

**‘Analysing Plays in the Twenty-First Century: A Critical Conversation’
Centre for Contemporary British Theatre, Royal Holloway**

Friday 5 July 2019, 9.30am-5pm

Room 154 (ground floor), Richard Hoggart Building, Goldsmith’s College

9.30-10am: **Arrive and refreshments**

10-10.30am: **Welcome and Introduction:** **Lynette Goddard** (Royal Holloway) and
Chris Megson (Royal Holloway)

10.30-11.15am: **Keynote 1:** **Marissia Fragkou** (Canterbury Christ Church University)

‘Reading Plays for the Contemporary Moment: Precarity, Ecology and Strangeness’

In her fascinating short essay ‘EF’s visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play’ (1994), Elinor Fuchs reads plays as small ecologies by comparing them to strange planets; in order to discover the world of the play including its inhabitants, Fuchs argues, we first need to ask questions about the habitat that surrounds them. Revisiting Fuchs’s ecological approach, this paper will explore the ecological dimensions of studying plays for the present moment against the backdrop of spiralling risk and uncertainty; I am particularly interested in the value of pedagogies of risk and precarity in the context of the current Higher Education landscape and their relevance for play analysis.

To this end, I will be partly drawing on Ronald Barnett’s conceptualization of the ‘ecological university’. For Barnett, ‘the ecological university will draw students into a pedagogy of strangeness or of risk, for it is such pedagogies that are likely to extend students so that they may be able to meet the challenges, conceptual, ethical and technological that the twenty-first century will assuredly face them with’ (2017: 149). Barnett’s call for embracing strangeness and risk chimes with wider philosophical discussions about the role of precarity in re-engaging with the world through an emphasis on relationality and interdependency as politics. Whilst reminding us of the University’s responsibility ‘to consider ways in which it can engage with the world proactively’ (2017: 149), it also echoes wider calls for diversifying the curriculum to address the complexities of the contemporary world.

Against the above backdrop, my paper will explore the possibilities of using precarity, strangeness and ecology as tools in approaching play texts with a particular focus on the representation of Othered identities. I will specifically examine how the study of plays that tap into issues of race and gender helps us ‘engage with the world proactively’ and forge relations of intimacy and responsibility. In doing so, I will be focusing my discussion around our responsibility as scholars and teachers in shaping new ways of looking at contemporary play texts as part of an ‘ecological University’ and the value of engaging with strangeness and precarity through teaching plays in the classroom.

Marissia Fragkou is Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her research focuses on the politics of representation, feminist theatre, affect, ethics and precarity. Her essays have appeared in *Modern Drama*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Performing Ethos* and volumes on contemporary British and European theatre. In 2017, she co-edited a special issue on Greek Theatre for the *Journal of Greek Media and Culture*. Her first monograph *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre: Politics,*

Affect, Responsibility was published by Bloomsbury in 2018. She currently co-convenes TaPRA's Performance, Identity and Community working group.

11.15-11.30am: Comfort Break

11.30-12.45pm: Panel 1: Feminist and Queer Dramaturgies

Jawaher Alghamdi (University of Bristol)

“‘A Playwright Who Happens to be Gay’: Critical Analysis of 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Plays’

Albee's remark on 'gay playwrights' in his 2011 acceptance speech of the Lambda Literary Foundation Award has ignited controversy about the critical and theoretical approaches to analysing plays written by gay playwrights. Terms such as 'gay theatre' and 'gay playwrights' are still used up to now to identify certain plays written by or contain LGBTQ content or characters. Approaching plays based on such identifications has been problematic since the 1960s. For some playwrights and critics, it is limiting and discourages any readings that do not work within such identifications.

In my paper (and my research in general), I am considering the influence of gender studies and Queer theory on the approaches used to identify and examine plays. The reference to the critical literature of the Off-Off-Broadway plays will be used as an example to provoke the conversation around this. Does the focus on LGBTQ themes in plays limit or inspire infinite understandings of the plays and their contemporary contexts? Does using the terms mentioned above encourage inclusion or exclusion in the theatrical context? How does all this influence the way we approach those plays? Questioning the necessity and influence of contextualizing such plays in their LGBTQ social and historical past and present backgrounds will be considered as well.

The paper will focus specifically on Off-Off-Broadway plays performed in American gay venues between 1960-1967 to question the approaches used in critical literature and play analysis. It will examine specifically plays written by gay playwrights but not necessarily with a gay content and how that fits in the mainstream approaches to plays written by gay American playwrights of the time such as Lanford Wilson, William Hoffman, and Robert Patrick.

