

## Masters (and Mistresses) of Menace

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Graham Saunders\*

## Masters (and Mistresses) of Menace

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**Abstract:** In Harold Pinter’s last completed project before his death, a screen adaptation of Anthony Shaffer’s play *Sleuth* (1970), a large publicity poster dominates the study of crime novelist Andrew Wyke, describing him as ‘the master of menace.’ This is also a self-referential joke directed at Pinter’s association with ‘comedies of menace,’ such as *A Slight Ache* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1958), that succeeded in creating feelings of unease and discomfort in ways that had not been seen in the theatre before.

As a repertory actor before he became a dramatist, Pinter was likely to have encountered the fears and insecurities that theatre can create, and these perhaps return in the sinister environments that we find in his early plays. In turn, the queasiness and growing unease we encounter in Pinter’s drama has been appropriated by other ‘childe Harolds’ including Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Martin Crimp, and Jez Butterworth, whose work follows variations of the Pinteresque. This article looks at some of the ways these dramatists have developed on from Pinter’s template of creating a sense of unease, yet at the same time these dramatists show an awareness of how the nature of fear has radically altered since the turn of the millennium. Signs of this change can also be found in Pinter’s work from the 1980s: whereas previously fear had been vague in its aetiology, now it came out of the shadows to be named: Pinter’s ‘comedies of menace’ gave way to plays about torture by repressive political regimes in *Party Time* (1991) and memories of the Holocaust in *Ashes to Ashes* (1997).

Since then the depiction of states of fear have forked off on two separate paths: latter day ‘childe Harolds’ such as Philip Ridley continue to promote what he has called ‘theatre as a ghost train,’ a place of disorientation designed to induce fear for its own sake, while a larger contingent that include Simon Stephens, Duncan Macmillan, Mike Bartlett, Martin Crimp, and Mark Ravenhill also make fears manifest: these include terrorism and the ensuing War on Terror, the Anthropocene and climate change and the precarity and repression of neo-liberal economies and the alienation of self-hood through technology.

**Keywords:** Comedies of Menace, Harold Pinter, War on Terror, ‘neurotic citizen’, apocalyptic, workplace, underclass, climate change

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## Welcome to the Decade of Fear

Harold Pinter's last fully completed writing project before his death in 2008 was to be a screen adaptation of Anthony Shaffer's 1970 play *Sleuth*. In the completed film, a large publicity poster dominates the study of the crime novelist Andrew Wyke, describing him as 'the master of menace.' The poster is clearly a self-referential joke, based on an association that Pinter's early plays, such as *The Room* (1957), *A Slight Ache* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1958), had as 'comedies of menace.' Basil Chiasson believes that the phrase, first coined by the theatre critic Irving Wardle in 1958, continues to resound in Pinter scholarship, where despite its association with earlier work, it remains a constant, appearing, albeit surreptitiously, in later, more politically orientated drama (*The Late Harold Pinter* 30).

While Pinter's 'master of menace' reference in *Sleuth* might be meant in the spirit of self-parody, it is also a well-deserved one, for his early plays introduced an entirely new dramatic vocabulary by which states of fear and anxiety were created on stage. Their main features are succinctly summarized by Basil Chiasson:

the staging of situations of intrusion, intermingling aggression or even violence with verbal and physical comedy, speech that is riddled with non-sequiturs; characters who incessantly pose questions [...] characters who refuse to answer other character's questions [...] and characters that produce haphazard or continually faltering 'narratives.' ("(Re)Thinking" 34–35)

To this can be added the ways characters dominate space, and of course, the famous use of the pause. During his 1989 screen adaptation of Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* (1925), Pinter has commented, "the nightmare of [Kafka's] world is precisely in its ordinariness, and that is what I think is so frightening" (Merritt 151). The same mood is also established in many of Pinter's plays, where seemingly dependable worlds, such as Meg and Petey Bowles's boarding house in *The Birthday Party*, subtly alter over the course of the play to something entirely more sinister with the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. Rarely exhibiting overt displays of violence, menace in Pinter manifests itself through the ordinary: persuading someone to take a seat, trapping a wasp inside a marmalade jar or asking someone to remove a glass of water.

