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The Discreet Charm of Apocalypse: Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* at the Royal Court

Abstract

Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in January 2016 under the direction of James Macdonald, and was revived, at the same venue and with the same cast, between 25 January and 11 February 2017, before going on tour in the UK and USA. After a brief overview of Churchill's latest production, I will focus on her preference for short theatrical forms as well as for environmental and eschatological themes. *Escaped Alone* will be briefly introduced in this frame, with a particular attention to its kinship with *Far Away*. The February 8 2017 performance will then be reviewed with regard to the text, the acting, and the stage design. Macdonald's choices will be discussed, stressing the difficulties and the advantages of staging a play with minimal stage direction; Churchill's relationship with the director, and her role in rehearsal and in the *mise en scène* will be considered too. Finally, I will suggest that Churchill, in her experimenting with theatrical language, has been distancing herself from her social-realistic works of the Seventies and Eighties, going towards a theatre reminiscent of Absurdist theatre in general, and Samuel Beckett in particular.

Keywords: Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, Royal Court, dystopia, environment, Absurdism

Four ladies, in their late middle age, sit and chat more or less cheerfully in a garden. Every now and then one of them leaves the group and directly faces the audience, assuming a Cassandra-like role and describing a chain of catastrophic events that humankind is due to face, supposedly in a near future; by her description, it is apparent that humanity has only itself to blame for these calamities. In a nutshell, this is what goes on in *Escaped Alone*, Caryl Churchill's latest play: yet this summary hardly does justice to the richness of the fifty minutes of (very little indeed) traffic on the stage of the Royal Court. *Escaped Alone* premiered at the same venue in January 2016, with the same cast and under the direction of James Macdonald, and is now revived for a two-week run before going on tour around the UK and then transferring to New York. The play was announced by Royal Court artistic director Vicki Featherstone as the curtain raiser to the theatre's sixtieth-year celebrations in 2016 in an interview (Brown 2015) published by *The Guardian* on 12 October 2015. In this interview, *Escaped Alone* was called "a full-length play".[1] This definition would sound quite off-mark for a fifty-minute play, if not in the context of Churchill's latest production. All through her career, Churchill has written shorter plays, especially for the radio, but in the last eighteen years (since *This is a Chair*,

[1] The phrase appears outside quotation marks, so it is probably a comment by the interviewer, not a statement by the interviewee.

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1999) this has become an established trait of her production, and she has never exceeded the one-hour limit since *Blue Heart* (1997a) and *Hotel* (1997b). The latest example of this concise playwriting was her 2015 play *Here We Go* that lasted some forty-five minutes, including a silent twenty-minute sequence (quite hard to bear for the audience, it has to be said) of an old man carrying out the routine of getting out of bed, dressing, undressing and going back to bed for three times, always with the help of a carer. This economy of expression is the most evident feature of Caryl Churchill's most recent plays, but there have been deeper changes in both thematic and theatrical form in her production. In introducing *Escaped Alone* I will show how, in this period, Churchill has shifted her focus from strictly political to environmental and eschatological themes. After reviewing the performance, I will argue that in her latest plays Churchill has adopted a style reminiscent of absurdist theatre, possibly opening a new path for political theatre.

"It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)"[2]

As I have stated above, environmental issues are at the core of Churchill's latest production. This is not a novelty, since, for instance, as early as 1971 she wrote, and BBC broadcast, the radio play *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxigen* (see Churchill 2008). As suggested by the title, the play described a not too far future (the play is set in 2010) in which breathing air would become a commodity to be sold and bought. What is new in some of her latest plays is the focus on a sense of unavoidable catastrophe, both collective and individual. The already mentioned *Here We Go* reflected on individual death and physical decay, while *Far Away* (2000) dealt with a worldwide nightmarish future: incidentally, Michael Billington has assigned to this play top position among his five favourite dystopian dramas (Billington 2014).[3] Both *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* present a situation in which Nature seems finally to rebel against humankind, with apocalyptic consequences. As the playwright Moira Buffini has stated, "I have heard *Far Away* described as the perfect play: the first scene is personal, the second societal, and the third universal. I think that's a bit neat. But it's weird and huge and damned brilliant" (2015). In *Far Away* the main character, Joan, moves from childhood to girlhood to womanhood in the three short acts into which the play is divided. In a sort of reversed *Bildungsroman*, she goes not so much from innocence to experience as from having ethic principles to completely losing them. What is fascinating, and distressing at the same time, is that *Far Away* portrays the 'banality of evil' at its simplest and purest. The reference to Hannah Arendt's report of Eichmann's trial is not casual, as in this play we see that human beings simply get used to evil, almost without being aware of it. As Mary Luckhurst has pointed out, "the actors performed Todd and Joan as classic examples of the banality of evil: as two workers just doing their jobs, which happen to involve the annihilation of other human beings" (2015: 150).

