“Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune”: Post-Pandemic Anglophone Theatre and Drama

ABSTRACT

Since the days of their conception and for most of their history, theatre institutions and the dramatic genre have indelibly reflected their immediate socio-historic contexts, including epidemics. Although forced to close for a full year during the 1918 outbreak of Spanish flu, however, modern Anglophone theatres and authors deliberately avoided exploiting the pandemic in their works. Conversely, the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected the birthing of new genres and individual plays that included it in their settings and contents, and also motivated discussions on the future of dramatic literature and theatre establishments, particularly with regard to hybrid drama. Building on its author’s previous research, this paper examines British and American dramatic literature and theatre establishments one year after the end of the pandemic, to detect whether Anglophone drama has embraced the new genres, and whether its authors have continued to reflect the pandemic in their works.

Keywords: Anglophone drama, hybrid drama, contemporary drama and theatre, theatre studies

“Puščic prš proži nezaslišana usoda”: anglofonsko gledališče in dramatika po koncu pandemije

IZVLEČEK

Gledališča in dramatika sta že od svojega začetka in skozi večji del svoje zgodovine odsev vsakokratnega družbeno-zgodovinskega konteksta, vključno z epidemijami. Čeprav so morala takratna gledališča v anglofonskih deželah med izbruhom gripe leta 1918 prvič v novejši zgodovini za celo leto zapreti svoja vrata, so se avtorji v svojih delih namenoma izogibali igranju na karto pandemije. Po drugi strani so med pandemijo COVID-19 nastali novi žanri in dramska dela, v katerih se pandemija pojavlja posredno ali neposredno, obenem pa je sporožila tudi razprave o prihodnosti dramatike in gledališča, zlasti o hibridni dramatiki. Avtorica v svojem prispevku nadaljuje obravnavo britanske in ameriške dramatike ter gledališč leto dni po koncu pandemije ter išče odgovor na vpričanje, ali so se novi žanri uveljavili in ali pandemija v novih delih še vedno igra pomembno vlogo.

Ključne besede: anglofonska dramatika, hibridna drama, sodobna dramatika in gledališče, gledališke študije
1 Introduction

Theatre institutions and dramatic genres have gone through manifold changes during their centuries-long history, partly as a result of extrinsic socio-historic factors, including wars and various epidemics. In its manifestations both as a performing art (a staged play) and a form of literature (a playtext), the dramatic genre has always reacted to its surroundings, and has to some extent been defined in accordance with socio-historic and geo-political expectations. Within such horizons and contexts the genre has perpetually been recognized, but not always saluted, as a highly relevant means of communal strengthening and social conditioning; a palpable and more captivating form of education; a medium of societal criticism; an efficient instrument of socio-political propaganda; and a method of individual and/or collective consolation. Further, dramas and theatres have always been active promoters of change, especially in moments of deep civilisational crises.

Dramatic authors, regardless of their (sub)genre, have frequently referenced and incorporated local and global historic events and daily geopolitics into their plays. Sometimes they do so literally and in passing, and at other times more substantially, turning such events and details into metaphors and symbols of existential and metaphysical dilemmas, and prompting an internal discussion, or even an actual (re)action from audiences (and lawmakers) on a particular issue. Ancient classical tragedians habitually set the action of their plays against the backdrop of (real) wars and epidemics. *Oedipus Rex* (c. 430 BCE), for example, one of the best known Ancient Greek tragedies, sets its quest for the perpetrator of a regicide against the backdrop of a pestilence, possibly invoking the plague of Athens (Kousoulis et al. 2012). These events of considerable death and destruction would have been understood as symptoms of moral deprivation and civilisational decay that could offer a valuable lesson to spectators. Further, they would have symbolically represented critical times of (self-)scrutiny, in which a different, more functional (if not better) society and social order could be conceived. In other words: fictionalised re-presentations of events of acute crises, whether wars or epidemics, would have been employed by authors and understood by audiences as “moment[s] of reckoning, the space when the intervention might still take place” (Angelaki 2017, 2).

In a similar manner, Anglophone drama (especially since the rise of secular Tudor drama and the works of its bard, William Shakespeare), has always reacted to and referenced its immediate socio-historic contexts. It has used wars, natural disasters and, sporadically, epidemics, as pretexts for promoting or probing current ideologies, myths and politics, either to uphold the status quo or obliquely offer social criticism. Born in the midst of the bubonic plague, and subject to the consequences of constant outbreaks of the disease – which impeded life in Elizabethan England, including its theatrical activities – Shakespeare used the epidemic as a pretext for a play’s action only once, although he referred to pestilence frequently in other texts (Tichenor 2021; Young and Hagan 2020). The one occasion on which Shakespeare wove the plague into a plot was when it prevented Friar John from delivering the letter to Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet* 1982, 5.2.). In all his other plays, the plague (in whatever variant)

---

1. An early version of the paper was presented at the 6th International SDAŠ Conference in September 2023.
2. Literary texts (of any genre) have always been (mis)used for (geo)political purposes and propaganda. A studious and inspiring text on the topic can be found in Hazemali and Onič (2023).
is given a symbolic meaning, either as a symptom of personal or societal corruption, or a threat of impending catastrophe caused by the depravity of its protagonists (who are seen and depicted as social agents). Within the latter context, these events also represented an opportunity for social intervention, and could eventually be interpreted as “agents of change and transformation” (Fernández-Caparrós and Brígido-Corachán 2017, xvii).

