

# Utopian Gestures: David Greig's texts for theatre

Josef, the central character of David Greig's *Stalinland* (1992), is a sculptor in glass. The play is set during a popular revolution against communism, the system under which Josef has worked for most of his life. He recalls how he was once commissioned to design a vase.

I made a vase that was pure. I thought. A pure vase. A vase that could contain a thought, a feeling . . . a container of feeling . . . so I banished decoration and pattern, I banished anything in line and curve that would lend itself to stand in some civil servant's house and shout about its cost . . . there would be no taste in it . . . it wouldn't stand in a corner and give away the secrets of the household incomes and moralities . . . it would be a minimum vase. A silent vase. [1](#)

Josef's own purity is called into question when the revolutionaries storm the police station and break into the files; there they discover that Josef had been an informer for the secret police. The moment is metaphorically prefigured in a flashback early in the play set during the transition into communism; as Josef argues with his wife who wants to emigrate to the west, they stumble into the vase which smashes to the floor. 'Never mind,' says Josef's daughter, 'They were mass produced. We have a box full'. [2](#)

David Greig began writing in the early 1990s, initially for Suspect Culture, a company he co-founded with actor-director Graham Eatough, while at Bristol University. Starting with *A Savage Reminiscence* (1991), a monologue imagining Caliban's reflections on his life after *The Tempest*, Greig's work for the company have included his texts for *One Way Street* (1995), *Airport* (1996), *Timeless* (1997), *Mainstream* (1999), *Candide 2000*, and *Casanova* (2001). [3](#) *Stalinland* was only his second play, but was revived in 1993 at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, marking the opening of his independent career as a playwright. His work was nurtured by Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, which produced *Europe* (1994), *The Architect* (1996), and *The Speculator* (1999). He has written children's plays—*Petra* (1996) and *Danny 306 + Me (4 Ever)* (1999)—as well as one produced screenplay, two radio plays and various translations/adaptations.

Greig's early work shows the clear influence of British playwright, Howard Barker, in the abrupt shifts of register, the emphasis on imagination and possibility, and the contrapuntal style of clashing dialogue. Bertolt Brecht was another touchstone for his early work, and though the influence of these writers has receded from the surface of the texts, the profound searching intelligence of both continues to characterise Greig's writing. Based in Scotland where he was soon

acclaimed as a striking and original new voice, Greig has only recently begun to be recognised in England, with a tour by the new writing company Paines Plough of his *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* [hereafter *Cosmonaut* ] and Suspect Culture's London debut with *Mainstream*, both in 1999. *Victoria* (2000), was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, and nominated for Best New Play at the Evening Standard drama awards. His work has been performed throughout Europe and in America, and he is slowly achieving recognition as one of Britain's most powerful new voices in the theatre.

Although *Stalinland* is an apprentice-work in an already prolific career, we can see in the shattering of Josef's perfect vase shards of dilemmas and concerns that Greig has continued to explore theatrically in his subsequent work. Indeed, despite its variety of genres and styles, there is a striking coherence and consistency to Greig's work, and in the texture of the world glimpsed on stage. This world is mapped out by the continuous deployment of a range of particular motifs, notably his use of theatrical ambiguity, paradox and oxymoron. Irony and paradox were not unusual on British new writing stages in the 1990s; indeed, it might be described as the dominant mode in which new writing took place. But while some might diagnose in it a failure of commitment, or a deep pessimism about the possibility of change, I want to argue that in Greig's work this style is pressed into service of a rigorously explored utopianism which, perversely enough, engages seriously and deeply with contemporary social concerns.

One consistent feature of Greig's texts for theatre is a deep concern for our inability to connect with one another. On one level it manifests in simple motifs like a radio that plays only static, a television which cannot get a picture, a telephone with an inconveniently short cable, and headphones which cannot be connected, all in *Victoria* , Greig's trilogy of short plays spanning the twentieth century from the 1930s to the 1990s; one thinks also of the incommunicable Edinburgh couple whose television cuts out at the opening of *Cosmonaut* . [4](#) But more subtly, his work often displays a failure of communication within communication itself. In his 1996 radio play, *Copper Sulphate* , Leonard is the agent for a mining company; he has been sent to find and bribe an African rebel leader to ensure the company keeps its copper concession. Everywhere he projects his own self-disgust, a feeling which comes out sharply in the abbreviated telephone conversations he has with his wife back in Scotland. He has sex with the disappeared man's sister and telephones his wife.