***Jawaher Alghamdi** is a final year PhD candidate at the University of Bristol. Her research interest is American theatre; Off-Off-Broadway theatre and playwrights in particular. She has worked as lecturer at AlBaha University (2010-2016) and Assistant Teacher at University of Bristol/ Department of Theatre (2017-2018).*

Hannah Greenstreet (University of Oxford)

‘Feminist formalism?’

Feminism and formalism might seem like irreconcilable theoretical approaches from which to analyse contemporary plays. Formalism, often used derogatively, can suggest an insular focus on the aesthetic at the expense of the political, a new critical investment in a canon of 'great literature', and an uninterrogated intellectual and political conservatism. In the introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre and Form* (2019), Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish

and Brandon Wolf suggest that there is a 'longstanding suspicion around – even allergy to – form'. This they suggest, has led to a concentration in theatre studies on the socio-political at the expense of attention to form.

The feminist theatre criticism developed by academics including Sue-Ellen Case, Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan and Elaine Aston might seem to follow this socio-political approach, in exposing the ideological underpinnings of the Western theatrical canon and analysing the political impact of production choices. However, feminist criticism, particularly the feminist critique of realism, does take a position on form; as Elin Diamond puts it in *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997), 'realism operates in concert with ideology', 'reinforc[ing] (even if it argues with it) the arrangements of that world' it represents'. This is a persuasive materialist approach to form, demonstrated by how influential the critique has been in theatre studies. However, it risks dismissing any subversive potential in realist drama through its generalisation.

In this paper, after exploring the limitations of both formalism and the feminist critique of realism as methods for analysing contemporary plays, I consider how they might be brought together. Might there be a way of combining formalism's toolkit for close analysis with feminist criticism's political commitment, along with a wider understanding of form as not limited to literary or theatrical devices, but as, as Boyle, Cornish and Wolf put it, 'the modes of production, consumption and circulation that give shape to and are shaped by theatre'?

Hannah Greenstreet is a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford, researching realism and feminism in contemporary women's theatre. Her work has been published in Studies in Theatre and Performance and Platform. She is postgraduate representative for TaPRA and won the TaPRA postgraduate essay prize in 2016.

Stephen Farrier (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama)
'Queer Dramaturgy and Sticky Stories: Making Messy Sense'

This paper discusses the ways that developing conceptions of queer dramaturgies relate to play analysis. By describing queer dramaturgies' relationship with play analysis as 'sticky', this paper in part examines the importance of such analysis for queer despite some characterisations of playtext as a vehicle for ongoing normativity. By tracing my own sticky relationship with play analysis, the paper looks to account for the situation where play analyses get stuck around discussions of queer dramaturgies. By examining this sticky relationship, the paper attempts to account for the consistent return to text-ness for queer work and looks to its impact, even when the textual representation of queerness is scant, thin or otherwise problematic.

By making quick reference to analyses of some contemporary work recently present on stage as well as queer/gay writers in the past, the paper explores the sticky mess that hangs around when queer dramaturgies are brought to bear in the process of analysis. The paper ends by thinking through the purposefulness of this sticky mess in analysis, making the argument (or perhaps the provocation) that sanitised well-rounded analyses of queers in plays do not perhaps encapsulate the toing and froing, the friction or the tacky residue required to sometimes make queers fit. Yet, despite some resistances to the contrary, queer readings, analysis and representation resonate with a larger community outside academia in

the groups that make, watch and find fuel in performance – as such, providing individual and community sustenance.

Stephen Farrier is a Reader in Theatre and Performance at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, where his work focusses on queer theory and performance, gender and the relations of theatre and performance to community. He has written, co-edited and presented on a number of queer ideas, in particular he works on the relationship of temporalities to queer theatre making and connects this work to community. He has written and presented on queer intergenerational work, the relation of temporalities to drag performance and queer research methodologies, in particular queer practice as research methodologies (with Alyson Campbell) and queer research methodologies and ethics (with drag performer and academic Mark Edward). He co-edited with Alyson Campbell *Queer Dramaturgies, International Perspectives on where Performance Leads Queer* (Palgrave 2016) and, with Mark Edward, is in the final stages of a two-volume edited collection on drag performance, *Drag in a Changing Scene*, due with Bloomsbury in 2020. From 2009-2012 he co-chaired the Theatre and Performance Research Association's (TaPRA) Performance, Identity and Community working group. He regularly directs shows at Royal Central and elsewhere and his co-devised show *Hetty the King (and Other Women I Have Loved)* was nominated for the LGBT prize at Brighton Fringe 2016.