The present paper is a continuation of its author’s research into whether and how contemporary American theatres and dramatic literature have reacted to the recent (COVID-19) pandemic, and is part of an ongoing study. The previous research was limited by its relatively short time span and may have led to inaccurate observations and initial conclusions. Therefore, this current research continues to observe and examine American and British dramatic literature and theatre establishments one year after the pandemic, with the primary aim of detecting whether Anglophone drama has embraced the new hybrid genres prompted by the health mandates in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its secondary intention is to inspect whether authors and directors have continued to reference the pandemic in their work, and to what degree. Its third, and most important, intention is to establish whether the crisis brought about any lasting transformations and interventions in Anglophone theatre and drama.

2 Previous Research

Theatres were among the first social institutions to be locked down at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequently experienced the most extended complete shut-down in their history, including the period at the beginning of the 20th century when the 1918 influenza pandemic halted the performing arts for a year (Canning 2020; Colleary 2021). Unlike other educational and cultural organizations, such as schools, universities, museums, and even the film industry, theatres and the dramatic genre are inherently dependent on the presence and proximity of audiences to be functional and viable. The health protocols mandated during the COVID-19 pandemic were thus in direct opposition to the intrinsic essence of the performing arts and staged drama, and an impediment to their existence. Additionally, by the 2020s most contemporary Anglophone theatres had completed a developmental cycle and arrived at the needs-assessment phase. Having previously received long-called-for demands for better social representation, inclusion and greater equity for the marginalised – among audiences as well as among dramatists, troupes and various theatre professions – Anglophone theatres were being compelled to re-evaluate their respective agendas, organisational structures, and long-term sustainability. The author’s aforementioned paper, published in late 2022, examined the condition of US theatres and drama in the contemporary era of crises, observed their immediate reactions to the global pandemic, and noted the ensuing changes. The premise of the research was that crises are “agents of change and transformation” (Fernández-Caparrós and Brígido-Corachán 2017, xvii), and that US theatre and drama could use the COVID-19 pandemic as a “space [of] intervention” (Angelaki 2017, 2), in order to tackle and successfully deal with its own crisis of representation and parity.

The early findings were that theatre companies around the world employed accessible digital and streaming platforms and/or directed their attention to the older, relatively overlooked, genre of the radio-drama (Lunden 2020a; Lunden 2020b; Langston 2022), so
that: “Productions did not stop completely, but instead went online” (Langston 2022, n.p.). This initial reaction from performers, authors and theatre professionals to work remotely from the safety of their homes and to experiment with contemporary technologies led to the burgeoning of new hybrid forms of theatre and drama. Because of the imposed health mandates, the creative survival strategies of those employed in theatre, and the deliverance the technologies provided, the dramatic genre has expanded since March 2020 to include sub-genres such as digital play-readings, micro-plays, audio theatres, Zoom plays, Instagram monologues, YouTube shorts and other full-scale digital(ised) (quasi)live-theatre subgenres. Major weaknesses of such developments, however, include the “lack of intimacy and dynamism of online theatre” (Langston 2022, n.p.), and eventual “Zoom fatigue” (Blake 2020, n.p.) or “digital theatre exhaustion”, a feeling that arose with the realisation that returning to physical theatres and live shows would take much longer than imagined.

The second observation from the earlier research was that digital performances and streamed and live plays in 2020 and the first half of 2021 (i.e., in the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 seasons) only sporadically exploited the pandemic in their plots and source materials. This was the case in Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen’s *The Line* (a YouTube-streamed docu-drama that portrayed frontline medical workers battling the pandemic); Richard Nelson’s *What We Need to Talk About* (a Zoom play, and the sequel to Nelson’s *The Apple Family* plays, which also addressed life during the COVID-19 pandemic); and Kristina Wong’s *Sweatshop Overlord* (an Asian-American comic take on the COVID-19 experience). In most cases, however, theatre in 2020–2021 preferred to alleviate the stress of living with the pandemic and lockdown and offer a form of escapism through musical drama, comic satires, and revivals of national and world classics whose thematic frameworks steered clear of the pandemic. Still, *The Great Work Begins* (a streamed benefit play-reading of scenes from Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, presented by amFAR and directed by Ellie Kanner) points to the early apprehension that the health crisis would hit historically marginalised individuals and communities (LGBTQ+, BIPOC, women, and the poor) disproportionately hard, forcing theatre professionals to take prompt action.