I got a connection.  
But I could only send silence down the line.  
I only had a silence in me. [5](#)

In *Mainstream* , the same figure is deployed intensively in a story of a record company employee being interviewed by a personnel consultant, which leads to

them having sex. This sexual act involves one watching the other masturbate, an image of distance within intimacy. This is only part of a network of similar images: the relationship between drivers on the motorway; people sharing secrets; in the production, the simple gesture of the embarrassed morning after was given extra resonance by the repeated motif of a queue for the hotel breakfast bar, one character offering the other an empty plate.

In *Airport*, which follows a number of different personal stories in and around an airport departure lounge, Greig multiplies the failures of communication by emphasising the distances between people, both spatially and culturally. It begins with two characters speaking two different languages, Castilian and Basque, and yet despite their linguistic separateness, they both independently describe the same fear of planes falling from the sky. The use of different languages in this play emphasises this theme; even without knowing a language, we can often glimpse the meaning of it, as if coming through the static of a broken radio. Jill describes an encounter with a man in a hotel bar, which ended with them sitting together in an olive grove. As we listen to the man's words the content and linguistic form come together in his reflection that: 'Cuando estas sentado aqui te sientes . . . conectado'. [6](#)

The hazards risked in making connection with one another are emphasised through their association with acts of violence. In *Caledonia Dreaming*, Greig's ambiguous love-hate letter to Edinburgh, a violent young man celebrates his random acts of violence:

I love to see the expression on their face.  
The shock when the punch connects.  
I love it.  
The moment they understand.  
Communication. [7](#)

Something of the same sense is captured in *The Architect* where Martin's alienation from his deeply dysfunctional family becomes a plan to leave home, making connection only by leaving them with 'a great amount of pain'. [8](#) In *Casanova*, a cabinet maker has planned an elaborate revenge against the play's eponymous anti-hero for seducing his wife. At the end he ruminates on the mysterious sounds he can hear through his house.

There was a rattle coming from somewhere in the kitchen.  
Do you ever notice the rattle?  
I have noticed it. Sometimes.  
I wondered if it was the fridge.  
I had a look round.

Sometimes when two objects stand just a fraction too close to each other they catch the underlying vibratory hum of the fridge mechanism and they rattle.

Talking to his new partner, his uneasiness about these sympathetic vibrations is clearly an image of his general revulsion against all contact, and it culminates in a typically violent image:

I can't sleep at night for the noise of the owls in the barn.  
We'll get a man in to poison them.

*He sits next to her.*

*She barely moves.*

*He holds her.*

*She does not move.* [9](#)

Both *Timeless* and *Victoria* use the image of fire to suggest both enlightenment and destruction, the cleansing of corruption and wholesale destruction. That motif was also crucial to the climax of *Europe*, in which two fascists torch a railway station and stand admiring the beauty of the flames, which we know are roasting the bodies of the station master and a Bosnian refugee. And this beacon then becomes a signal, communicating out to the rest of Europe; the act of violence puts the town on the map. [10](#)

The failure and violence lurking within human contact is often emphasised by the settings of the plays: airports (*Airport*), hotels (*Danny 306*, *Mainstream*), designer bars (*Timeless*), shopping centres (*Candide 2000*), and railway stations (*Europe*). Such spaces bear with them the curious melancholy of places through which people only pass, something captured in the French phrase for which there is no precise English equivalent: *l'angoisse des gares*. The motorway network which forms part of the setting of *The Architect*, or the train networks of *Europe*, are themselves images of our relations with one another. The long stretches of road both connect and separate the towns in *The Architect*, and Fret, the station master in *Europe*, sees the train as an image of progress, drawing Europe together, while the theatrical experience of the noise, light and metal is altogether more threatening. We are subliminally reminded of the famous claim that Mussolini made the trains run on time by Fret's unconsciously fascistic imagery praising 'steel and tracks and trains like blood muscle and arteries holding the continent together'. [11](#)

Importantly, though, the metaphysical emptiness of these spaces seems to prompt vertiginous crises of identity. In *Airport*, Therese continually invents personalities and histories for herself, admitting at one point that she's never before told anyone her name. [12](#) In his puppet play for children, *Stella*, the shy daughter of a famous cabaret chanteuse sings 'She Can't Be Me': 'if a winter can turn into spring / And a river turn into the sea / [ . . . ] why can't I please . . . / turn

into me.' [13](#)

This failure to experience a true sense of self is turned outward into a desire to find oneself in other people's vision of who you are. Colin, who works for a travel company searching for perfect images, confides

I love market research.  
I always want to get asked if I see them in the street . . .  
I try and catch their eye.  
I yearn to be chosen. [14](#)