Writing in 1983 for the edited collection *Pinter at 60*, Martin Esslin summed up Pinter's achievements to date, arguing that with his "recurring figures of terrorists, torturers and executioners" Pinter has become the natural spokesman for the modern age and that "behind the menace there stands the consciousness of an anxiety about the post-Holocaust, post nuclear world itself" (29). I want to argue that from the 1990s onwards this enshrinement of Pinter as the embodi-

ment of fear becomes a far less convincing argument and that after 2000 a new group of dramatists emerge, who set out to explicitly *name* new forms of fear that supersede the Cold War preoccupations of nuclear Armageddon. These new fears and anxieties, produced by different systems of politics, in turn created new cultures and modes of behaviour by which citizens were expected to conduct their daily lives.

In 1993, Stephen Daldry, the newly appointed Artistic Director of the Royal Court, announced a season of American plays publicized as ‘Welcome to the Decade of Fear.’ One of these, David Mamet’s *Oleanna*, was directed by Harold Pinter and gives some credence as an indicator of a continuity in support of Esslin’s assessment. Further evidence came from shared affinities between the so-called in-*yer-face* generation of dramatists such as Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Patrick Marber, and Sarah Kane (Saunders 38, 98; Sierz 21, 38; Shaw 221; Wyllie 63–78), who have acknowledged the influence of Pinter’s work. Straightforward borrowings can be found in the figures of menace who invade and occupy rooms in Philip Ridley’s *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991), Anthony Neilson’s *Penetrator* (1994), and Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995). The work of these latter day ‘childe Harolds’ might also function as indicators that states of fear in post-millennial drama can still be expressed in recognizably Pinteresque ways.

The main representative for this faction is Philip Ridley, who Andrew Wyllie identifies as writing in a style strongly influenced by Pinter’s work at least up until 2008 (125). Significantly, his first major play, *The Pitchfork Disney*, was originally based on two monologues – one about a character who is afraid of everything and the other on someone who feared nothing. Out of this came Ridley’s speculation on what might happen if the two characters should happen to meet (Rebellato 425). This emphasis on fear extends to the play’s preface. Here, Ridley includes three quotes from other writers, all concerning the emotion of fear: one, by Chazal – “Extreme terror gives us back the gestures of our childhood” (8) – is a central concern in many of Ridley’s own plays and novels. Yet despite comparisons with the Pinteresque, Ridley’s work is more concerned with fear in its rawest state, an interest he expresses in the introduction to *Plays 1*: “Long live the Ghost Train. Make ‘em scream! Make ‘em dream!” (ix). These lines could in fact be taken as a manifesto of intent for much of Ridley’s work across film, theatre, painting, and the novel, to which he adds: “Fuck messages. Fuck morals. Fuck meanings” (ix). Often, Ridley draws from the primal fears of childhood, which he attempts to distil through performance without the need to associate either the cause or nature of these fears to any political or social cause.

As mentioned above, Esslin’s naming of Pinter as the quintessential articulator of fear had by 2000 started to look increasingly questionable. This became clear when several post-millennial British dramatists also made the subject cen-

tral to their work; yet they had done so without the need to appropriate the Pinteresque. In contrast, these dramatists deliberately set out to explain and give name to the fears and anxieties that dominated their work. Perhaps the reason for this shift was simply that by the new millennium the nature of fear itself had changed. Pinter's drama was largely shaped by World War II and its Cold War aftermath that lasted until the beginning of the 1990s, yet this also underwent significant change during the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely rejecting many of its former ambiguities. In plays such as *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), and *Party Time* (1991) the causes were no longer ill-defined or mysterious. These short plays offered dramatic snapshots of torture – or the threat of torture – by regimes to control and subjugate its citizens. Here, Pinter examines the nature of fear in a context more reminiscent of what Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) calls “Total Terror,” the aim of which is the complete subjugation of the individual's will. Arendt believes that this is not carried out for any political or genocidal cause, but as an exercise designed “to destroy individual freedom and responsibility” (Corey 101), by “reduc[ing] men and women to the barest strips of nature” (Corey 105).

However, Pinter's 1993 play *Moonlight* saw the return to more familiar territory of ‘memory plays,’ such as *Old Times* (1971) and *No Man's Land* (1975). *Celebration*, his final major work for the theatre in 2000, while held up as a political play by some (Batty 177; Chiasson, *The Late Harold Pinter* 100–108; Wyllie and Rees 66–67), also seemed a retrospective reworking of themes and ideas going back as far as the 1950s ‘comedies of menace,’ with an emphasis on the comic.