Another key finding of the research was that the COVID-19 pandemic propelled theatres to begin a much-needed reckoning process. This was driven in part by the previously mentioned demands for a reappraisal of their programming and structures, and other social and historic events, such as the 2020 Black Lives Matter riots (sparked by a spate of excessive police violence against Black Americans), racially-motivated acts of aggression and violence against Asian-Americans, and reports and data that supported the further social marginalization of BIPOC, women and LGBTQ+ individuals, who were more likely to be furloughed or laid off, and had limited (if any) access to medical assistance. Discussions on how to achieve better societal representation, inclusion and equity brought a series of early propositions, the details of which can be found in the previous research (Čirić-Fazlija 2022). A comparative assessment of the dramatic genres, emergent authors and modes of societal representation that re-directed the trajectory of US theatre in the 20th and 21st centuries, however, indicates that a greater transformation of US drama and theatre took place in earlier decades rather than more recently. This is despite the rise of new/hybrid genres necessitated by the recent pandemic, and the increased number of plays by American women staged in commercial and independent theatres.
3 Research Methodology

To conduct the current research, the author accessed and examined a variety of sources that focus on theatres and performances in 2022 in the US and UK, in independent non-profit and commercial institutions. The sources fell into two main categories. The first comprised reports and surveys from national theatre associations/organisations, including the Theatre Communication Group’s reports and editorials (Fonner et al. 2022; Weinert-Kendt 2023); the LA Performing Arts Survey (Star Insights 2022); and writings by individual reporters and theatre columnists (Paulson and Hernández 2022; Gelt 2022; Veltman 2023; Mason 2023; Farber 2023), all of whom cited and relied on specialised surveys and analytical data on theatres.

The second category of resources consisted of “best of” theatre lists, compiled by established theatre critics and columnists such as Jackson McHenry (2022) of the Vulture, Jesse Green (Green et al. 2022) and Maya Philips (2022) of The New York Times, Peter Marks (2022b) of The Washington Post, Adam Feldman (2022) of Time Out New York, David Gordon (2022) of Theatermania, Charles McNulty of LA Times (2022b), Holly Williams, Jessie Thompson and Isobel Lewis (2022) of The Independent, Arifa Akbar (2022e) of The Guardian, Dominic Cavendish (2022) of The Telegraph, Susana Clapp (2022) of The Observer, Sam Marlowe (2022) of The Stage, Andrzej Lukowski (2022) of Time Out, Sarah Hemming (2022) of The Financial Times, and Daisy Watford of Matadornetwork (2022). At times various theatre websites were accessed for the purpose of clarification, but their information on the season’s programmes was not taken into account, as it often proved changeable and incomplete.

4 Research Findings: Reports and Surveys

Most of the aforementioned reports and surveys testified to the fact that theatres have suffered significant losses, not only in financial terms but more significantly with regard to their personnel, as “unemployment in the arts doubled the nation average during the pandemic, spiking at 30%”, especially among BIPOC workers (Gelt 2022, n.p.; SMU DataArts 2023). Moreover, the frequent suspensions and cancellations of the performances that occurred in 2021 (either when a new variant of COVID-19 emerged, or companies’ staff fell ill), the generational flux of the audience, and changing social habits have meant that the return to live, in-person theatre has been surprisingly slow and faltering. Additionally, by the end of 2022 federal grants and relief funds in the US, such as the Payroll Protection Program (PPP), Shuttered Venues Operating Grant (SVOG), and funding from the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture (LACDAC), if successfully won, dried out, had mostly been spent on “operating and reopening efforts”, and to “cover losses incurred due to pandemic-related shutdowns” (Star Insights 2022, 9). The funds generally did not prevent institutions from losing employees, or from having to discontinue their activities. Further, although individual (and last-minute) ticket sales did not drop, subscriptions fell significantly (30–60%), and the general political and economic volatility combined with high inflation have reduced funding from benefactors and corporations. These factors combined have eventually led to fewer performances being given, shorter runs, further losses of performing arts jobs, and the permanent closure of some (non-profit) theatres. This has had far-reaching implications...
on theatre programming, as companies have had to prioritise, placing sustainability over try-out/new drama, as explained by Snehal Desai:

I think what we are seeing is our audiences are coming back, but they are being really selective, which makes it hard to stage riskier plays or challenging material – or to do new work or introduce new artists. (Gelt 2022, n.p.)

The realisation that it will take a much longer time for the performing arts to recover from the pandemic (another three to five years, according to the artistic and theatre executives interviewed), and the generational shift among audiences (which necessarily implies different habits, interests and cultural tastes) do, however, have some upsides. First of all, theatres have started to restructure and re-think their organisational policies and artistic agendas, in order to devise new strategies and methods of attracting audiences and adapting to the newest normal in the “era of diminished expectations” (Weinert-Kendt 2023, n.p.). Some have dismissed their boards and traditional hierarchies, others have changed their marketing strategies, and others still have diversified into programming “outside traditional, proscenium-based theatre” (Weinert-Kendt 2023, n.p.). The development of programmes beyond the bounds of traditional theatre implies the inclusion of immersive, virtual and augmented theatre, which, according to Alan Brown of the WulfBrown consultancy, “the public has embraced […] and the commercial producers are running away with millions of dollars in demand for them”, even if a certain number of artistic directors still prefer “to do important theatrical work on their mainstages [sic] for an audience of critics” (quoted in Weinert-Kendt 2023, n.p.). The second upside is that theatres have undertaken the necessary reckoning and have already intervened in their programmes, making them increasingly diverse and inclusive, with more texts and performances by the traditionally marginalised (women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+). This is already apparent in the “best of” lists, which have correspondingly become more inclusive.