In environments which seems to drain the personality, even the sense of self, from its inhabitants, market research, offering a range of clear and delimitable questions to establish you who are, seems very attractive. The same motif appears in *Mainstream*, a two-person play, written to be performed by four actors (two men and two women) in every gender permutation. Despite the unsettling effect this device has on the story being told, the characters continually ask each other their favourite confectionary, songs, drinks, as if these simple coordinates can fix down the mercurial identities they present to each other and to the audience. The record company employee describes a device that attaches to the radio in his car: 'it observes what you listen to and it builds up a profile of you . . . then, when you're driving it automatically tunes to the station that's playing the type of stuff you like'. He or she discovers:

I used to think I was the sort of person who liked Radio 4  
That's what I would tune to.  
Until I had this gadget.  
It taught me who I really am. [15](#)

In *The Architect*, Dorothy, the daughter of the family, hitch-hikes and forms an uneasy relationship with Joe, a lorry driver who picks her up. They go into the container on the back of the lorry but the attempt at sexual connection falters because Dorothy seems to have no desires herself, except simply to be desired: the scene ends with Dorothy adopting a semi-pornographic pose and begging, 'You have to say. You have to tell me. How do you want me to be? How Joe?' [16](#)

The quest for a true sense of self draws the characters towards seeking some purer, more natural state. In *Timeless* four university friends at a reunion reminisce about an almost mythical trip they all took to the beach together. The language is peppered with primitivist images of purity as they discuss making a fire to complete the elemental set of water, earth and air. In the triptych *Victoria*, 1936's Victoria begins the play yearning to escape the crushing effect of the

landscape. 1996's Victoria returns and is filled with bucolic fantasies of natural living:

Imagine the sea, Billy.  
Imagine coming in off the sea in a boat made of wood.  
Coming up to the beach.  
To a house that you'd built.  
Imagine we were the only people left.  
Place without a name left even.  
Nothing was touched or spoiled.  
Nothing to eat that wasn't caught or grown by us. [17](#)

Martin, in *The Architect*, expresses the desire to run away to 'some wilderness. Somewhere with mountains' where he believes he will find some lost sense of purity by becoming an apprentice to an old man who will teach him how to make furniture. [18](#)

But these dreams of nature are bound by culture. The enthusiasm of *Timeless's* friends for this rural escape may owe something to their knowing so little about it:

**martin** . I don't think I've been to the country ever.

**stella** . Not willingly. I've been through the country, inevitably, but not actually in it.

**martin** . Except that time we went to look for magic mushrooms.

**stella** . That was beside a motorway. [19](#)

Victoria's enthusiasm for natural self-sufficiency is cast in equally dubious light in a sequence where she implausibly conjectures what potato crisps would be like in their natural state:

You could slice up a wild potato.  
And fry it in . . .  
Some fat from a wild animal.  
Like a fox.  
Fry it on a flat stone.  
Heated in a wood fire. [20](#)

Martin's ambition is punctured by an unimpressed Billy who asks him if he really believes in his furniture-making plan: 'Of course I fucking don't,' says Martin. 'It's the only thing I can think of'. [21](#)

The tendency for the original to be lost, or masked by idealised images of it, is a postmodern theme found in *The Architect*. Leo and Paulina's marriage is in a

state of serious disrepair, and Leo's constant hope is to regain a lost simplicity and purity. But the idealised phraseology inspires doubt: alone with his wife at the table he declares, 'we should eat together more. As a family [ . . . ] Everyone round the table. Do the washing up together . . . like we used to'. [22](#) The aspiration might be harmless, but seems less so given his failure to appreciate the discrepancy between his architectural designs and the misery of those forced to live in them, as well as the evident dysfunctionality of the family. Earlier he had tried to quieten an argument between his children with the words, 'it's a perfect afternoon. I don't want to argue on a perfect afternoon', the spurious image of perfection seeming to take priority over the reality of the argument. [23](#) Paulina is appalled the banal stereotype into which she has fallen. She hurls a plate to the floor during an argument, and complains 'Why did I do that? [ . . . ] Plate throwing. It's so . . . domestic'. [24](#) And she it is who most devastatingly identifies Leo's tendency to confuse the image of something with the thing itself. Paulina wants a divorce and has just asked him to leave the family home:

**leo** . [ . . . ] I think you forget sometimes, Paulina, that I know you. I know you better than anyone.

**paulina** . You know your wife. When you leave you'll notice a wife-shaped space. [25](#)

A telling image of this preference for representations over reality comes late in *Airport* . Three tourists discuss where they would go if they could go anywhere in the world. Alan chooses the holodeck from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* , a computer environment which can image any place in the universe. [26](#)