[2] Title of a song by the rock group R.E.M from their album *Document* (1987).

[3] As a matter of interest, the other plays are Alan Ayckbourn's *Henceforward…* (1987), the trilogy *The War Plays* (1985) by Edward Bond, Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* (1960), and Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920).

The sense of cosmic moral void is what links *Far Away* to *Escaped Alone*, as does the telling of catastrophic events going on outside the secluded space of the stage. Yet *Escaped Alone* opens on a quite different key. We initially see three women sitting in a garden. We hear distant noises of road traffic, birds chirping, children playing, while the blue background among the fence suggests a cloudless summer sky (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – *Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill. Directed by James Macdonald (21 January-12 March 2016, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court). Photo: Johan Persson. From left: Linda Bassett (Mrs Jarrett), Deborah Findlay (Sally), Kika Markham (Lena) and June Watson (Vi).

The atmosphere is familiar and relaxed, but we do not hear what they are saying; the first audible cue is Mrs Jarrett's, a fourth woman who joins the group saying: "I'm walking down the street and there's a door in the fence open and inside are three women I've seen before" (Churchill 2016: 5). It is soon apparent that the three women are life-long friends, while Mrs Jarrett is a newcomer both in the group and in the neighbourhood, and therefore her observations are cautious and restrained to the point of shyness, as we may expect from an outsider. The four women go on chatting for a few minutes about everyday topics such as family and furniture, with some boasting and gossiping about grandchildren. All of a sudden the lights black out, the garden disappears into darkness, and a double casing of pulsating, buzzing red light frames the proscenium: in this disquieting atmosphere Mrs Jarrett (played by Linda Bassett) steps forward and directly addresses the audience, delivering a vision of catastrophic events. Her speech is terrifying and farcical at the same time, mixing timeless fears ("Babies were born and quickly became blind", 8) and social satire ("Some groups lost their sexuality while others developed a new morality of constant fucking with any proximate body", ibid.). Another black out follows, and, when the lights are switched on again, conversation in the garden is resumed. This scene-switching is repeated seven times[4] during the play, alternating garden conversations and catastrophic

[4] Number seven is charged with biblical significance; moreover, it resonates throughout Churchill's production, as in *Seven Jewish Children* (2009) or *Love and Information* (2012), which is divided into seven sections, each including seven scenes (Gobert 2014: 188).

chronicles or prophecies. The evoked catastrophes have a distinct aura of biblical curses around them, as they involve rocks, floods, chemical contamination, famine, wind, poisonous food, fire. The title itself has a strong biblical resonance, being a quotation from the Book of Job. As the story goes, Job is the most pious of men, and the Lord allows Satan to test his faithfulness by taking away his earthly goods and family, before causing injuries to his body too. The aforementioned phrase is repeated by three different servants who, having escaped from the slaughter of Job's children and cattle by means of sword, wind, and fire, report the events to their master: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (Job 1:15).[5] The spectator is left wondering whether Mrs Jarrett, speaking in the past tense, describes past events, or prophesizes, or talks from an undefined future describing what is going on outside the garden (of Eden?) while the ladies chat. The above quotation appears as an epigraph to the printed edition, acknowledging both the Book of Job and *Moby Dick* as sources, thus reinforcing the idea that Mrs Jarrett's tale is the tale of a survivor. Yet, since most spectators do not read the script in advance, this sort of dedication is of no importance for the audience. Like the servant in the biblical story, Mrs Jarrett is but a trustworthy witness with no possibility or will either to prevent or interfere with the events. In the biblical tale, it is evident that also when the deeds are carried out by human beings (namely the Sabeans and the Chaldeans, who kill the servants and steal the cattle), they are but instruments of God's will. But in this case the messenger, that is, Mrs Jarrett, makes it very clear that the disasters she tells of are always caused by or linked to some human activity, even when they involve stones falling from the hill: "Four hundred thousand tons of rocks paid for by the senior executives split off the hillside to smash through the roof . . ." (Churchill 2016: 8). The not too covert message is that the catastrophic events are the surreal outcome of a deregulated economy: "The wind developed by property developers started as breezes on cheek and soon turned heads inside out" (28).