5 Findings from the “Best of” Lists

The “best of” lists compiled by the previously listed theatre reviewers, critics and columnists reveal that theatres and audiences in 2022 preferred revivals, Broadway transfers and new productions of older national dramas and world classics. As expected, musical dramas such as *Funny Girl,*5 *A Strange Loop,*6 *Kimberly Akimbo,*7 *Into the Woods, Intimate Apparel,*8 and *Cyrano*

---

5 This phenomenon is partly natural and partly the result of the pandemic, with older generations observing safety precautions and health mandates more strictly.
6 More information on songs as generic elements in film musicals can be found in Plemenitaš (2016).
7 This 2022 performance, starring Lea Michele, was the first Broadway revival of the 1964 musical by Isobel Lennart (book author), Bob Merrill (lyrics) and Jule Styne (score). It presents the career and personal life of comedienne Fanny Brice of Ziegfeld Follies.
8 Michael R. Jackson's meta-theatrical musical dramatises the daily and social struggles and concerns of a gay Black author writing a musical about a gay Black author writing a musical. First premiered in 2019 off-Broadway, the piece won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Drama (for more information, see: Pulitzer Prizes 2020), and Best Book of a Musical and Best Musical at the 75th Tony Awards in 2022, after being nominated in 11 categories. The 2022 performance was its first Broadway premiere. For more information, see: Wiegand (2022) and the “Winners/2022” section on the Tony Awards website (Broadway League 2022).
9 Intimate Apparel is a 2004 playtext by Lynn Nottage, which foregrounds the intersectionality of race, gender and class in its representation of an African-American working-class woman at the turn of the 20th century. It was not
If the authorship and thematic framework of the plays are considered, it must be concluded that a palpable increase in racial, gender and cultural diversity and parity is evident. This is visible in the number of playtexts and performances by or about BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals. The scripted dramas include: Alice Childress’s *Trouble in Mind* and *Wedding Band* (portraying the difficulties of the interracial love and marriage of a black woman and a white man in the American South in 1918, told from the female protagonist’s point of view);\(^9\) Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel*; Susan-Lori Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* (highly original in its treatment of drama and stage conventions, and postmodernist in its ironic re-visitiation of American history, the play premiered in 2001 off-Broadway, but was transferred to Broadway the following year);\(^10\) Pearl Cleage’s *Blues for the Alabama Sky* (this 1995 play, set in 1930s Harlem, reveals its author’s complex probing of US historiographical narratives, and her attempt to recover African-American women from the neglect and oblivion of official history);\(^11\) Adrienne Kennedy’s *Ohio State Murders* (1991/1992 play, which thematises a race-related crime, had its Broadway premiere in 2022);\(^12\) Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* (dramatising issues of sexual abuse and paedophilia within the larger coming-of-age narrative

originally devised as a musical play, although the performance mentioned here was staged as one: “*Intimate Apparel* began its life as a popular play, but it was the brilliant composer Ricky Ian Gordon who invited me to consider adapting it into an opera. He saw something epic and expansive in the life of Esther that he felt demanded to be sung, and with his loving guidance, I was able to write my first libretto” (Nottage 2022, n.p.).

\(^9\) A revival of David Newman, Ira Gasman and Cy Coleman’s 1990 classic, which depicts the street life of colourful characters of sex workers in 1980s New York. It had its first Broadway premiere in 1997, and won two of the twelve Tony awards it was nominated for that year (see Concord Theatricals 2023; and Playbill 2023).

\(^10\) A new musical by Sarah Silverman, Joshua Harmon and Adam Schlesinger, which was set to premiere in 2020 and is based on Silverman’s 2010 memoir. For more information, see: Jessy Green’s review (Green 2022b), and the Atlantic Theatre Company’s website (Atlantic Theatre 2022).

\(^11\) Cinco Paul and Bekah Brunstetter’s new musical (which was both streamed online and performed in-person in early 2022) gives a humorous take on the biblical story of Mary Magdalene and Jesus as teenagers. For trailers and more extensive information, see Marks (2022a) and Hall (2022).

\(^12\) A new musical by Charles Randolph-Wright and Marcus Hummon, which presents the life and activism of Frederick Douglass. For additional information, see: the American Prophet website (ShowTown Theatricals 2022), and David Smith’s piece (2022).

\(^13\) For example: *Fat Ham*, and the aforementioned *&Juliet*.