The same year also saw Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000), a play whose dystopian vision in the opinion of fellow playwright Mark Ravenhill pointed towards the future events of 9/11 (Sierz, “Beyond Timidity?”). Arguably, it subsequently becomes a blueprint and a springboard for the work of other dramatists in attempting to articulate how the world had changed after the terrorist attacks in America. After this point, – as Jenny Spencer comments in her 2012-edited volume *Political and Protest Theatre After 9/11* – “the stage brutality associated with British playwriting in the 1990s [...] pales in comparison to the brutality associated with the war on terror that dominated the news after 9/11” (63). While Spencer reminds us of Zygmunt Bauman's observation that western societies' living standards during this period were the highest seen in history, anticipation of fear and anxiety had never been higher (Spencer 75). Aleks Sierz, in his survey of British drama from 2000–2010, also summarizes the millennial decade as one dominated by fear (71), something which David Hare's 2008 play *The Vertical Hour* explicitly addresses. Here Nadia, a one-time war reporter now turned academic with the nickname “the Professor of terror” (Hare 22), comments, “We're infantilised by fear to a point where all we want is to live as long and comfortably as possible,”

whereas to others (and here presumably she is referring to the terrorists who provoke such infantilised states), “this western ethic of survival [...] as though the world were everything ... seems to other people, other cultures, well [...] ignoble” (Hare 23). This idea is returned to later in the play, when the retired GP Oliver compares past responses to terrorism:

People have forgotten. They’ve forgotten already. All they think about is terrorism. The truth is there was far more terrorism in the 1980s when nobody thought about it than there is today when nobody thinks about anything else. (Hare 47)

Set against this context, Pinter’s *Celebration* feels like a coda – a revisitation and drawing together of themes and moods from earlier work. The following year was also superseded by the events of 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror. Following this came the financial crash of 2008 together with growing portents of ecological break down through climate change. By the time of Pinter’s death in December 2008 it was clear that a new group of dramatists had replaced him in articulating such threats.

## The New Masters of Menace

However, the situation is more complicated than simply arguing for the existence of two different groups of playwrights – one continuing to explore existential fears based on the Pinteresque with the other breaking away to expose and name new threats. A good example of a dramatist who occupies the middle ground between these two positions is Martin Crimp. Charles Spencer’s by-line in a review of the 1987 play *Definitely the Bahamas* called him “The New Pinter” (Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* 21), while 2000’s *The Country* led several critics to make direct comparisons (58, 114). However, Crimp’s identification of states of fear and anxiety are both more specific than Pinter’s and at the same time more random in the ways they manifest. A good illustration of this can be seen in the short essays included in *Plays 2* entitled “Four Unwelcome Thoughts.” These all focus on the anxieties of an unnamed writer: one, entitled “When the Actor Pulls Out,” concerns the tortured speculation the writer undergoes when an actor suddenly withdraws from their play, causing them to pull down and reconstruct the entire edifice of the text in order to find some flaw that they imagine the actor has identified; another, “The Directors Are Squeezed,” concerns a painting onto which the writer projects their own fears and self-loathing, while “When the Writer Kills Himself” charts the growing anxiety and resentment experienced by a group of writers who at first mourn the death of a brilliant colleague. However, this is followed by anxieties about “the dead one [...] filling theatres and making the uni-

versities hum” (“Four Unwelcome Thoughts” xiii). However, anxiety gives way to relief when the writers realize “now that there’s no longer the threat of genius [...] *the field is clear*” (xiii–xiv). In these short prose pieces, it is the material processes of theatre itself that creates these various states of dis-ease and fear.

Elsewhere, Crimp’s treatment of fear in his post-millennial work differs, both in its reworkings of Pinteresque motifs and techniques and the invention of new forms, as he explores international terrorism in *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), states of war in *Cruel and Tender* (2004), and a significant sub-genre that Crimp very much makes his own – what Aleks Sierz calls “the anxieties of British suburban life” (*The Theatre of Martin Crimp* 69). These feature prominently in *The City* (2008) and *The Republic of Happiness* (2012), in which we encounter what Sierz names “Crimpland”: located within modern western cities, many of Crimp’s characters, despite “material security, bodily comfort and safety [...] suffer mental stress, emotional discomfort and fear” (127).

While states of anxiety are central themes within Crimp’s work, he is less interested than say Anthony Nielson – whose 2008 play *Relocated* uses what Michael Billington calls “the full repertory of the Victorian sensation-novel and the modern horror movie” (2008) – who seems to desire physically scaring his audiences. In fact, in plays such as *Face to the Wall* (2002), *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), and *Fewer Emergencies*, Crimp often does the opposite by distancing horrific events, by having them narrated or read out as if they were scripted scenarios. Here, it is less the emotion of fear itself that Crimp wishes to provoke but more a sense of all pervading unease.

