

**“Well of course there’s blood”:
The Blood Ties of *In-Yer-Face* Theatre,
from Inheritance to Legacy**

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“Le sang au théâtre, c’est de la cuisine.”
Agnès Pierron, *Les Nuits blanches du Grand Guignol*

In-Yer-Face theatre has struck minds and memories with scenes of extreme and explicit violence: it was all, or so it seems, about genitals being flung across the theatre, eyes being enucleated, partners raped and babies devoured. Such scenes were precisely what labelled the violent plays written in the nineties by young playwrights as *In-Yer-Face*. To quote Aleks Sierz’ famous definition of *In-Yer-Face* theatre, they were what took “the audience by the scruff of the neck and [shook] it until it [got] the message” (Sierz: 4).

The extremely graphic nature of such scenes and the echo they produced in contemporary culture may have tended to blind audiences and critics to the whole heritage of theatrical conventions and artifices that were at stake in the staged gore of Sarah Kane’s, Mark Ravenhill’s or Martin MacDonagh’s productions (to name but a few). English theatre traditionally reclaims the heritage of explicitly staged violence. *In-Yer-Face* theatre belongs to a “history of provocation” which, as Sierz pinpoints, includes Greek tragedy, Seneca’s plays, Jacobean tragedy, gothic fantasy, Grand Guignol and horror stories (Sierz: 10): a lineage whose common trend is to rely on apparent immediacy and shock and, as far as dramatic genres are concerned, to question the very nature of theatre as an artifice.

The question is therefore twofold: how have the *In-Yer-Face* dramatists played with the conventions of shock as they had been staged after the 1968 abolition of censorship? What legacy have they

reclaimed? And how have they influenced the stage productions that emerged after the end of the “nasty nineties”?

Before analysing the aesthetic principles on which the representation of blood is based in *In-Yer-Face* theatre, it seems necessary to study how such scenes were – or were not – staged from the abolition of censorship onwards. This double panorama shall provide the necessary background to understand how the very graphic bloodbaths of *In-Yer-Face* plays have influenced more recent productions, and what aesthetic reaction they have provoked.

With the abolition of censorship in 1968 came the possibility of staging violence in an explicit way. The role of Edward Bond in this major event is well known: his play *Saved* (1965) in which a baby is stoned by a group of youngsters, raised enough scandal and support to change the rules in theatrical life. Yet, for all its violence and despair, it does not stage any bloodshed. This is in fact the case of many plays written in the 1970s and 1980s, with a few memorable exceptions, such as Howard Brenton’s *The Romans in Britain* (1980). In Edward Bond’s *The Sea* (1972) for instance, the whole plot is based on the quest for a corpse which, when found, is mistaken for a sleeping person and violently stabbed to death. Dramatic irony here implies a game with expectations in which the blood turns out to be water:

HATCH [He reaches the body. He falls on it and knives it in a frenzy.] Kill it! Kill it! Kill it! At last! What’s this? Water! Look, water! Water, not blood? [Stabbing.] Kill it! Kill it! [He stops.] More water? [Stabs.] The filthy beast! [...] No blood, only water. How do I know he’s dead? Surely, surely. [Stabs.] There, that’s hard enough. Hack this throat! Cut it! Tear it! Rip it! Slash it! (Bond: 149)

Turning tension and violence into surprise and release, the scene explicitly refuses the optical fascination of bloodshed. Horror merges into comedy and this stylization of blood appears as one of the major trends on the post-1968 English stage. This entails an aesthetic game with excess that gives a visual representation of horror while keeping it at distance.

Peter Barnes's *Laughter!* (1978) exemplifies this dramatic tendency especially in its first half ("Tsar") which stages Ivan the Terrible torturing one of his opponents: the screams are precisely spelled out letter after letter and the playwright even provides technical advice as to the visual aspect of blood. Odoevsky is being impaled and "*the sharpened point of the stake, which is covered with congealed blood like candle grease, is driven up through his body*" mentions the stage direction (Barnes: 344). In this case, stylization is both visual and linguistic and effectively aims at concealing the actual pain and blood, producing a grotesque effect that paradoxically suggests the horrific emotion.