\(^14\) Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* particularly captured the attention of directors and audiences in the season(s) examined.

\(^15\) *The Wedding Band* was written in 1962, preceding anti-miscegenation laws by five years. The premiere listed here was the play’s “first major New York revival in 50 years” (Green 2022a).

\(^16\) *Topdog/Underdog* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2002 and celebrated as “A darkly comic fable of brotherly love and family identity, […] tell[ing] the story of Lincoln and Booth, two brothers whose names, given to them as a joke, foretell a lifetime of sibling rivalry and resentment” (Pulitzer Prizes 2002, n.p.).

\(^17\) As the author states: “I am writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet. I am writing to help myself understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is both racist and sexist” (Cleage quoted in Anderson 2008, 17).

\(^18\) As the unnamed author of the promotional material explains: “This haunting, provocative mystery – the Broadway debut of legendary playwright Adrienne Kennedy – concerns a famous writer who returns to her alma mater to finally reveal the truth of what happened when she was a student there” (Concord Theatricals 2022, n.p.).
of a naïve female character, in a poignant and harrowing dissection of its topics); Caryl Churchill’s *A Number* (2002 play that probes the issue of cloning and the potential to atone for past mistakes through scientific experiment); Helen Edmundson’s *A Small Island* (two-act scripted drama which portrays the lives of three Windrush generation women migrants from the Caribbean to the UK); Aya Ogawa’s *Nosebleed* (an autobiographical piece by the playwright-cum-director presented as a work-in-progress in 2019, and premiered in autumn 2021); Suzie Miller’s highly acclaimed *Prima Facie* (a one-act, solo drama which presents a female lawyer who specialises in defending men from sexual abuse charges, at the tragic moment of having been sexually attacked herself); August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*; J.E. Cooper’s *Ain’t No Mo’* (the 2019 play of the Black author-cum-performer that satirically examines racialised American society); R. Calais Cameron’s *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When The Hue Gets Too Heavy* (highly lauded play which problematises the (self)perception of Black masculinity); Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop*; Richard Greenberg’s *Take Me Out* (discussing class-, race- and gender-based chauvinism in the sports industry); Mike Bartlett’s *Cock*; Jeremy O. Harris’s *Daddy: A Melodrama*; Katie Elin-Salt’s *Celebrated Virgins*; Mathew Lopez’s *The Inheritance*; and Sami Ibrahim’s *Two Palestinians Go Dogging*. The latter, although grounded in the 2022 reality of the cold-blooded murder of an Al Jazeera journalist, was sadly to turn prophetic by the end of 2023. Among the

19 A highly relevant and acclaimed work by an American woman dramatist, Vogel’s play premiered in 1997, and received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1998 (Pulitzer Prize 1998).

20 Churchill is an established and acclaimed British female dramatist. This play was revived numerous times, the last in 2022 at the Old Vic in London (The Old Vic 2022).

21 First produced in 2019, Edmundson’s play is based on Andrea Levy’s 2004 novel. For more information on the play and its context, see: Sierz (2019) and BBC News (2023) respectively.

22 *Nosebleed* dramatises the “insurmountable cultural and generational gap between Aya and their father” (Ogawa n.d., n.p.).

23 This was the West End debut of Suzie Miller’s drama, which had its Broadway premiere in 2023. As Arifa Akbar (2022b, n.p.) states: “Prima Facie’s final messages are urgent in highlighting who our laws fail to protect. If they are delivered in hammer blows, there is power in hearing them spoken on a West End stage…”

24 A revival of the 1987 play by highly revered contemporary African American dramatists, set in 1936 Pittsburgh.

25 The play’s short run on Broadway testifies less to the quality of the piece and more to the difficulties US theatres had when trying to introduce new works in the early post-pandemic period. For more information, see: Huston (2022) and Oladipo (2022).

26 Inspired by Ntozake Shange’s 1975 choreopoem, the play premiered in October 2021 and was transferred to the Royal Court Theatre in 2022. It has had a West End theatre run in 2023 (Hall 2023; Ryan 2023).

27 A Broadway revival of the 2002 play. For information on the 2022 revival, which counts the Tony for Best Play Revival among its many awards, see: Towers (2022) and Frank (2022).

28 The play premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 2009, and portrays the dilemma of a gay man who “accidently fall[s] in love with a woman” (Dramatists Play Service 2009, n.p.).

29 A play that foregrounds the issues of race, gender and sexuality embedded in the politics of modern patronage, *Daddy: A Melodrama* was first performed off-Broadway in 2019 (Lewis 2019; Akbar 2022a). For information on its 2022 UK premiere, see: Akbar (2022a) and “Daddy: A Melodrama” (Almeida Theatre 2022).

30 A new play by the actress and emerging author from South Wales, *Celebrated Virgins* presents a fictionalised history of ‘The Ladies of Llangollen’, two women from the upper echelons of Irish society, shunned by early 19th-century society because of their lesbian relationship (see Gareth Williams’s interview with the dramatist [Williams 2022]). The play “attempts to reclaim their story on their own terms” (Llyr Evans 2022, n.p.).