Scepticism about the possibility of communication, a lack of clear identity, and a sense that the real has been overtaken by images, are all phrases habitually used to characterise the work of a tradition in modern playwriting stretching back through Pinter to the European 'absurdist' writers: Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Adamov. To apply these to Greig would seem to locate him amongst these writers and undoubtedly some influence is detectable there. But this is not an innocent affiliation in the context of British theatre history. In particular, this tradition has often appeared to be in sharp contrast to a more engaged, evidently *political* theatre writing. In the 1950s, when British theatre experienced a kind of revolution, Samuel Beckett and John Osborne were initially considered part of the same programme of renewal and reformation of theatrical possibility. But in 1958, the most influential British critic of the twentieth century, Kenneth Tynan, marked a sharp parting of the ways between these traditions in his review of a revival of Ionesco's *Les Chaises* and *La Leçon* . He censured Ionesco's epistemological scepticism as an artificial exercise in self-imposed formal restraint and self-indulgent intellectual pessimism. Ionesco's mocking response reinforced the sense of battle lines being drawn and a great number of British theatre workers and critics joined in to condemn Ionesco, Beckett and others for

their typically arid continental scepticism. [27](#)

By the 1970s, as a much more consciously revolutionary new writing dominated national stages, figures like David Hare, Edward Bond and Howard Brenton scorned the kinds of scepticism associated Pinter, Beckett and others. 'There's a myth put about by certain writers that there's something called non-communication,' alleged Brenton: 'well that doesn't happen. People are capable of making themselves very clear'. [28](#) A distaste for these kinds of questioning is not, of course, specific to the theatre, being rather characteristic of British culture as a whole, with roots no doubt stretching back to the battle between British empiricists and European rationalists in the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, such debates were given particular historical shape and force in the 1950s and continue to affect such theatrical faultlines as the division between naturalists and experimentalists, new writing and performance art, and so on.

Vera Gottlieb offered a variation on the same theme in her 1988 article, 'Thatcher's Theatre: or, After *Equus*'. Gottlieb claimed that the revolutionary clarity and rationality of the 1970s generation has been overtaken by 'mysticism; the irrational; violence, whether physical or verbal; impotence, and an abdication and surrender to "dark forces", whether undefined, or anarchic'. As such she considered it to be 'in collusion with today's ideological climate'. [29](#) She identifies Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973) as an early inspiration for this deliberate obfuscation, particularly for its religious and spiritual reverberations in a tale of rural alienation and brutality. It is a claim worth assessing, since it seriously affects the value one might wish to place on a playwright who persists in questioning those things which, to a certain Anglo-Saxon mentality, are not worth questioning.

And indeed Greig's work displays a persistent thread of non-rationality, even of religious imagery. In *The Architect*, Leo Black once designed a housing estate which the residents now want to see demolished. While he vainly insists on the purity of the original designs, his family falls apart around him and he eventually is forced to capitulate, deliberately dying in the demolition of the hated buildings. The name of the estate is Eden Court, a name which seems to associate Leo's self-defence with an attempt to recover a lost state of grace. The image is picked up in his wife's insistence that their garden be paved over, visually suggesting a kind of expulsion from the garden. Their son Martin's alienation is described in terms of original sin: 'I need to get pure. I got off on the wrong foot somewhere. Somewhere around when I was born'. [30](#) There are also hints that Billy, his casual sexual partner, might be usefully seen as a heavenly creature, an angel. He twice tells Martin 'I can make you good', and feels able to run off buildings without being harmed. Later there is sly support from this thesis during a pub quiz, one answer in which is the film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, which we might remember involves an angel visiting the earth to save a man's soul. [31](#)

This search for an original purity before the fall is picked up in a series of reference to corruption and pollution. In *Copper Sulphate*, the theme is expressed through Leonard's search for Innocence, the name of the elusive rebel leader, once a childhood friend. A succession of flashbacks build up a picture of the two playing in a garden building a perfect city, before they argue and Innocence bests Leonard in a fight. Leonard expels Innocence from the garden and concocts a poison that he throws in the face of his erstwhile friend. This may have caused the scar which has become the rebel leader's defining iconographic feature, and carries with it associations with the taint of Adam, or the mark of Cain.