IVAN Doest feel thy anus split, rectum cleifed, pancreas lanced up on a point, tripes born out in blood and piss-water? Then smile, your chastizer's human not divine, who gi'es his victims *mercy*. Smile, my son, that Christ stakes me not you. You buy forgiveness cheap. *Aaarr*.

ODOEVSKY [*screaming*] Arrr-arrrrh-eeeeaaaaa-aa hrrr.

IVAN 'Tis easy f' you to say but t'isn't true. My pain's greater... (Barnes: 345)

Unspeakable as it may be, suffering is yet expressed in proper lines of dialogue and theatrical artifice has the upper hand over shock and dislocation in many ways: both the blood and the screams are petrified, made unreal and grotesque by the extreme codification of their appearance on the stage. The choice of staging congealed blood therefore reads as a way to prevent the representation of any bloodshed – to prevent any gory experience for the spectator.

Playing either on the speaker's or on the spectator's position, grotesque bloodbaths as they were staged in the 1970s are defined by a certain degree of distance. Contrary to what is at stake in *In-Yer-Face* plays, they do not imply "that you are being forced to see something close up, that your personal space has been invaded" (Sierz: 4). The visual and emotional focus is indeed on the suffering/decaying body represented onstage but the general frame remains under the control of reason, through the use of dramatic irony or elaborate language for instance. In other words, the

technical question of how blood is staged is answered by the grotesque artifice even before the audience has given it a thought.

In this aesthetic landscape, *The Romans in Britain*, Howard Brenton's 1980 landmark play stands as a turning point. It famously stages very graphic violence, with rapes, sacrifices, murders and other war crimes happening onstage. Even more shocking than those explicit scenes was probably the political message conveyed by the play that denounces the British presence in Northern Ireland as savage imperialism, in a historical context of increasing tension in Ulster. In Brenton's play large amounts of blood are being shed while the stage directions do not necessarily mention them and never make it explicit through which artifice this blood should be represented.

In the famous scene where Marban, the druid, is raped by three Roman soldiers, accounts of the productions (the original one or the 2005 revival) testify to the gory nature of the show whereas the stage directions do not mention the presence of any blood.

The SOLDIERS run at MARBAN, smashing their shields against him from three sides. MARBAN's knife goes flying, he stumbles away and falls. The FIRST and THIRD SOLDIER begin to strip.

Hold him, then.

SECOND SOLDIER *I'll do him in the neck.*

THIRD SOLDIER Don't, he'll shit himself.

FIRST SOLDIER All this trouble for a bit of a swim.

THIRD SOLDIER No, I want him to feel this. You can cut him about a bit if you want. Here!

The THIRD SOLDIER picks up MARBAN's knife and tosses it toward the second soldier.

Use his knife.

SECOND SOLDIER I wonder about you sometimes.

THIRD SOLDIER *Cut him! Make him look pretty!*

SECOND SOLDIER Dear oh dear.

The SECOND SOLDIER picks up the knife and makes a cut on MARBAN's shoulder blade. (Brenton: 39-40)

The absence of any stage direction mentioning Marban's blood implies an illusionist, realistic representation of blood by default. It is in keeping with the function of gore in the play which

systematically points to the violent nature of imperialism. The violence of the struggle appears all the more actual as it is embodied and singular. To refer to Kristeva's categories of abjection, the play stages private pain in order to denounce public horror.¹ With a clear political message attached to it, blood is nonetheless used for its shocking and fascinating power – and the amounts shed onstage testify to this. The effect is necessarily to engulf the audience in the spectacular dimension of bloodshed instead of permitting them to perceive the allegoric and political meaning of staged violence. For that matter this seems to be the intended effect, as the rape appears as a real violation and not a mere metaphor. But what might not be intentional is probably the depoliticization of the scene in the audience's perception.