31 This revival of the 2019 LGBTQ+ drama premiered on Broadway. It was inspired by Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* and E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*. For additional information on the original production and most recent revival, see: Travers (2019) and McNulty (2022a), respectively.

32 For more information on the play and its coincidence with the killing of Shireen Abu Aqleh, see Arifa Akbar’s review (2022c); for information on the murder of the famous Al Jazeera journalist see Bethan McKernan and Sufian Taha’s piece (2023) in *The Guardian*. 

254 Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija “Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune”: Post-Pandemic Anglophone Theatre and Drama
plays by BIPOC, women, and/or LGBTQ+ authors (and which are in part intersectional) two are particularly interesting: The Father and the Assassin, a new play by the Indian woman dramatist Anupama Chandrasekhar (the first International-Playwright-in-Residence at the National Theatre in London), which unravels the history of British colonialism through its focalisation on the killing of Ghandi, and is “a story of division and whipped-up animosities that has its roots in colonialism and is repeating itself throughout the world today” (Armitstead 2022, n.p.); and The P Word by British actor-cum-author of Asian/Middle-Eastern origin Waleed Akhtar (Akhtar 2022), “a consciousness-raising play” (Akbar 2022d, n.p.) that foregrounds gender-based prosecution, homophobic castigation, racial chauvinism inside the LGBTQ+ community, and global migration in the context of the British asylum-seeking system. Curiously, among the more anticipated revived classics (Shakespeare, Shaw, Miller and Williams), are a few examples of theatre of the absurd, and meta-theatrical and experimental drama, such as Ionesco’s The Chairs, Albee’s Three Tall Women and Wilder’s The Skin of Our Teeth. These plays are all strongly existentialist and metaphysical in their contents and thematic frameworks, yet they (especially the latter) remain optimistic in tone. It appears that the intimate and collective experience of living with (and surviving) a global health crisis and its (at times inconsistent) mandates have had an impact on programme selectors, who reached for the older plays audiences and artists could learn from and find comfort in.

Quite a number of new plays and premieres caught the attention of critics and reviewers, including: A Case for the Existence of God, a play on the issue of custody and single fathers’ battles for their children; Camp Siegfried, a piece which foregrounds camps for young German-Americans that indoctrinated children with Nazi ideology; English, a text that debates global migration crisis, and the Iranian migratory experience and cultural identity; At the Wedding, a drama that discusses the LGBTQ+ experience; The Hang, an LGBTQ+ performance that combines the musical and jazz cabaret genres; Here Are the Blueberries, a docu-drama on Nazi concentration camps; That Is Not Who I Am, a mystery-piece on online conspiracy theories; House of Ife, which presents a British-Ethiopian family after the death of its eldest son; Two Palestinians Go Dogging, which references the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; Our Generation, a piece of verbatim theatre on Generation Z’s coming-of-age; Beautiful Evil Things, a solo that retells the ancient tragedies of Medusa, the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, seer Cassandra, and Leda, mother of Clytemnestra; and The Glow, a sci-fi and folk-myth drama about a woman with supernatural powers. This list compels us to agree with Arifa Akbar that it was “a superb year for the stage” (2022e, n.p.), and with Charles McNulty, who describes the 2021–2022 season as one marked by “theatrical richness”, although it was “a bruiser, economically and emotionally” (2022b, n.p.).

Of all the plays and performances included in these “best of” lists, only three directly referenced the pandemic: a pared-down and modernised staging of Tennessee Williams’s A Long Day’s Journey into Night, performed at the Minetta Lane Theatre, directed by Robert O’Hara and

---

33 For more information on public reactions to the 2016 migration crises in UK and Slovenia, and on how to use songs to successfully battle xenophobia and teach inclusivity and interculturallism, see Hempkin (2016).

starring Bill Camp and Elizabeth Marvel (Shaw 2022); Max Webster’s modern-dress version of William Shakespeare’s *Henry V* for the Donmar Warehouse (and streamed on National Theatre Live), starring Kit Harington (Watford 2022); and Alecky Blythe’s *Our Generation*, co-produced by the National Theatre and Chichester Festival Theatre, and directed by Daniel Evans. The first uses the pandemic as a backdrop for its plot; the second references the pandemic briefly in its stage design; and the third, an example of coming-of-age verbatim theatre, weaves the health crisis into its plot, as it dramatises the dilemmas and issues of a dozen Gen Z youths from across the UK over a five-year period, which ended in 2020. Since the first two of the aforementioned texts and performances do not include the COVID-19 pandemic in a substantial way, the next subsection of the paper focuses solely on Alecky Blythe’s *Our Generation*.

