudice. And further, show those particular prejudiced characters as the heroes, rather

than the victims, of the drama. This “Brexit play” might be interesting, and would certainly confront most audiences, who are overwhelmingly liberal in sentiment, with views that they don’t want to hear, but somehow I can’t see it happening.

In general, the idea of Brexit—which won’t actually take place for, at the very least, another two years—has led to an understandable fog of gloom in the theatre community. This has been deepened by statements from a handful of so-called cultural figureheads: Munira Mirza, former culture deputy to London mayor and foremost Leave campaigner Boris Johnson, has argued that theatre should adopt a more global perspective. In the *Evening Standard*, she wrote: “Nick Allott, managing director of Cameron Mackintosh Ltd says that for commercial theatre at least, Europe is decreasing in importance, while the market is growing rapidly in China and the Middle East. We are ready for a truly global future.” She also repeated the assertion that “The Brexit vote brought home that some elements of the cultural sector are profoundly out of touch with much of the country.” This is a recognizably populist sentiment, but so far Mirza has declined to tell us what a culture that is “in touch” with the country would look like.

It is certainly true that the Referendum issue has polarized opinion. In *The Stage*, the newspaper of the theatre industry, an article by arts consultant James Doeser argued that Brexit was the result of the “angry voice of the dispossessed, elderly, white working class” who were protesting against the “liberal metropolitan elite.” Brexit, he said, “was a grand expression of a long-standing yet previously muted philistinism.” Leavers are not only politically wrong, but culturally ignorant too. The article’s headline read “Brexit is just the start of the war on culture.” Such early reactions of appalled despair have been greeted in turn by protests against the Remainers. Carole Burton from Solihull complained to the same newspaper’s “Letters” page that the idea that “all the Leave voters are cultural philistines” is plain wrong, and she objected to the “torrent of abuse that has been pouring from the losing side.” In another issue, Mitch Murray from the Isle of Man called *The Stage* critic Mark Shenton “arrogant” for suggesting that only “some” British citizens voted for Brexit when “Britain voted by a majority of more than one million to leave the EU.” That’s democracy, he said, get over it! Yet the general feeling when scanning reports in *The Stage* is that the main problem is uncertainty. Clearly, if you are planning events and funding several years in advance this vagueness makes life extremely hard. In the middle of the Edinburgh Festival, for example, some leading Fringe performers, producers, and venue managers warned that Brexit will have a profound effect not only on international artists participating in the festival (due to expected visa restrictions on foreign citizens), but also on international students who wish to study the arts in the UK. Therefore many artists are lobbying the Conservative government

to ensure that the eventual terms of Leaving will not make life too difficult for the international exchange of ideas and people.

What is certain, at the moment, is that the Referendum campaign has accentuated a series of divisions within the UK. The litany is now familiar: middle-class versus working class; young versus old; educated versus ignorant; employed versus unemployed; cosmopolitan versus Little Englander; multicultural versus racist; and London versus the regions. Although, with a couple of exceptions, it is too early for British theatre to tackle the new issue of Brexit, it has for decades already addressed the subject of social division. In fact, plays about the so-called underclass are a staple of British stages. The examples, since the start of the new millennium, are legion: Leo Butler's council-estate drama *Redundant* (Royal Court, 2001), to name but one, is a typical example of what is recognizably dirty realism: poor working-class people in desperate straits. Expect coarse language, vulgar sentiments, and brutality. Set in Sheffield, this is the story of a year in the life of Lucy, a seventeen-year-old white teen who dreams of having a family, unfazed by the fact that she already has one child in care. Written with excruciating psychological realism, the play is raw and raucous. In the 1970s tradition of state-of-the-nation plays, Lucy's gran attacks the link between thoughtlessness and teenage pregnancy—"Never learn, d'yer?" And her granddaughter's response to the fact that her child is a girl—"Another fuckin' cunt in the family"—sums up the disappointment of all the women in the story. While representations of wild folk on stage habitually fascinate the tame folk in the audience, it is worth stressing that, far from being out of touch, the play is also sympathetic to the underclass. Poverty-line Britain is not so much a Hell on Earth as a place that urgently needs attention. And when its inhabitants don't get it, they vote against those they think have let them down. The problem is not that British theatre ignores the concerns of the poor; the problem is that the poor are excluded from much of British culture. They are not theatre's main audience, and when they are represented on the television, it is as objects of fun and derision.