The Romans in Britain has pushed the limits of blood staging in the British theatrical landscape. The representation of the individualization of violence, the spectacular dimension of gory violence screening its theatrical purpose appear to be a remarkable shift from the stylized use that was made of blood earlier in the 1970s. It seems the *In-Yer-Face* generation has reclaimed the legacy of Brenton's play even in its aporetic nature, by refusing violence as a message, seeking the experience of shock for its own sake and replacing the political intention by a moral stand: indeed *In-Yer-Face* plays do not focus mainly on the exposition of power struggle between social types, but instead on physical disgust, on a moral rejection of social decay that is written all over the bodies of characters viewed as individuals. As Nicole Boireau underlines, with *In-Yer-Face* aesthetics, "the social dimension dissolves into the organic one".²

With its apparently unmediated representation of blood, Howard Brenton's play has paved the way for the gory shows that have become the hallmark of *In-Yer-Face* theatre. In such plays as Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* or Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, blood is indeed abundantly represented. The stage becomes the very locus of visual shock and no mention is made whatsoever as to how these amounts of blood (and other body fluids) shall be represented,

especially in an economic context which forced productions to work on a restricted budget. But whereas Brenton's message was clearly political, the significance of *In-Yer-Face* is first moral.

GARY *pulls down his trousers and underpants.* MARK *starts to lick GARY's arse. [...]* MARK *pulls away. There's blood around his mouth.*

MARK There's blood.

Pause.

You're bleeding. (Ravenhill: 26)

The repetition of the phrase "There's blood" in the stage direction and in the dialogue denies any theatrical artifice and exposes the fact that *In-Yer-Face* plays tend to rely more on the effects of presence than those of representation. Aiming at triggering a physical reaction among the audience and pushing the physical limits of its actors, *In-Yer-Face* theatre uses actual bodies to convey its rejection of moral and social decay. Every time blood is shed in *Shopping and F***ing*, it is indeed the symptom of a moral failure: it first appears around Mark's mouth, betraying Gary's past as an abused child and present life as a male prostitute. It is then spilled out by the cashier in the 7/eleven as she is being mugged for a chocolate bar in front of a passive assembly of customers (Ravenhill: 28-29). It is dried out on Robbie's forehead after he was attacked while distributing free ecstasy outside a disco (Ravenhill: 34). Blood is also shed on the video shown by Brian to threaten and terrorise Lulu and Robbie (Ravenhill: 50). And it is finally monstrously concealed from the spectator's eye as Gary is being impaled by his friends by way of a forfeit in a Truth or Dare game (Ravenhill: 85).

In this respect *In-Yer-Face* theatre seems to reclaim the legacy of Grand Guignol: the function of blood has less to do with expressing a message than questioning the spectators on their own sensitivity. Its presence is less dramatically than experientially justified. As Agnès Pierron explains in *Les Nuits blanches du Grand-Guignol*, the blood and thunder plays written at the end of the nineteenth century for the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol did not bank on shock for the sake of shock but were meant to testify to the violence of contemporary society. Some of them were even at the

origin of social reforms. Just in the same way, stage violence is explicitly used by *In-Yer-Face* dramatists as a way to fight the denial or the toning down of contemporary violence. With *Blasted* (1995), Sarah Kane intended to expose the horrors of the war in former Yugoslavia to the eyes of the European public. That is how she herself viewed the excesses of violence in her own plays:

Sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. For me it's crucial to commit to memory events we haven't experienced – in order to avoid them happening. I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life.
(Sierz: 111)

The other common point between Grand Guignol and *In-Yer-Face* aesthetics is the typical mixture of horror and comedy, or, to put it more accurately, the exhaustion of horror into laughter. In *Phaedra's Love* (1996), the final scene stages a whole series of mutilations that end up in the audience's laughter: either Strophe, or Hippolytus get stoned, strangled, raped, castrated or disembowelled and Hippolytus' flesh ends up on a barbecue (Kane: 38-39). The very dynamics of the scene, in which the human body is spectacularly being reified, is built on the degradation of horror into comedy. Aleks Sierz describes the audience's reaction to this hyperbolic bloodbath as ambiguous.

Being in the middle of the action made you feel complicit in the horror, even if the castration scene proved risible – as Hippolytus's genitals were flung across the length of the theatre, several people laughed. (Sierz: 108)

The use of the adjective “risible” (instead of “comical” or “comedic”) shows that the audience cannot help but doubt the legitimacy of their own laugh because they have lost the soothing awareness of the artifice which makes it possible to perceive the comic and put horror at a distance. And yet, the whole scene does bank on an effect of accumulation and repetition which makes the bloodbath banal and eventually laughable.

The play gives no specifics at all concerning the actual staging of such physical dislocations in the stage directions: it places actors,

directors as well as spectators in a state of aesthetic aporia concerning the visual possibilities of staging this scene.