Between one vision and the other, in the 'garden' parts, the ladies go on free associating from one thought to the next and even enjoying moments of careless fun, as when they improvise an a cappella version of a hit from the Sixties, *Da Doo Ron Ron*; yet we gradually find out that their lives are not as smooth as they look. One of them, Vi, has killed her husband and even her friends are not sure if it was manslaughter, as was decided in court, or premeditated murder; another, Lena, suffers from a severe form of agoraphobia or depression, and meeting her friends in the garden seems the only social entertainment in a life of secluded isolation; the third, Sally, the landlady, is affected by an irrational and incapacitating fear and hatred of cats. In the course of the drama, each of them is given a longish monologue, interrupting the flow of the otherwise very quick dialogue characterized by short, unfinished alternating cues, in which she elaborates her particular problem or phobia. All the while, the fourth lady, Mrs Jarrett, i.e. Linda Bassett, seems to be tiptoeing among the others' problems, trying to avoid any sore subject, before offering her visions of doom. Her speeches are delivered in a rather plain, matter-of-fact tone which seems to exclude any judgement or involvement. Yet, she always succeeds in communicating to the audience a hint of irony not so much with her voice as with her relaxed body attitude, and with hardly perceptible changes in her facial expression, be they a slight arching of the corners of

[5] This quotation passed on as title of the Epilogue of *Moby Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville (1952: 583).

her lips or a twinkle in her eyes: whether this sort of metaphorical nudging is meant to highlight the implausibility of the described events or to suggest that the punishment humanity gets in the end is thoroughly deserved, it is left to the audience to decide. Andrzej Lukowski, in his review in the on-line edition of *Time Out*, underlines this coexistence of tragic and comic elements: "What makes 'Escaped Alone' a great play is that it is strangely euphoric: spiked with terrible, apocalyptic foreboding, yes, but Churchill's funniest since 'Serious Money', and with an incredible gift for spinning light out of the dark" (Lukowski 2016). "Euphoric" may seem, and in my opinion is, too far-fetched a term to be applied to an apocalyptic play; but surely *Escaped Alone* is, in its own strange way, quite entertaining and, in fact, the performance I attended was punctuated by laughs from the audience. Some of these reactions could be foreseen reading the script, but otherwise they came quite unexpectedly. This seems to have annoyed the *Daily Mail* critic Quentin Letts, who implied the presence of a claque or, at least, accused the Royal Court audience of lack of critical faculties: "The Royal Court audience, eager to love it, had a few determined cacklers who laughed showily at some words and phrases" (Letts 2016). Having said that this remark is part of a generally malevolent review, one has to wonder whether this kind of comic relief was intended by the author herself. Caryl Churchill does not give interviews, and so, in order to understand her intentions, we have to rely on the written text and, given the paucity of stage directions, this is only partially useful. Yet, given the standing of Caryl Churchill as, arguably, the greatest English living playwright, it is difficult to surmise that her latest drama could be staged in a way she would not approve of. Mark Lawson, in his preview of *Here We Go* and *Escaped Alone* in *The Guardian*, reports a statement of the director James Macdonald on Churchill's attitude to the *mise en scène* of her texts: "Churchill, especially in her later work, has, as her regular director James Macdonald puts it, 'almost dispensed with instructions altogether. The director and actors are granted extraordinary freedom'" (Lawson 2015). In the *Escaped Alone Resource Pack*, compiled by Romana Fiello and published by the Royal Court Theatre, the assistant director Roy Alexander Weise gives an interesting account of Churchill's and Macdonald's co-working:

> In rehearsals, she's very present as the playwright, she doesn't try to be invisible at all . . . because Caryl and James have worked together for such a long time they have a mutual understanding of the way that they work, I think negotiation is probably too strong a word to use, in terms of their relationship, it just sort of happens and they're very easy and comfortable about talking about things. It feels like they work like real creators together and not like a writer and a director in that very conventional sense . . . I think James is aware of Caryl's style, the things she does and doesn't like in theatre and the kind of work she likes to make as an artist and so he's aware of things that won't go down well as suggestions. Sometimes, Caryl gives acting notes and James is absolutely fine with that but it doesn't feel like it's very defined. . . . You really get that she trusts the actors. (Fiello 2016: 13)

There are quite a few points of interest in this statement. First of all, it sheds some light on Churchill's relationship with Macdonald, and directors in general: the cementing of strong working bonds seems to be the necessary precondition to achieve the above mentioned "mutual understanding". It is surely no accident that in the last twenty years Churchill has mostly collaborated with three directors: James Macdon-

ald (apart from *Escaped Alone*, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You*, 2006; *Love and Information*, 2012), Dominic Cooke (*This is a Chair*, 1999; *Seven Jewish Children*, 2009; *Here We Go*, 2015) and Stephen Daldry (*Far away*, 2000; *A Number*, 2002). Secondly, Weise's remark is not entirely consistent with, or, at least, somehow mitigates Macdonald's assertion that the director and actors are granted absolute freedom. There is freedom, but Churchill is always, even if discretely, present, and she intervenes during rehearsals if necessary. Thirdly, it openly states that Churchill's trusting the actors seems to be an essential element in getting the best out of actresses and actors. As regards the last issue, the necessary premise is that the actresses performing in *Escaped Alone* are well-established names in British theatre and cinema, and therefore it came as no surprise that the acting in *Escaped Alone* was superb. I have already mentioned Linda Bassett. Susannah Clapp calls her "one of our greatest and least anointed actors" (2016), probably referring to her getting, both in theatre and in cinema, more parts as deuteragonist than as protagonist. Yet, her outstanding talent shows in Mrs Jarrett's role, keeping the difficult balance between tragedy and farce. Talking of established working relations, the collaboration between Churchill and Bassett dates back to 1983, when the latter was aggregated to Joint Stock for the staging of *Fen* (1983): a life-changing encounter for the then young unemployed Linda, who described the experience in an article published by *The Guardian* on 30 January 2014, entitled "Linda Bassett: sharing a fen cottage with Caryl Churchill changed my career". The other actresses are Kika Markham as Lena, Deborah Findlay as Sally, and June Watson as Vi. Kika Markham lends to Lena her luminous smile and physical frailty. Claire Allfree, in her review in *The Daily Telegraph*, calls her "fragile as a leaf" (2016), and the naivety of her responses makes her character endearingly childish, but never a simpleton: a masterful depiction of the quiet hell of depression. Findlay has probably the hardest task, and she successfully overcomes the difficulties of depicting a character seemingly at peace with herself and with the world, yet showing the underlying signs of neurosis. June Watson is the oldest of the four actresses, but her character, Vi, is the most aggressive and pugnacious, defiant in willingly concealing the details of her husband's death, and spiky when confronting her friends on any issue. Vi is not an agreeable character, as clearly asserted by Sally: "you just need to face . . . how unpleasant you can be (Churchill 2016: 15). Yet Watson's raspy voice and tight-lipped utterances make of this character such a complete challenge to the stereotype of the serene old dear as to make the audience overcome this trait of unpleasantness and sympathize with her: in fact she is the one getting more laughs with her lines. As regards the age of the characters, there is a precise direction following the *dramatis personae* in the published text: "*They are all at least seventy*" (4). Only Linda Basset is slightly younger than that, being born in 1950, so there is no need for heavy aging make-up, and the actresses look absolutely at ease in their parts. There is something liberating for the audience in the presence of four septuagenarians on stage who neither deny nor hide their age, yet escape its *clichés*. The moment in which this empathy is more evident is in the already mentioned rendition of *Da Doo Ron Ron*, a 1963 hit by the Crystals, an all-girl American group, describing the joys and heartbeats of teenage love: while singing it, the four elder ladies on stage regain all their girlish *joie de vivre*. The situation is thus described in the directions: "*All sing.* SALLY, VI *and* LENA *in harmony.* MRS JARRETT *joins in the melody. They are singing for themselves in the garden, not performing to the audience*" (28). As can be seen, there is no mention of which song should be performed, so this scene