### 6 Our Generation: Coming of Age in the Contemporary Era of Crises, the Pandemic Included

Alecky Blythe’s most recent piece in the genre of verbatim theatre, *Our Generation*, came to fruition over a period of five years, starting in 2015, when its author came up with an idea to devise a piece that would reflect the experiences of a “generation of young people in the UK coming of age in the 2020s” (Blythe 2020, “Introduction”). When the concept was first discussed by Blythe and Rufus Norris, the newly-appointed Artistic Director of the National Theatre, neither the author nor her interlocutor could foresee what would be happening by the end date, and the dramatist expressed her concern that such a project would present structural difficulties, because it “could be potentially so freewheeling […] without a central event to aid knitting it together” (Blythe 2022, “Introduction”). Despite the fact that Norris tried to allay Blythe’s fears by citing the unpredictability of the future, suggesting that the intervening years might bring “wars, terrorist attacks, a pandemic” (as quoted in Blythe 2022, “Introduction”), neither could foresee the (specific impact of the) COVID-19 pandemic, and the striking effect it would have on their research subjects. Yet, when the health mandates were imposed in March 2020, the project of tracking and interviewing twelve British youths from around the UK became not only an accurate representation of the authentic predicaments, anxieties, interests, dreams and struggles of a cohort of maturing teenagers, but also a testimony to the strength, adaptability, buoyancy and overall resilience of a generation affected and even disrupted by various manifestations of crises, from substance abuse and mental-health epidemics, to the infodemic, Brexit, and eventually the COVID-19 pandemic.

Blythe selected her subjects carefully, paying attention not only to the age criterion (all were supposed to be in their early teens at the beginning of the project – the youngest was 12, and the oldest 15; see Blythe 2022, “Characters”), but also the criteria of gender, class, race, and

---

nationality, thereby “representing the geographical breadth of the country” (“Introduction”). Although the play lists 94 characters, including the 12 chief protagonists’ familial, scholarly, and/or intimate connections and associations, its focus remains on: Ierum, a 12-year-old North-African British girl; Luan, a 15-year-old British boy of Kosovan descent (two characters from South London); Anabella, a 13-year-old girl of dual heritage; Callum, a 13-year-old white boy (two characters from Belfast); Emily, a 14-year-old white girl; Lucas, a 14-year-old white boy (two characters from Cambridgeshire); Zak, a 15-year-old boy of dual heritage, with an Indian mother; Robyn, a white 15-year-old girl (two characters from Glasgow); Mia, a white 14-year-old girl; Taylor, a white 14-year-old boy with a disability (two characters from North Wales); and Ali and Ayesha, a Birmingham-based Pakistani British brother and sister, aged 15 and 12, respectively. The characters come from various kinds of households, including single-parent and broken homes, and experience myriad challenges. The trials readers witness include age-related worries about school results and GCSE exams; identity issues and the need to fit in; first romantic relationships; rebellion against authority figures; and heart-rending distress and ordeals to which no young adult should be exposed, such as child neglect, substance abuse, unwanted teen pregnancy, stress-induced mental breakdowns, and even physical abuse at the hands of a romantic partner. Although many fragments in Act Four might induce profound sympathy in the reader, among the most distressing series of fragments in this context are those relating to the horrendous experiences of Mia, shown in the following excerpt:

I’ve just had a really, really shit time yeah. (Pause.) Got into like really bad, like really really badly abusive relationship for thirteen and a half months. (Beat.) Do you remember when you came to see me last when we’re in college? It’s the same lad. He was on bail. So he’s admitted, they [sic] he’s admitted to one allegation which was throwing me round. They’ve got ten charges, then they’ve also now got charges for coercin’ an’ controlling behaviour. He’d ripped all my hair out, left big dents on my knees where he’d like jump on top of me and stuff, kicked me round the plot, smacked my head against the side, this is just in like one day yeah. (Pause.) I overdosed yeah. … (Blythe 2022, 2.4.24.)

The playtext is organized into three parts, and its dramatic dialogue is spread over six acts and 208 episodic scenes. The first two acts are presented in Part One, each of which comprises 28 scenes; the next two acts make up Part Two, and are of different lengths – Act Three comprises 41 scenes; and Act Four 35. Act Five (Part Three) is the longest, comprising 59 scenes, while the last act, Act Six (also in Part Three) is the shortest, with only 17. Most scenes are reasonably short monologues and/or duologues by various of the 12 teens, and appear as juxtaposed fragments, making the reader privy to a specific moment in the life of a character. All scenes are numbered (by Part, Act and Scene) and almost all have a title, which attaches a key descriptive phrase for the experience that dominates the scene and/or reverberates in the episode. The opening fragments in Act One of Part One serve as introductions to the dramatis personae, whom the reader follows in their progression and maturation from early teens to young adulthood over the course of the play. A certain number of episodes are devised as ensemble scenes, which place the 12 characters next to each other, offering a dissonance in the individual voices of the generational experience. Such is the last scene in Act Four,
entitled “The Future Ensemble”, in which the 12 characters discuss their individual “hopes and aspirations” for the future (Blythe 2023, 2.4.35.). The episode ends with a ripping sound, signalling an approaching catastrophe, which will put their dreams and plans on hold:

ANNABELLA. I don’t like to think about the future, like ever. I literally haven’t even thought about what I’m gonna eat for dinner. I just think like, like I’m happy now, you know I’m fifteen like I’m so young. I don’t want to think about the future, I want to be hap-happy like now. There’s going to be so many surprises in life, there’s jus’ no point in thinking about it. I wanna get this year over at school and then (Beat.) we’ll see what happens then.