A good example of this technique can be found in *The City* (2008). Here, a mood of apprehension is established from the opening exchange “how was your day” between husband and wife Clair and Chris. Almost immediately we learn of Clair’s encounter with a well-known writer whose child has gone missing, while Chris hears rumours that his job is under threat, something he anticipated earlier when he is temporarily locked out of his place of work (8–15). Later, the narrative moves beyond London to another city, when Chris and Clair’s neighbour Jenny recounts her husband’s experiences as an army medic, “in a secret war,” inside an unnamed city that is being transformed “into fine grey dust” (22). Despite this, her husband still fears the “angry fuckers clinging onto life” (24), who become the most dangerous adversaries. This target city is a useful example of what Stephen Graham calls “dehumanized terror cities” (256), imaginative cityscapes that exist outside the seemingly familiar locale of Crimp’s London. The city as a locus for fears and anxieties has been a prominent strand in Crimp’s work, from *The Treatment* (1993) onwards. Ariane de Waal, drawing upon the work of Giorgio Agamben for her book *Theatre on Terror*, notes that, following the terror attacks between 2004–2017 in Madrid, London, Paris and Brussels, western cities have be-

come new battlegrounds in the War on Terror (48). This has been reflected in plays such as Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (2008) and Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008) that both demonstrate what Mitchell Gray and Elvin Wyly in their "Terror City Hypothesis" classify as vulnerable cities – vulnerable both to attack as well as sites with "a propensity to breed and harbour terrorists" (331).

In Crimp's *The City* this weaving together of the disquiet that haunts civilian metropolitan life due to the War on Terror is different from the sense of foreboding we experience in *The Country*. This is more reminiscent of the adulterous triangles we encounter through work such as *The Collection* (1961), *Old Times* (1971), and *Betrayal* (1978). Moreover, in another play, *Fewer Emergencies*, Crimp makes use of a familiar device in Pinter: namely, the room as a refuge against sinister forces. However, Crimp gives this far greater political resonance. Written one day after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, *Fewer Emergencies* is set on a sailing vessel that seems to be insulated from the outside world, replete with an extraordinary array of resources including "fresh figs, generators and barrels of oil" and designed for the sole use for its one occupant Bobby, to use "in life for pleasure and emergencies" (28). The two anonymous narrators recount how Bobby unwittingly opens a door, letting in an unnamed group of people. This leads to an undisclosed crisis: we learn, "What [Bobby's] losing in blood he's gaining in confidence" (33). The room in *Fewer Emergencies*, with its "shelf full of oak trees" and "wardrobe full of cobalt" (29) now exceeds the absurdist language games that we encounter in Pinter's work and assumes a bolder metaphorical resonance, in that its store of infinite plenitude reserved exclusively for a single occupant becomes analogous with the inequalities between the affluent West and those excluded from it – and who might subsequently wish to overthrow those values.

## Neurotic Citizens

The influence of *Fewer Emergencies* can also be felt in Mark Ravenhill's 2008 cycle of sixteen short plays *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (*SGTR*), which depict the fears and anxieties of privileged enclaves – of what Ravenhill in the play calls the "good people [who] make smoothies for the family [...] wash [...] the SUV [...] eat good food. Ethical food" (8). In her discussion of the cycle, Jenny Hughes points out that individual plays such as *Intolerance* and *Paradise Lost* concern themselves with characters' attempts to repress fears of being the victims of terrorism. Yet overall *SGTR* is more illustrative of what Engin F. Isin calls the "Neurotic Citizen." Isin argues that a new situation has arisen. Whereas Anglophone governments of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to ameliorate citizens' fears arising out of

unemployment and poverty, since the millennium these priorities have become focused on a host of supposedly imminent threats: these include terrorism, mass immigration as potential security threat, climate change, contamination of the food chain and other bio-threats such as the Ebola and SARS viruses. This bombardment with things to fear and with it attempts by governments to minimize any supposed risk has subsequently given rise, according to Isin, to the “Neurotic Citizen” and with it to a new style of politics (which he terms “Neuro-Politics”), arising out of Neo-Liberalism (“Neuro-Liberalism”):

The culture of fear thesis has in a sense become the explanatory framework for the rise of risk society. The established interests in society benefit from the production of certain risks and fuel a culture of fear, which in turn produces a society governed by risk disproportionate to actual dangers that these risks might constitute. The risk society undergirded by a culture of fear becomes vulnerable to the emergence of panics, gate communities’ security industries, and an overall trend toward isolation and insularity. (219)