can be considered a token example of how the collaboration between Macdonald and Churchill works. According to Weise, this choice was the result of research that took into account artistic but also down-to-earth matters: "We have been researching songs . . . that all these women would know, that don't make too much of a comment about the play and what it's talking about. Also you need to look at who wrote the songs and who is most likely to give us permission" (Fiello 2016: 14). But what is most meaningful in this direction is the "*singing for themselves*", and this is exactly the effect achieved in performance. It would be naive to assume that the characters on stage may ignore the presence of an audience; yet they look so absorbed, not so much in their own selves as in the song and in the group, to cut themselves off from the stage fiction into a separate reality. Their ensuing perceivable isolation, paradoxically, enhances the audience's empathy with the characters on stage, and this empathic feeling is all the more evident as the song is interposed, with no further action or cues, between two of the terrifying tales/prophecies. Due to the lack of dialogue, this is when the transition from apocalyptic tales to garden conversation and back is most abrupt, and consequently the feeling of estrangement more acute: here the audience arrive at questioning the basic assumption that what goes on in the garden is in the frame of reality and what Mrs Jarrett says is fantasy or prophecy. I have already mentioned the transformation undergone by the stage when Mrs Jarrett speaks directly to the audience: a completely dark space, encased by a double pattern of red light that faintly illuminates the speaker (see Fig. 2).

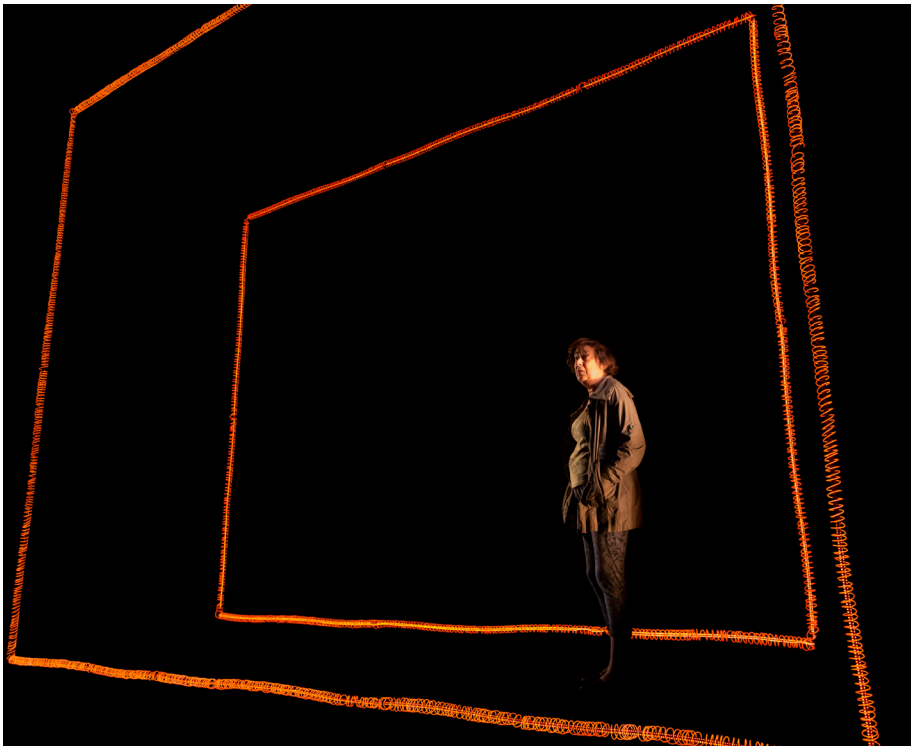

Fig. 2 – *Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill. Directed by James Macdonald (21 January-12 March 2016, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court). Photo: Johan Persson. Linda Bassett (Mrs Jarrett).