A similar mixture of disadvantage and violence is a familiar aspect of contemporary British playwriting. In Dennis Kelly's *Orphans*, for example, Danny and Helen, a young married working-class couple who have one child and are expecting another, are enjoying a quiet dinner when Liam, Helen's brother, arrives unexpectedly. The stage direction describes his appearance: "*He has blood all down his front.*" Starting from this vivid image, Kelly makes Liam give a series of explanations for what has happened to him until finally the horrendous truth comes out. The title refers to Helen and Liam, whose parents died when they were small, and the intense energy of the play comes from the three characters deciding what to do about the narratives that Liam spins. Each moment of decision is also a moment when an ethical question is asked: What is the right thing to do?

Such implicit questions are also common to other underclass dramas of the 2000s. They occur in Roy Williams's *Fallout* (Royal Court, 2003), about a teenage black gang who have killed a young black kid, and in Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (Royal Court, 2006), about a working-class army veteran, returned from one of Blair's wars, who casually kills a black woman. The main criticism of such powerful imaginings of underclass life is that they are instances of cultural tourism: well-heeled middle-class audiences gawping at poor people doing bad things in dirty settings. On the other hand, they also give a strong voice to the dispossessed and the deprived. Either way, the large number of plays about the underclass and about Britain's forgotten communities, both urban and rural, make Rufus Norris's idea of listening to people outside of the metropolitan elite patronizing at best and completely futile at worst. British playwrights have not only been listening, they have been writing dramas about such people for decades.

But just as successive governments and the EU have failed to enthuse the British people about the European project, so British theatre has, despite its ever-expanding canon, practically ignored the subject of Europe. While the War on Terror has dominated the way playwrights view the state of the world, Britain's uneasy relationship with the Continent has rarely been examined. Only two plays have taken the Chunnel to Euroland: Tim Luscombe's *The Schuman Plan* (Hampstead, 2006) and Richard Bean's *In the Club* (Hampstead, 2007)—the first as tragedy, the second as farce. Luscombe took a grand historical view, which told the story of Bill, a Suffolk boy who grows up in a fishing family in the 1930s and then becomes a Eurocrat in the postwar era. The quintessential Englishman, he starts off idealistic and ends up disillusioned: "Now all I see is details. Fiscal, merchantile, boring details." "Don't worry," advises his colleague. "It's a very English response to being in Europe." By contrast with this serious account of EU politics, Bean created a political sex farce by looking at the misfortunes of one hapless Euro MP, Philip Wardrobe, who is venal, shifty, and selfish. "I've only ever been any good at two things. Fucking up and apologizing [sic]," he admits, with a wry nod to the British penchant for saying "sorry."

A handful of other plays have mentioned some EU institutions, usually as examples of political failure. In Steve Waters's *World Music* (Sheffield, 2003), loosely based on the fallout from the Rwandan genocide, the central character is Geoff Fallon, a socialist member of the European Parliament, who as a young man taught in Africa and made friends with Kiyabe, a local politician helping to rebuild his country after its colonial past. Deftly jumping between the present and scenes set in 1980, Waters convincingly shows the machinations of the European parliament, the painful private life of Fallon (who ignores his son while picking up Florence, a black woman working illegally in a Brussels cafe),

and the contrast between an idealistic view of Africa and its reality. By the end of the story, grim reality trumps starry-eyed idealism.

An excellent example of the effect of the EU on a specific English community can be found in Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court, 2005), a century-long comic epic about the Harrisons, a pig-farming family in Yorkshire. Set on Kildham Wold Farm, some eighty-two acres near Drifffield, Bean's comedy follows the fortunes of William Harrison from the age of nineteen in 1914 to 109 in 2005. Over these ninety years, as well as family quarrels, the external pressures on the Harrisons include edicts from the central government and the European Community. Eccentric, comic, and celebratory of Yorkshire Englishness, one of the play's messages is that Britain's countryside is neglected and oppressed by foreign powers, whether in Whitehall or in Brussels. And this failure to protect the countryside compromises national identity. If the traditional English breakfast is bacon and eggs, Bean shows how pig farmers have been betrayed by market forces and government indifference. Ours is a land of lost content and anger. As Laura says in the play, "I've never had a penny in grants from Europe and yet him up the road with forty thousand fucking acres gets two million quid a year he dunt need." This is the authentic voice of English resentment.