ANNABELLA pulls away the gauze as a vicious sound rips through the auditorium. The youngsters are revealed all stood in a line wearing face masks, staring blankly at the audience. (Blythe 2022, 2.4.35.)

The dramatic tension rises throughout the episode, and the irony is tangible as the scene’s closing didascalie announces the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the “many surprises” Anabelle mentions, without fully grasping her own prophetic words.

The play’s longest act, Act Five, is situated in Part Three, and depicts a year in the life of the youngsters, one suspended by the pandemic. It is a vivid reminder of the minutest details of the annus horribilis of 2020. The stage direction is decisive about the setting: all characters (and their parents, friends and partners) now appear as if at an extended Zoom conference. They talk about safety measures, health protocols, numbers and percentages of people falling ill and dying, social distancing, the cancelling of their plans and exams, and the difficulty of maintaining relationships while living the “hap-hap[iest]” days of their lives remotely, and in seclusion. Their openness about their individual struggles to maintain a meaningful life is heartfelt yet agonising, and reveals both the fragility and unexpected resilience of the characters at such a precarious (historic) moment, which made them mature overnight.

Instead of celebrating momentous birthdays and having graduation parties, starting college and university studies, partaking in the Paralympics (and maybe winning a medal), getting their first “serious” job (one that could help to procure a home), or simply taking a year-long tour of Europe, their rite of passage comes in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alecky Blythe, however, ensures that the audience feels the hope of the generation that was disrupted “when suddenly the world stopped” (“Introduction”). Act Six reveals that all 12 characters have survived the health scare, and come out of it “stronger than [they] thought” (3.6.12.), although they feel they have “aged, more than [they] did, […] in the previous eighteen …” (3.6.13.). Our Generation is therefore among the rare Anglophone dramatic texts that delves into the representation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and is a lasting testimony to the poignant resilience of humankind in the face of yet another calamity.

### 7 Conclusion

This paper is a part of longitudinal study on Anglophone theatre and its responses to the contemporary era of crises, in particular the health crisis of 2019–2022. Its preliminary results should be read with caution, as the research is not yet complete, and the author intends to continue to observe developments in the American and British dramatic literature and
performing arts scenes in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to establish its longer-term effects on Anglophone drama and theatre. Still, the preliminary findings do demonstrate that, although not necessarily detectable in the first year of the pandemic (which coincided with the latter half of the 2019–2020 and first half of the 2020–2021 seasons), Anglophone theatres have in the meanwhile taken the crisis as a “moment of reckoning”. In the course of the 2021–2022 season, theatre institutions have intervened significantly in structural and programming decisions, so as to battle exclusivity and unbalanced representation (an internal crisis), and to achieve both greater viability and social impact. This process of restructuring, which is intended to more comprehensively mirror the diversity and inclusivity of society, will unavoidably last years into the future, making this research necessarily a work-in-progress. To date, theatres and professionals have not neglected the potential of digital theatre in this process, but nor have they exploited hybrid drama or technology as much as they did in the first year of the pandemic. The 2022 revivals, the modern staging of classics, the debuts of new plays, and the performances that were transferred from off-Broadway to Broadway, or from non-West End to West End theatres, or from US to UK theatres and vice versa, did show greater inclusivity of authors from traditionally marginalised social groups (women, BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+). This tendency has also been reflected in the diversity displayed in the US and UK “best of” lists. A final observation that can be made in the conclusion to this paper is that the recent activity in the field is similar to that of the first two years of the pandemic, in that most playtexts and performances given in the first post-pandemic season steered clear of new plays, and the performances that were transferred from off-Broadway to Broadway, or from non-West End to West End theatres, or from US to UK theatres and vice versa, did show greater inclusivity of authors from traditionally marginalised social groups (women, BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+). This tendency has also been reflected in the diversity displayed in the US and UK “best of” lists. A final observation that can be made in the conclusion to this paper is that the recent activity in the field is similar to that of the first two years of the pandemic, in that most playtexts and performances given in the first post-pandemic season steered clear of the historic event of COVID-19, both in its literal/symbolic sense, and its application. The one play that has woven the pandemic into its dramatic story and plot in a substantial way is Alecky Blythe’s Our Generation, whose playtext was assessed in this paper.

References


Colleary, Eric. 2021. “Theatre 2020 Project: Documenting a year of changes.” *Harry Ransom Centre, U of Texas at Austin, You Tube Channel*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKEg2Wewmmk&list=PL8cM0nJmOlYf0WHgzy0RQb48KlHo2O_cl&index=1&t=381s.