The play text carries no direction as to how this delicate passage should be rendered on stage: Mrs Jarrett's visions appear on different pages to mark their separation from the garden speeches, with no further comment. So the choice of encasing the stage in a double red pattern is a creation of the director and his creative team:

> It was essential to the creative team that Mrs Jarrett's speeches take place in a different location to the garden. In order to achieve this, a proscenium has been built at the front of the stage, this is a square filament that you look through to see the action, when Mrs Jarrett steps out of the garden, the lights on this filament shine and "blind the audience" making the garden behind disappear. (Fiello 2016: 10)

The lighted frame solution, in its simplicity, is very effective in clearly marking the distinction between the two spaces, while the creaking sound that accompanies it, contributes to the nerve-wrecking atmosphere created by Mrs Jarrett's speeches. Susannah Clapp, in her review in *The Observer* (31 January 2016), gives full marks to the play at large, and foregrounds the role of the stage designer: "This is one of the mind spaces that Macdonald and designer Miriam Buether excel at creating" (Clapp 2016). This praise is echoed by David Jays in his survey of Buether's career in *The Guardian* (4 May 2017):

> Miriam Buether's stage designs always astonish audiences. . . . Born in Germany, Buether has made her name in Britain with audacious design for bold new writing. . . . You may be seated around a boxing ring. The stage floor may be in constant motion. The entire set may disappear without warning. (Jays 2017)

Buethen had already collaborated with Macdonald in staging Churchill's *Love and Information* in 2012, so she was familiar with their working method and demands. In *Escaped Alone* her creation is straightforward enough, if compared to others recalled by Jays. Of course this responds to a play in which the focus is on the main character, that is, Mrs Jarrett, and her narration. Yet I would add that this minimalistic stage design validates the idea that Churchill is experimenting with a theatrical form reminding of absurdist theatre, as I will further comment on in the next paragraph. A kinship to absurdist theatre is also suggested by the sometime disconcerting verbal flow, and the undeniable difficulty of attributing a definite meaning to the play is the issue that has caused some negative reactions from the critics. *The Daily Telegraph*'s Claire Allfree expressed some reservations in this respect in her review, whose title "Terrific cast with nowhere to go" (2016) clearly reflects her view. Similar doubts were voiced by Quentin Letts in the *Daily Mail* on 1 February 2016, in such an unpleasant way as to suggest personal and/or political dislike: "Towards the end Mrs Jarrett says 'terrible rage' 25 times in succession. . . . it did arouse in me a terrible rage that British workers, many on grotty wages, have had their taxes used to subsidise such posh tosh" (Letts 2016). In their different ways, both articles acknowledge Churchill's tendency to exceed the limits of naturalistic speech that has been manifest for some time, and requires further investigation.

From Daughter of Brecht to Daughter of Beckett

In order to explain Churchill's shift from a strictly political form of theatre, Max Stafford-Clark remarked that Churchill had "developed her own response to a political agenda which she has discovered she cannot effectively address any more" (qtd in Roberts 2008: 146). Stafford-Clark referred to *Far Away* (2000), yet this observation has not lost its relevance nowadays. Of course, the use of dystopia in order to make a political point is not a particularly original solution: examples abound, also in English, in the twentieth century, especially in the Seventies, both on the right (Stoppard's *Jumpers*, 1972) and on the left (Brenton's *The Churchill Play*, 1974) of the political spectrum. What is new in twenty-first-century politics and economics is that, since free-market economy has risen to the status of absolute, God-given entity, dystopia seems the only effective way of challenging it, of showing its human, transient nature. The consequence is the abandonment of the so-called social realism and the embracing of a theatrical form that is reminiscent of absurdist theatre. In Churchill's plays the uncompleted lines and the uncertain time frame of *Escaped Alone*, the decomposed language of *Blue Heart* (1997a)[6] or the symbolically charged dialogue in *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* (2006)[7] are clear examples of this experimental language. In this respect, *The Skriker* (1994) was the turning point. In this drama, the eponymous character is a fairy, connected to English traditional folklore, that haunts two teenage mothers of the present time. She speaks in a broken language that Churchill describes in this way: "A bit like someone with schizophrenia or a stroke, where the sense is constantly interrupted by the other associations of words" (qtd in Gobert 2014: 20). I will quote a few examples, considering their relevance in connection to *Escaped Alone*:

> Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater, daughter could spin span spick and spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonesse under the castle for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved . . . Eating a plum in the enchanted orchard, cherry orchid, charted orchestra was my undoing my doing my dying my undying love for you. (Churchill 1998: 243, 245)

As can be seen, the speech progresses through both phonic and semantic associations, often adding an element of estrangement in the general fairy tale atmosphere (". . . for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved"). A similar technique of foregrounding economic terms in an estranging context is employed by Churchill in *Escaped Alone* with the transparent intent of satirizing financial jargon: ". . . lifebelts and upturned umbrellas, swimming instructors and lilos, rubber ducks and pumice stone floated on the stock market" (Churchill 2016: 12). In *The Skriker*, environmental preoccupations were expressed in terms of nostalgia for the ancient times, when fairies were feared and respected: "Now

[6] In the second part of the play, every word is increasingly substituted by "blue" and "kettle": "I am getting a horrible kettle from this situation, Derek. I think you need to blue us what's kettle on" (Churchill 1997a: 66).

[7] The play stages the relationship between the USA and the UK through the dialogue of two characters, Sam (USA) and Guy (UK).

they hate us and hurt hurtle faster and master. They poison me in my rivers of blood poisoning makes my arm swelter" (Churchill 1998: 246); "Poison in the food chain saw massacre" (271).[8] The same preoccupations are presented in *Escaped Alone* in the neutral language of journalistic report, highlighting the increasingly thin divide between truth and invention: "The illness started when children drank sugar developed from monkeys" (Churchill 2016: 29).

Moira Buffini thus synthesizes this evolution in Churchill's playwriting:

> Churchill, who in the 70s and 80s was the daughter of Brecht, has become the daughter of Beckett. Her writing is distilled to its very essence. She has the epic sweep of the former: the alienation (your emotions never manipulated); the bare bones of the theatre constantly visible. And she has the distillation, the humour of the latter: the human condition writhing on a pin. (Buffini 2015)

That absurdist forms may be used in a somehow socialist perspective is utterly paradoxical, considering that epic or social realistic and absurdist theatre have been considered competing forces in the race for the attention of British audiences from the late Fifties to the early Nineties, as John Bull argued in his *Stage Right* (1994). This antithesis has always been considered an irreconcilable one, at least in Great Britain;[9] it goes as far back as 1958, when Eugene Ionesco and Kenneth Tynan were involved in an acrimonious confrontation on the pages of *The Observer*, as reported by Martin Esslin in his seminal *The Theatre of the Absurd*, on the respective merits of politically engaged drama and 'theatre for theatre's sake', so to speak (Esslin 1974: 100-1). To attribute this reconciliation between contrasting approaches to theatre to the fall of the Berlin Wall would probably mean to stretch the point too far. Yet economical and financial issues replacing ideological contraposition in public life is a hardly questionable fact: and this results in an increasing difficulty in interpreting reality. For example, on 11 April 2017, the bus carrying the Borussia Dortmund football team to a match was subjected to a bombing attack; at first the act was attributed to Muslim terrorism, but further investigations found out that the attack was meant to depreciate Borussia Dortmund's shares. On 21 April 2017 *The Guardian*, reporting on the investigations, titled "Dortmund attack: man arrested on suspicion of share dealing plot", which is only marginally more believable than Churchill's "Four-hundred-thousand tons of rocks paid for by the senior executives . . . " (Churchill 2016: 28). It is tempting to assert that life has overdone its imitation of art. On a more serious note, in a world in which traditional social and political oppositions (capital and labour, right and left) seem to be outdated, dystopian theatre, in shifting its focus from day-to-day politics to human condition, regardless of time and space, is probably the most powerful development of political drama.

[8] In 1994, when *The Skriker* was written and staged, Great Britain was in the midst of the Mad Cow Desease crisis, caused by herbivores being fed with products of animal origin.

[9] Absurdist theatrical forms have been employed in the countries of the pre-'89 Eastern Block as a way of effectively satirizing the Communist bureaucracy. See Vaclav Havel's plays, dealt with by Kenneth Tynan in relation to Tom Stoppard (Tynan 1979: 44-123).

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