Isin goes on to say that governing through neurosis produces a citizen who becomes unable to calculate risk rationally: “It wants absolute safety. It wants the perfect body. It wants tranquillity. [...] It wants the impossible” (232). We see such a citizen in *Intolerance*, one of the plays within Ravenhill’s *SGTR*. Here, in a bid to stave off painful spasms in her gut, Helen drinks fruit smoothies, which together with shopping has created an illusion of serenity (Ravenhill 24). This is symptomatic of Isin’s Neurotic Citizens and their own highly sensitized sense of entitlement, together with an assessment that they will remain untouched from any adverse threat (Isin 233). However, Helen’s spasms return and with them indications that an unnamed war has begun (Ravenhill 27).

Throughout *SGTR* this gnawing sense of anxiety haunts many of the bewildered characters living within their gated communities. Ravenhill’s play cycle is also a strong exemplar of Ariane de Waal’s discussion of how the homeland in the War on Terror produces citizens who obsess over their own sense of security by withdrawing into a state of physical and mental fortification. Here, the nation state under siege becomes replicated in the citizens’ domestic homes (48–49).

One play in the cycle, *Fear and Misery*, is highly indicative of such a constituency. Here, a middle-class couple, Olivia and Harry, exist in a state of heightened vigilance for potential threats in their neighbourhood. While they are temporarily pacified to learn that “The gypsies are finally moving on” (Ravenhill 45) and “the crack house was raided last night,” both are haunted by morbid fears of “the addicts. The madwomen, The bombers” (44). Steven H. Gale, discussing the function of the room in Pinter’s work, observes that from *A Slight Ache* onwards “menace is no longer outside the room [...] but is part of the characters within the room and is carried with them” (81). What Crimp and Ravenhill do is a variation on this con-

vention: rather than the room being invaded by a mysterious assailant, the ethical demarcation between terrorists and soldiers as agents of threat are either blurred or made indistinguishable. This is also seen in other plays, such as Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator* (that most closely follows Pinter's dramatic pattern of the 'invaded room') and Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (2006), in the figures of Tadge and Danny: psychopathic casualties of the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars, who return from their respective theatres of conflict and bring fear to their former home communities. Ariane de Waal helpfully observes that one of the features in the early years of the War on Terror was a geographical fluidity between the war being played out 'elsewhere' being articulated in British drama through the figure of the returning soldier (49). She sees this played out more through dramatic flashbacks between home and the theatre of war, such as Danny in *Motortown* (141), whose experience of the warzone comes through traumatic repetition and the act of prolonged torture and murder of a teenage girl, Jade.

Alongside the figure of the traumatized soldier, one of the other principal figures of 9/11 who have supplanted Pinter's agents of menace has been that of the terrorist. Joanna Bourke in her book *Fear: A Cultural History* argues that since 9/11 this figure has "taken on god-like power, equivalent to the plague of earlier times or the Satan of religion" (x). The main reason why the Islamist terrorist since 9/11 has become such a totemic emblem of fear has been western culture's inability to understand their motives. This has been called "New Terrorism," whereby ideology has replaced formerly clearly understood political or economic motives. New Terrorism shows a complete disregard and disconnection with the liberal values associated with western society. It is the rejection of these values that makes the New Terrorism both so perplexing and threatening. We see the citizens of *Women of Troy* reduced to these states in the opening play of *SGTR*, repeating their bewildered refrain "Why do you bomb us?" (Ravenhill 7) Despite attempting to understand the terrorist's position ("We know your culture's very different"), at the same time these voices cannot help but display their own virtue and superiority ("We celebrate – exactly – we celebrate difference") (Ravenhill 10). The result is a complete impasse. This is most evident in one scene when the gated citizens invent incongruous domestic scenes that feature adversaries embracing their values:

I want to imagine you going to the garden centre. I want to imagine you taking your son and your husband in the SUV and choosing a – I don't know – a bench. A garden bench. (10)

Yet whereas previous enemies of western democracy can still be imagined, "drinking coffee [...] eating their breakfast" (11), the representatives of New Terrorism cannot be assimilated in the same way. Jenny Spencer observes that as violent acts of terrorism come ever closer to impinging on the privileged enclaves of Ravenhill's cossetted citizens, their mindset also switches from attempts at find-

ing shared values to wanting to strike back against the ‘bad eggs’ in *Yesterday an Incident Occurred*, who knowingly withhold information relating to terrorist attacks (Spencer 71). This takes the form of a proposal to draw up a bill to introduce branding as a countermeasure, while in another play, *Women of Troy*, one of the western voices concludes: “I see nothing when I look at you / I see ... darkness” (Ravenhill 11). Not only does this illustrate the fear that drives cycles of violence between both terrorist and victim, but also the fear that presents itself to western governments after 9/11 in the difficulties they faced in presenting a clear identity for their adversaries. The terrorists’ invisibility, their lack of embodiment is something that Ariane de Waal also observes in ways that the terrorist has been depicted in British drama, taking theatrical forms she identifies with doubles, remnants and hauntings (166).