Bean is an expert at articulating the feelings of Little Englanders. His most outrageous and controversial play is all about migration. The comic epic *England People Very Nice* (National Theatre, 2009) covers more than 400 years of the history of various migrations into London's East End, from yesteryear's French Huguenots to today's Bangladeshis, and including the Irish, the Jews, and the Somalis. As each group of new arrivals is met with violence but eventually assimilated by means of *Romeo and Juliet*-style love affairs, a picture emerges of a mongrel nation, bonded together by a wicked sense of humor, a love of drink, and a lusty earthiness. If at times the playwriting suggests that behind Bean's breezy humor there lurks an unconscious fury—which is frankly unsettling—the play shows how definitions of national identity are in constant flux. Although some scenes made many in the audience uncomfortable because of the play's evident delight in insistent cultural stereotyping, its multicultural cast and high profile suggested a confidence in dealing with an enormously sensitive issue. The production was a huge box-office success, and its main theme of migration was to prove central in the Referendum debate. Unsurprisingly, the eastward expansion of the EU in 2004–07 resulted in a spate of East European migrant dramas. Steve Waters's *Hard Labour* (Hampstead/WYP, 2008), for example, looks at the rise and fall of a gang master, who—in a parody of the Thatcherite free market—sees little difference between crime and business. His ruthless exploitation of migrant labor, undercutting the wages of local workers, has since grown into a pressing social

issue, often alluded to during the Referendum campaign. Similarly, Tena Stivicic's *Fragile!* (Arcola, 2007) gives a panoramic picture of migrants trying to make a new life for themselves in London, while one of the most powerful accounts of sex trafficking is Lucy Kirkwood's *It Felt Empty When the Heart Went in at First but It Is Alright Now* (Clean Break/Arcola, 2009), a strong mix of feisty realism, satirical comedy, and numbing heartbreak. With its ironic repeated refrain of "Welcome to England!" the play looks at the experiences of Dijana, a Croatian woman who is forced to work as a prostitute and ends up in a detention center where she meets Gloria, a West African. Here, multicultural England appears as an international crossroads of female pain.

Other plays have explored the English resentment of foreigners in local contexts. Joy Wilkinson's excellent *Fair* (Finborough, 2005), for example, is set in Lancashire and shows what happens when Melanie meets Railton at a fairground and they end up in bed. Soon after, she discovers that he's a racist and the play accurately explores the resentments of the white working class, often using the ghost of Railton's dead father as a third character. For a while, Melanie campaigns for a mela, a multicultural celebratory event open to all ages and all races, but Railton wants an English St. George's Fair. At one point, Railton mocks Melanie's middle-class bohemian identity: "Northerner? Londoner? English? British? European? Westerner? Earthling? Some liberal pick 'n' mix bag." Here, the white working class is seen as the problem. Similarly, in Atiha Sen Gupta's thoughtful *What Fatima Did . . .* (Hampstead, 2009), the teenage Fatima throws her friends and family into confusion when she decides to start wearing the hijab, and the climactic scene comes when her white ex-boyfriend George arrives at her fancy-dress eighteenth birthday party draped in the flag of St. George (although his folks are Irish) and then provocatively turns the flag into a hijab. Likewise, D.C. Moore's *Alaska* (Royal Court, 2007) looks at how a twenty-four-year-old failure, Frank, who works at a cinema, racially abuses Mamta, his new supervisor. In their final confrontation, Frank provocatively argues that blacks and Asians commit worse crimes on each other than they ever suffered under British imperialism: "Cos I'm white, you care more about what I say than what all those billions of black and brown fuckers actually do." Like Gupta, Moore introduces complex crosscurrents, showing how Frank's insecurities about his sexual identity are part of his racist mindset. Plays such as these illustrate the fact that there is no such thing as racial purity and argue that racism in Britain results from a mixture of social failure and sexual anxiety.