12.45pm-2pm: **Lunch**

2-3.15pm: **Panel 2: Page/Stage: strategies of reading, responding, reflecting**

Siân Adiseshiah (University of Loughborough), **Jacqueline Bolton** (University of Lincoln) and **Nicholas Holden** (University of Greenwich)

'The International Playwrights' Symposium: Reflections and Future Direction'

Since its inception in 2011, the International Playwrights' Symposium at the Lincoln Performing Arts Centre has hosted a series of one-day conferences, successively dedicated to the works of Caryl Churchill (2011), Sarah Kane (2012), Mark Ravenhill (2013), David Greig (2014), debbie tucker green (2015) and Dennis Kelly (2017). Later this year (November 2019), the initiative's seventh event will address the original works and adaptations of playwright Zinnie Harris. Drawing world-leading scholars as keynotes, and often featuring a Q&A with the playwright under discussion, these events have attracted a stimulating mix of national and international scholars, practitioners and students from countries including the UK, USA, China, Spain, Belgium, France and Turkey. In addition to facilitating an international network of scholars, these symposia have also led directly to the publication of three collected volumes: 'David Greig: Dramaturgies of Encounter and Engagement' (special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2016), *debbie tucker green: Critical Perspectives* (Palgrave, 2019) and *Beautiful Doom: The Work of Dennis Kelly on Stage and Screen* (MUP, forthcoming).

The International Playwrights' Symposium has captured, and indeed testifies to, a far-reaching, global interest in contemporary Anglophone playwriting studies. As we look forward to its 10-year anniversary in 2021, we would like to use this opportunity to reflect on the practices and discoveries of previous symposia, as well as consider possibilities and aims for its future. In this paper, we will reflect on traditions and practices of playwright-

focused research in order to offer some thoughts as to how evolving methods of play analysis might respond to some of the challenges facing the discipline of theatre and performance studies within academia. This will include discussions on how new critical-theoretical perspectives might be developed to create a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to the future of play analysis, and consider how such approaches could find a place within current curricula.

Siân Adiseshiah is a Senior Lecturer in English and Drama at Loughborough University. She co-founded (with Mark O'Thomas) the International Playwrights' Symposium in 2011 and co-convened the event until 2015. She is the author of *Churchill's Socialism: Political Resistance in the Plays of Caryl Churchill* (2009) and co-editor of *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now* (2013); *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now* (2016) and *debbie tucker green: Critical Perspectives* (2019). Her current monograph is *Utopian Drama: In Search of a Genre* (forthcoming with Methuen in 2021).

Jacqueline Bolton is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Drama at the University of Lincoln. She has co-convened the International Playwrights' Symposium since 2014 and edited and co-edited collections of essays on David Greig, debbie tucker green and Dennis Kelly. She is also the author of various essays on Simon Stephens including the forthcoming *The Theatre of Simon Stephens* (Methuen).

Nicholas Holden is a Lecturer in Drama at the University of Greenwich, UK. He has been the co-convenor of the International Playwrights' Symposium since 2017 and is co-editor of a forthcoming collection of essays on Dennis Kelly. He is now writing his first monograph on the Royal Court and its historic and current work with young people.

Harry Derbyshire (University of Greenwich)

'Group Analysis: Responding Collectively in the Classroom to New Plays in Performance'

Although it's something in which I engage often as a solitary scholar, I experience play analysis in its purest and best form as a collective and collaborative activity undertaken with the third year undergraduates who take my Contemporary British Theatre module. This is especially true when we go to see a play in performance, even more so if it's a brand new play, and most of all if it's challenging and brilliant.

In thinking about the how and why of play analysis, therefore, I was led repeatedly back to my experiences teaching this module, on which I propose to reflect in this presentation. I plan to discuss (as an exemplary instance) our response to Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (Royal Court Theatre, 2016, 2017), which I saw with two successive cohorts of students thanks to the production returning for a second run. We saw the show in the theatre, we studied the text on the tube home, I put together a PowerPoint, we discussed the performance in class, the students wrote analyses, I marked the analyses, and the whole thing felt not only fantastically stimulating but hugely worthwhile, both for me and for the students.

In this presentation I'm going to describe what we did and try to define why it seemed such a good use of all our time.

Harry Derbyshire has taught at the University of Greenwich since 2003; he is Principal Lecturer in English Literature and Drama and Academic Portfolio Lead for those subjects. His recent publications include a chapter in *Women in Edward Bond* and a piece about Caryl Churchill for *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*; forthcoming pieces include contributions to edited collections about Debbie Tucker Green, Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter. He is working on a book about the history of the Theatre of the Absurd on the British stage.