While Robin Soans’s verbatim play *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) might be a successful exception to this, embodying the terrorist onstage through the intermediary of an actor speaking their words, none of the chosen subjects (with the possible exception of the Palestinian Al Aqsa Martyrs Group), from Irish Protestant/Republican Terrorists or the Kurdish Worker’s Party, were representatives of New Terrorism. Instead, all were drawn from former enemies who could at least be comprehended and partially assimilated through a set of shared values. This refusal to compromise or assimilate is the main reason why these figures are so difficult to depict in theatrical terms; instead, the only option is to be represented as fearful bogeymen. Only rarely, as in Ravenhill’s earlier 2005 play *Product*, does the figure of the terrorist become comically reprocessed and repackaged as part of a treatment for a romantic love story in a Hollywood film.

## New Comedies of Menace

Several recent assessments of Pinter’s work have pointed out that when using the term ‘comedies of menace,’ attention is often afforded to menace at the expense of comedy (e.g. Chiasson, “(Re)Thinking” 32). Jez Butterworth, another dramatist associated with the in-yer-face generation of the mid 1990s, has done much to reverse this situation, writing his own idiosyncratic ‘comedies of menace.’ Here, the relationship between the sinister and the comic are far more in synchronicity with each other. Butterworth has been candid about Pinter’s influence, and David Ian Rabey observes that his work “contain[s], but [is] not dominated by, the tragicomic senses of menace, fear and defensive contraction that we find in Pinter’s drama” (15). Butterworth is also well attuned to moments in Pinter, such as the fight between James and Bill using a cheese knife and a fruit knife as impromptu

weaponry in *The Collection* (151–153) – here menace and the ridiculous become entwined. A good example of this in Butterworth’s plays includes the uncanny disappearances of Dale’s household possessions in *Parlour Song*, including the incongruous loss of a heavy stone garden birdbath (278).

This is not to say that fear is absent in Butterworth’s plays, unlike the vague existential sense of crisis that we find in Pinter, a sense of threat pulses through plays such as *The Night Heron* (2002) and *Jerusalem*. David Ian Rabey correctly identifies the source of fear residing in a very specific threat – namely how in each play the rural community expels or sacrifices individuals such as Wattmore and Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron (Rabey 72). Notwithstanding, close associations with Pinter’s work, it is significant that the apocalyptic opening of Butterworth’s *Parlour Song* (2006) felt somehow like an acknowledgement that a host of new kinds of threat were in the ascendant:

*In the air, apocalyptic visions appear: buildings, towers, skyscrapers crashing to the ground; office blocks, factories, entire community projects collapsing; histories imploding, destroyed, erased for ever, disappearing in dust, the music swells to utter darkness and silence.* (257)

In a similar vein, the following year saw Simon Stephens interspersing scenes from his play *Pornography* with the stage direction ‘*Images of Hell*’ (275), before going on to provide brief character sketches of the fifty victims who died in the London terrorist attacks of 7 July 2005. Both stage directions from *Parlour Song* and *Jerusalem* with the benefit of hindsight now read as prescient indications of the turn British theatre took after 2008 with the embrace of what could be described as catastrophic millenarianism. This has not only included plays about the effects of economic breakdown, but also fears around environmental disaster, particularly fears attributed to the threat of global warming.