MAN 1 *pulls down* HIPPOLYTUS' trousers.

WOMAN 2 *cuts off his genitals.*

They are thrown onto the barbecue.

The children cheer.

A child takes them off the barbecue and throws them at another child who screams and runs away.

Much laughter.

Someone retrieves them and they are thrown to a dog.

THESEUS *takes the knife.*

He cuts HIPPOLYTUS from groin to chest.

HIPPOLYTUS' bowels are torn out and thrown onto the barbecue.

He is kicked and stoned and spat on.

HIPPOLYTUS *looks at the body of STROPHE.* (Kane: 39)

Making it possible to stage horror in many different ways (from the use of mock blood, make-up and illusionist props to the mere reading of the stage directions), the play necessarily confronts the spectator with the question of the "how", thereby risking to make the simulacra all the more obvious as it paradoxically intends to create the illusion of bloodshed.

In his critical reflection on violent theatricality, David Graver asks to what extent the stage can "embody aggression and pain without becoming something else or without the aggression and pain becoming (uneasily) their own simulacra" (Graver: 43). In the spectator's eye, the performative nature of the dislocation scene in *Phaedra's Love* is deprived of its theatricality. It is another level of reality that is revealed and the focus is now on the action itself as it is carried out and as it is not represented: the whole action is not attributed to the characters, but to the actors engaging in a deed. Consequently, the centre of interest moves to the *how?* of the action rather than dwelling on the *why?* What is shown through the gory violence is ultimately contextualized in the horrified gaze of the spectator. In a way, the provocation stands in its own way and screens its own meaning. This might explain why the contemporary English stage has tended to distance itself from direct shock and gore after the "nasty nineties": *In-Yer-Face* techniques seemed to

have exhausted themselves, at least as far as graphic violence was concerned.

Upon examining the way blood is staged at the beginning of the millennium, it is striking to notice the difference with either grotesque stylization or gory immediacy. Such plays as Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000) and Martin Crimp's trilogy *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) refuse the *In-Yer-Face* legacy of spectacular bloodshed while attempting to find new ways to make blood present through the artifice of representation.

In Churchill's dystopian play about the loss of any ethical, artistic or even linguistic hope, the blood is off-stage and has already been spilled when the play opens:

JOAN If it's a party, why was there so much blood?

HARPER There isn't any blood.

JOAN Yes.

HARPER Where?

JOAN On the ground.

HARPER In the dark? how would you see that in the dark?

JOAN I slipped in it.

She holds up her bare foot.

I mostly wiped it off. (Churchill: 15)

Resorting to denial and dishonesty, Harper (the character of the aunt) tries to conceal from her niece's eyes the atrocities committed by her husband in the garden shed. The use of the past tense ("was", "slipped", "wiped") and the actual presence of blood under the girl's foot plunges the spectator in a world where horror is already there – and still here. It is present without having to appear and blood thereby loses its fascinating power while the shock is intensified: much more disturbing than the commonplace sight of blood, the narrative of the girl who inadvertently treads in it comes as an emotional shock to the spectator, evoking disgust without appealing to any scopic impulse.

In *Fewer Emergencies*, this refusal of visual shock is pushed to the extreme since the whole trilogy does not stage anything but a

blank place and a few actors speaking about the action instead of playing it. Blood is no longer a stain under a foot. It is only words.

1 Well of course there's blood—not just blood on the wall—not just blood on the floor.

3 But blood in the air.

2 But blood in the air. Blood hanging in the air. A mist.

3 An aerosol.

1 An aerosol – that's right – that's good – of blood – which he hadn't foreseen – he hadn't foreseen the aerosol of blood – or the sound – is this right? – or the sound of the distressed children when his head was on the white pillow – on the white pillow – don't help me – when his head was on the white pillow picturing the scene – but now – don't help me – but now it's clear – and there's another sound – what's that other sound? – don't help me, don't help me – the sound of his heart – the sound of his own heart – the sound of the killer's heart sounding in the killer's head – that's right – that's good – which he hadn't foreseen – he hadn't foreseen the sound of his own heart in his own head – filling his head – his own heart filling his head with blood – popping his ears – popping his ears with blood – like a swimmer – not swimmer – don't help me – like a diver – that is right diving into blood – he's like a diver diving into blood. (Crimp: 30)

In this passage, Crimp rejuvenates the tragic convention of the hypotyposis. It is a narrative inserted in the dialogues that makes it possible for the dramatist to evoke violence in a vivid way without showing it onstage. The legacy of the hypotyposis is one that can be traced from Ancient Greek tragedy to classical French tragedy as it is epitomized by Racine.