Stephe Harrop (Liverpool Hope University)
'Agonistic Reading'

For both Aristotle and Plato, the value of poetry (like that of music) resides in the ability of correctly chosen inherited forms to inculcate appropriate, consensual emotional and ethical responses among a civic population. This culturally conservative position testifies to the unease both philosophers felt with democratic practices, a position which would go on to inform neo-classical and Romantic readings of Greek tragedy.

Agonistic reading, a new critical-theoretical approach, works against the grain of this tradition. In tragic playwriting, the *agon* was a pair of speeches pitting diametrically opposed views against each other. The term was derived from ancient Greece's competitive sporting culture, where it referred to the struggles and confrontations which took place in an athletic contest, or wrestling match. And in contemporary political theory (primarily Chantal Mouffe's formulations), it describes a politics which challenges the pursuit of (neo)liberal consensus, insisting upon the necessity for ongoing processes of democratic debate and confrontation.

The type of agonistic reading advocated in this paper foregrounds tragedy's embeddedness within the contentious historical emergence of democratic politics; the prominent role of unresolved conflicts within dramatic narratives; dramaturgical elements which struggle to find a presence within conventionally published texts (especially space, place, and relational bodies); and ancient plays which co-exist fractiously with the established scholarly/performance canon.

Such agonistic reading, it is argued, has the potential to facilitate important new engagements with classical plays, for new audiences. The Platonic/Aristotelian emphasis on appropriate poetic forms (and close-reading of these) has played an enduring role in disenfranchising readers without classical language skills from interpreting ancient plays. By contrast, contemporary agonistic approaches empower a wide range of readers to explore ancient drama's tensions, conflicts, and frictions, taking the unresolved, agonistic qualities of many surviving play-texts as a cue for creating a diverse, disharmonious array of responses, reinterpretations, and appropriations.

Stephe Harrop is Senior Lecturer in Drama at Liverpool Hope University. Her research focuses on performances responding to ancient tragedy and epic, the traditional arts in modern British theatre-making, and contemporary storytelling practices. Recent publications include *Greek Tragedy and the Contemporary Actor* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 'Greek Tragedy, Agonistic Space, and Contemporary Performance' (New Theatre Quarterly, 2018) and 'Athens: A Work-In-Progress' (Kritika Kultura, 2018). See <https://hcommons.org/members/stepheharrop/>

3.15-3.30pm: Comfort Break

3.30-4.15pm: Keynote 2: Dan Rebellato (Royal Holloway)

‘Do Not Perform This Play’

Much debate about how plays should be analysed in theatre studies is that a play on the page is incomplete and completed in performance; that a play should be considered not as literature but as a blueprint for performance; that the play on the page is only brought to life on stage. This paper argues that this is to misunderstand the material work of playwrights, and the nature of plays, literature, performance, and the imagination. I want to make a case for the page: the playwright’s material engagement with the page, the value of the gap between page and stage, and the particular dynamics of the playwright as collaborator through the page. The paper will touch briefly on various ways, historically, in which playwrights have emphasised the gaps between play and performance, withdrawing from performability in a way that has paradoxically created new kinds of performability. Methodologically, I propose we pay renewed attention to the page in itself, not as an incomplete ghost of a more complete thing but an object itself, both as a material object but also the outcome of a material process. This new conception of the play’s objecthood need to be fully historicised in terms of the twin relationships between the page and the playwright and the page and the stage.

***Dan Rebellato** is Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he teaches theatre, playwriting, and philosophy. His books include 1956 and All That, Theatre & Globalization, Contemporary European Theatre Directors, Decades of British Playwriting: 2000-2009 and The Suspect Culture Book (2013) plus numerous articles on modern and contemporary theatre, including Sarah Kane, David Greig, David Hare, Mark Ravenhill, Caryl Churchill, Simon Stephens and Dennis Kelly. His plays include Chekhov in Hell, Static, Here’s What I Did With My Body One Day, Mile End, Beachy Head, Theatremorphosis, Outright Terror Bold and Brilliant, and Emily Rising. He has written eighteen plays for BBC Radio, including Cavalry, My Life is a Series of People Saying Goodbye, Negative Signs of Progress and was lead writer on the award-winning Emile Zola: Blood, Sex & Money for Radio 4. He is currently writing a how-to guide on writing plays for Bloomsbury and the National Theatre.*

4.15-4.45pm Symposium Respondent: Clare Finburgh Delijani (Goldsmiths College)

4.45-5pm: Closing remarks: Lynette Goddard and **Chris Megson**