Stephens returns to the apocalyptic sentiments behind hellish stage directions in *Pornography* in much greater clarity and detail two years later in *Punk Rock* (2009), as expressed in a long speech by the schoolboy Chadwick Meade:

Everything good human beings ever make is built on something monstrous. Nothing lasts. We certainly won’t [...] We’ve been around one hundred thousand years. We’ll have died out before the next two hundred. You know what we’ve got to look forward to? [...] Religions will become brutalised; crime rates will become hysterical; everybody will become addicted to internet sex; suicide will become fashionable; there’ll be famine; there’ll be floods; there’ll be fires in the major cities of the Western World. Our education systems will become battered. Our health services unsustainable; our police forces unmanageable; our governments corrupt. There’ll be open brutality in the streets; there’ll be nuclear war; massive depletion of resources on every level; insanely increasing third-world population. It’s happening already. It’s happening now. Thousands die every summer from floods in the Indian monsoon season. Africans from Senegal wash up on the beaches of the Mediterranean and get looked after by guilty liberal holidaymakers [...] Hundreds die of heat or fire every year in Paris. Or

California. Or Athens. The oceans will rise. The cities will flood. The power stations will flood [...] Species will vanish for ever. Including ours. (68–69)

Variations of these apocalyptic vignettes have also haunted Caryl Churchill's recent play *Escaped Alone* (2016), in which four elderly women intersperse small talk about mutual acquaintances and family with accounts of man-made disasters such as chemical leaks and arson erupting on a huge scale. Churchill is something of a veteran when it comes to writing about fear – after all, the ending she gives to one of her most well-known plays *Top Girls* (1982) is Angie's single line "Frightening," and *Escaped Alone* is also in some ways a continuation of the final scene of her 2000 play *Far Away* and its account of a conflict where mankind seems to be engaged in waging a war against nature itself.

As regards to the global economic downturn in 2008, the approach that some dramatists took was to try and provide a narrative that could lend sense to the chain of the events leading up to the collapse. While the most notable example of a play that examines the financial crash in this way was Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009), two plays by Mike Bartlett, *Contractions* (2008) and *Bull* (2013), examine the effects of financial austerity through the workplace. In his book *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, Corey Robin comments that in America the workplace has become a toxic environment in terms of "personal coercion and repressive fear" (288). In *Bull*, Bartlett illustrates how the repercussions of the crash, aided through older neo-liberal processes of deregulation and the weakening of trade union power, have impacted upon day to day interactions in the workplace. Bartlett shows that this produces a Darwinian struggle to control and subjugate its employees. *Bull* is a particularly brutal play, a dramatic realization of what Robin calls "an internal social order that can only be described, with little exaggeration, as feral" (21). In the play, Tony and Isobel conspire to undermine a fellow employee, Thomas, with the aim for him to lose his job in a forthcoming round of cuts at the firm at which they work. However, Bartlett shows that the tactics designed to break their co-worker are in turn motivated out of their own collective sense of fear at the prospect of losing their own positions in the company.

Other plays on the same theme, such as Leo Butler's *Faces in the Crowd* (2004) and Dennis Kelly's *Love and Money* (2006), share affinities in Victorian novels that also examine the consequences of catastrophic financial collapse in their own day. In Charles Dickens's *Little Dorritt* (1857) for example, following the collapse of Merdle's Bank, its repercussions on society are shown through the actions and behaviour of individuals who are suddenly faced with penury. Kelly's and Butler's plays were written and staged several years before the 2008 financial crash, but their shared theme – the anxieties of accruing unsustainable personal debt – are seen by both as a major cause of the later financial collapse. Isin also mentions

the burden of debt as another contributory factor in the creation of the Neurotic Citizen, where the encouragement to borrow as a way of demonstrating material success is followed by dire warnings that such borrowing exceeds income (226).

At the heart of many of the plays that examine the failures of major financial systems lurks the same fear that so obsessed the Victorian novel, i.e. how financial ruin causes the individual to sink down to a state which George Gissing gave a name to with the title of his 1889 novel *The Netherworld* and what we now call today the *underclass*. Theatre scholars such as Sian Adiseshiah, Nadine Holdsworth, and Katie Beswick have started to open up important debates in this area, and within the past ten years – through plays such as Gillian Slovo’s verbatim play *The Riots* (2011), Alecky Blythe’s verbatim musical *London Road* (2011) (followed by a later verbatim piece in 2014, *Little Revolution*), Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* and Simon Stephens’s *Port* (2002) – the underclass has come to dominate British drama as much as the terrorist has done. Even within Ravenhill’s *SGTR*, dominated as it is with fear of terrorist attack, Harry and Olivia in *Fear and Misery* are just as much haunted by the “Gyppos on crack” (47), which prompts their decision to move to a gated community. While the play is explicit in associating the underclass with a sense of fear and loathing, it is hard to avoid the feeling that many of the other plays are also more symptomatic of varying states of fear regarding an identified underclass than what they might purport to be: serious examinations of this socio-economic group.