British new writing is always quick off the mark. Since June 2016, the idea of Brexit has already sneaked into a couple of recent plays: Stephen Laughton's aptly-titled *Screens* (Theatre 503, 2016) is about a British-Cypriot family of Turkish

Muslim ancestry. In one incident, the mother is abused in the street because she is mistaken for a Syrian refugee, and this is explicitly mentioned as an effect of Brexit. Meanwhile, several recent migrant stories have tackled a subject that was to become crucial in the Referendum. Examples include Tess Berry-Hart's *Cargo* (Arcola, 2016) and Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* (Soho Theatre, 2015), as well as earlier examples such as Rachel De-lahay's *Routes* (Royal Court, 2013) and Carla Grauls's *Occupied* (Theatre 503, 2014). In *Occupied*, Alex, one of the Romanian characters, says, "But you see it is your problem. Because where does Romania go, where do the hundreds, thousands of Romanians come to get jobs, to get a better life? England! It's the pretending I hate. The way the English pretend to care when they don't. Why not be like other Europeans and show your hatred instead of hiding it in your tolerance?" Arguably, the Referendum provided the opportunity for a mass of British people to express exactly this hatred. Best of all the migrant stories was Zinnie Harris's *How To Hold Your Breath* (Royal Court, 2015), a highly imaginative take on the situation which invented a scenario in which Europeans were fleeing into north Africa, thus reversing the mindset and clichés of some standard accounts of the migrant issue.

Using a more traditional form, *A View from Islington North* (Arts Theatre, 2016), a series of very short plays curated by director Max Stafford-Clark, looks at British politics today. Named after leftwing leader Jeremy Corbyn's North London constituency, the evening included *Ayn Rand Takes a Stand* by David Hare, and showed how Rand—Russian-born novelist and proto-neo-con philosopher—returns from the grave to encourage our Chancellor and Home Secretary (at the time, Theresa May) to put their trust in the market. With impeccable logic, she argues in favor of unrestricted migration—to May's horror. This highly intelligent, brightly written, and thought-provoking piece ranges across subjects such as free speech, economic liberty, and the power of individuals to change their destiny. Although this is a short playlet, it surely proves that in dark times, maybe the best way to articulate anxiety is through imagination and humor.

There have also been many recent plays that deal sympathetically with migrant communities, especially Muslims. For instance, John Hollingworth's *Multitudes* (Tricycle Theatre, 2015) is set in Bradford, and its title alludes to Walt Whitman's "I am large. I contain multitudes" from *Song of Myself*. It intelligently explores conflict between several social groups. With its highly topical references to young men and women being radicalized or going off to Syria, and the fraught subject of the conversion of white women to Islam, this really is a play for today. At the same time, the problems of some migrant communities have also attracted attention, such as Charlene James's *Cuttin' It* (Young Vic, 2016) about female genital mutilation in the London Somali community. Additionally, lots of small plays,



such as Andrew Muir's *The Session* (Soho, 2015), have looked at the relationship between migrants and natives: in this case between Bournemouth-born Robbie and Polish-born Lena. Despite all of these many examples, the failure of successive governments to "sell" the idea of being European to the British public at large is matched by theatre's failure to convince a mass audience that a European identity—as well as a British one—might be worth having.

Most of the theatre community was in favor of Remain, and many see dark times coming, dreading the effects of Brexit: mostly the loss of European funding, but also the various personal hassles (more costly trips abroad, uncertainty about the civil status of EU nationals at present in the UK, and ditto for touring ventures and co-productions). If, in the wider community, migration is a kind of universal scapegoat, then for theatre people there is a risk that maybe Brexit will soon fulfill the same function: Oh dear, I've lost my job—blame Brexit. I can't get social housing—blame Brexit. My wages have gone down—blame Brexit. I can't get a doctor's appointment—blame Brexit. Look, prices have gone up—blame Brexit. Little Tom can't get into primary school—blame Brexit. His older sister Charlotte can't get into the best secondary school—blame Brexit. What about child care?—blame Brexit. My mother spent a long waiting time at A&E in the local hospital—blame Brexit. The price of beer has gone up—blame Brexit. My internet speed is too slow—blame Brexit. My wife no longer loves me—blame Brexit. My children hate me—blame Brexit. My cat has died—blame Brexit.

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