The close of *Phèdre* or *Athalie* has in it as much fury as the battle in *Macbeth* or the massacre in *Hamlet*. The difference is simply this: the great bang takes place off stage. It is related to us in the formal *récit* of the messenger or confidant. But that does not make it a jot less exciting. On the contrary; the outward formality of the recital conveys the ferocity of the event. It impels our imaginings towards the scene of disaster. (Steiner: 79)

Paradoxically enough, the horror of the bloodshed is made more hyperbolic and less spectacular. But contrary to the classical

hypotyposis which represents (presents again) an explosion of violence that has already happened, Crimp's text is written in the present and set here and now. The mass murder seems to be taking place just as it is being told, which could explain the extremely troubled syntax. All the devices used in the text tend to slow down or even freeze the moment when blood gushes. The text displays the whole range of possible repetitions:

- polyptoton: "a **diver diving** into blood"
- chiasmus: "An **aerosol** – that's right – that's good – of blood – which he hadn't **foreseen** – he hadn't **foreseen** the **aerosol** of blood"
- anaphora: "**the sound of** his heart – **the sound of** his own heart – **the sound of** the killer's heart sounding in the killer's head"
- epiphora: "and there's another **sound** – what's that other **sound?**"

Together with the many epanorthoses (*i.e.* the devices through which the character corrects his own sentences), flashbacks and the accumulation of gerund clauses, they freeze on the frame and create a device that opposes the aesthetics of suddenness and immediacy typical of *In-Yer-Face* theatre. The moment spreads so much that it encompasses a change of physical state from gas ("a mist", "an aerosol") to liquid ("diving into blood") and a huge increase in quantities. This slowing down process opens the door to many other transformations: originally a visual phenomenon, the gore aesthetics becomes an acoustic and mental one ("popping his ears with blood" "his own heart filling his head with blood"). Poetically slowed down, the instant when blood is being shed becomes the unavoidable, ever-present moment of horror that has invaded all inner and outer spaces, together with all the sensorial ducts.

As for the stammering rhetoric at work in this hypotyposis, it mingles pathetic and burlesque effects: the childish, repetitive character of the epanorthoses ("that's right – that's good" "don't help me") conveys the impression that, to paraphrase Bergson, "something mechanical [is] encrusted on the living" speech (Bergson: 84). The discrepancy between the little comical machine and the absolute horror of the bloodshed creates an uncanny impression: it is this weirdness that decentres the spectator's gaze

and becomes the artifice that makes it possible to face reality without being overwhelmed by horror.

This quick panorama of the way British theatre has staged blood since the abolition of censorship reveals some profound aesthetic shifts that bear witness to the constant theatrical experimentation on the British stage. The spectacular nature of the *In-Yer-Face* way to stage blood is reminiscent of the confrontational and experiential legacy of Seneca's theatre, the Jacobean tragedy and the Grand Guignol aesthetic that mingles horror and laughter. It seems this conception of the stage as being a mirror to the world's monstrosity, with a testimonial value attached to it, has pushed the limits of audiences' sensitivities to a point where excesses stand in their own way and end up getting them interested in another level of stage phenomena: the practical arrangements necessary to create the illusion of violence. The post-*In-Yer-Face* reaction to this radical legacy is not less radical: the visual representation of blood, whether realistic or stylized, is more often than not avoided in more recent plays. Crimp's aesthetics of restraint epitomizes this trend but even more recent plays refuse to dramatize the shock they intend to cause and the awareness they wish to raise; for instance Nick Gill's *Fiji Land* stages Abu Ghraib torture onstage but with various plants standing for prisoners and without any blood being shed. This profound aesthetic shift constitutes the paradoxical legacy of *In-Yer-Face* theatre: it questions the very value of the stage as a place of revelation and the possibility of accessing meaning through sensation.

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¹ "La douleur [en] est le côté intime et l'horreur le visage public." (Kristeva: 165)

² "Le social se dissout dans l'organique." (Boireau: 232)