## Conclusion

In her book *Fear: A Cultural History*, Joanna Bourke makes a differentiation between states of fear and anxiety, the former referring “to an immediate objective threat, while anxiety refers to anticipated subjective threat” (189). She goes on to say that these undefined states of free-floating anxiety can be transformed into identifiable states of fear through the process of *naming*. It has been this process of naming – The War on Terror, the collapse of global capitalism, climate change – that can be seen as one of the key features in British playwriting since 2008. By the same token, Bourke observes that governments have also named a way of scapegoating certain groups for ideological reasons or for political expediency. In these situations – such as the moral panic over AIDS in the 1980s – plays (such as Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* in 1985 and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* in 1991) attempted to address the causes that gave rise to societal fears. This same response also occurred post 9/11 and the War on Terror, with plays such as Ravenhill’s *Product*, *SGTR* and Dennis Kelly’s *Osama the Hero* (2005).

Anthony Kubiak, in his book *Stages of Terror*, argues that theatre itself serves as the natural arena for dramatizing states of fear, given that it originally existed as the site for the expression of terror and violence through which “cultural consciousness and identity come into being through fear” (5). One such manifestation that Kubiak identifies is theatre becoming the site that gives rise to the tragic. However, what unites all the plays discussed here is that they are all profoundly anti-tragic, at least from the Aristotelian notion of catharsis being experienced through fear and pity by the audience. Allied to this, Bourke observes that fear can have a productive outcome by drawing communities together in collective action (191). Corey Robin also comments along similar lines in observing that

[Fear] quickens our perceptions as no other emotion can, forcing us to see and to act in the world in new and more interesting ways with moral discrimination and a more acute consciousness of our surroundings and ourselves. (4)

Climate change plays, such as Steve Water’s *The Contingency Plan* (2009) and Chris Rapley and Duncan Macmillan’s *2071* (2014), are symptomatic of this. By presenting stark warnings they hope to initiate political change. Fear, as demonstrated in 9/11, also acts as a stimulus for change, which some, such as commentators including Francis Fukuyama, welcomed as “the galvanizing electricity now coursing through the body politic [and] with its shocking spectacle of death and consequent fear 9/11 offered a dead or dying culture the chance to live again” (Robin 157). For Fukuyama, 9/11 produced a state of fear that acted as shock treatment for western governments who had fallen into self-absorbed inertia and preoccupation with materialism for much of the preceding decade.

Yet, as we have seen, many of the scenarios in Ravenhill’s *SGTR* seem to refute this confident assertion by producing representatives of Isin’s Neurotic Citizens, preoccupied more with their own personal safety, rather than a newly awakened and confident politicised collective. Instead, as Ariane De Waal observes, Ravenhill’s cycle portrays the opposite, what she calls “an individuated, privatised form of subjectivation” (103). The same might also be said of the two unnamed characters (W)oman and (M)an in Duncan Macmillan’s *Lungs* (2011), who sublimate personal anxieties about committing to each other by having a child. In this way prevarication becomes a way of attributing these feelings in a more virtuous direction towards resources and the environment. Again, here they resemble examples of Isin’s Neurotic Citizens:

Nervously recycling, reducing, reusing [and while] on a mission to save the earth [...] unable to judge whether [their] neurotic energies were any match to what multinational corporations were doing or even whether [their] neurotic energies were being wiped away in an overseas jet trip for vacation. (229)

Similar Malthusian fears about over-population and dwindling natural resources also preoccupy Mike Bartlett's 2010 play *Earthquakes in London*. Here, the character of Freya meets her yet unborn daughter Emily sixteen years later in a dystopian future. Rising sea levels have transformed London into a site resembling a giant immigrant shanty town, subject to curfews, disease where "everyone has given up" (132). Emily appears as a living rebuke to her mother's initial decision to give birth to her and is also reminiscent of the anxiety dreams that 'M' in Macmillan's *Lungs* experiences, where the baby is envisaged as "A little thunder cloud. Or a squirming little creature with fangs and claws and flashing eyes" (57).

A final question that remains about these successors to Pinter is whether, like his early comedies of menace, their treatment of societal fears has replicated, albeit unwittingly, a climate of fear that governments have encouraged through ideologies such as the War on Terror. Yet these latter day 'childe Harolds' – who explicitly address catastrophic events, such as 9/11, which, like the event itself, in Corey Robin's words provide clarification "that evil exists, making moral, deliberate action possible once again" (2) – might productively have gone beyond the formlessness of the Pinteresque: by naming and exploring such fears, post-millennial British dramatists might have succeeded in exposing the ideological apparatus that makes these fears so potent.

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## Bionote

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