*Timeless* is organised in three parts. The first, in the present, shows the four friends at a reunion; the second flashes back to an event in the past they all share; the third is set in a perfect future. The event in the past, when they all decided to spend an evening on the beach, represents for all of them an idyllic moment of spontaneity and perhaps innocence. One talisman of this perfect past is a naked photograph taken of one of the young women which has ended up on the 'reader's wives' page of a pornographic magazine. Stella, the subject of the photograph, recalls

I was smiling.  
When that picture was taken.  
Because I was lost in a very happy moment.  
I hadn't planned for it, or expected it to happen, but it seemed perfect at the time.  
Perfect that somebody should take a picture.  
To preserve the moment. [32](#)

The perfection of the moment was that it was unexpected. No planning, no strategy adulterated the spontaneity of the event. In a sense, it did not partake in temporality, its purity consisting in its immediacy, its lack of calculation. For the photograph to be seen binds it back into history, to recollection and judgment, an almost pornographic voyeurism that renders the nakedness shameful. When the friends try abortively to recreate the spontaneity of the past, they find their 'maturity' inexorably imposes planning on the moment ('if we go now the traffic won't be so bad' 'all I'm saying is I could make a pasta salad' [33](#)) and the impulse is dissipated. When one of the more nervous characters in the past braces himself for the expedition with the words, 'I'm really looking forward to it. / Something to look back on', the play seems to be asking how possible it is to understand a moment outside of temporality, the present crushed between future and past. [34](#) For a moment to be real, a quality Veronica (a photographer) immediately sees in the photograph, it seems to need to be timeless.

Existing outside time suggests the desire for a divine perspective. In the course of the monologue, *A Savage Reminiscence*, Caliban writes three words: 'I',

'Want', 'God', which reinforces the sense of divine aspiration. He describes Miranda teaching him how to draw a map of the island, 'to see its shape the way Ariel sees it'. [35](#) Similar ariel views are offered to characters in *One Way Street*, *Airport*, *The Architect* and *Cosmonaut*. In *Caledonia Dreaming* a helicopter pilot flying over Edinburgh directly links this view to the eye of God, as he tells his celebrity passenger:

A well travelled man such as yourself  
You'll be familiar with the way that  
From the air  
Some cities lay themselves out for you as if . . .  
As if, sir, they'd been planned so you should see them from half a mile up.  
[ . . . ] They say the earth looks very beautiful from space  
Dazzling blue  
Small  
So  
Unless there's God sir,  
How come it's beautiful? [36](#)

A committed critic, of the Gottlieb persuasion, might feel that, taken alongside the affirmation of faith over knowledge at the conclusion to *Copper Sulphate* and the presence of ghosts in *Petra* and *Danny 306*, that Greig's work has fallen prey to ideological delusion. In place of a concrete engagement with the quotidian particularities of historical life, Greig has opted to offer spiritual perspectives, seeming to want to step out of history into a purer timeless realm, and lift out of material reality to adopt some divine perspective.

This would be a mistake, and explaining why may begin to offer a sense of why those categories and judgments, forged in the fifties and sharpened in the seventies, need to be taken apart if we are to understand a writer like Greig, working in the profoundly altered political circumstances of the 1990s.

The divine perspective is not wholeheartedly endorsed in Greig's work. In *The Architect*, height as a motif is consistently associated with a failure to engage on a human level. As they fall apart, the members of this family fail to note that the one thing they all share is the aspiration to altitude and a disdain for earthly human experience. Paulina meets Sheena, a resident of the troubled Eden Court flats, and speculates that it must be

nice to live in a tall building [ . . . ] Height's a strong point. You don't want to be in amongst it. Ground floors attract opportunist thieves. I don't imagine they bother with the tenth. On the tenth you can watch it all happening down below. Rise above it all. [37](#)

Martin echoes this sentiment. He takes Billy to the top of a tower block and remarks that 'I come up here to get away from . . . for silence. Because it's pure. No voices. No talking [ . . . ] No people, no sound, no signals, no feelings'. [38](#) Dorothy uses a model of the award-winning Eden Court to show a sceptical Sheena that from above the flats are designed to create a communal space. Sheena's reply is piercing: 'Were the judges in a helicopter when they gave you the award?' [39](#)

Greig's ambivalence towards such aerial viewpoints relates closely to the changing fortunes of the left in Britain. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 marked a turning point for post-war British politics. The consensus that had dominated both left and right since the Second World War—that full employment was desirable and a welfare state was a priority—was overturned. Thatcher's guru, Keith Joseph, argued in October 1979 that 'the only real lasting help we can give the poor is helping them to help themselves; to do the opposite, to create more dependence is to destroy them morally, while throwing an unfair burden upon society'. [40](#) Driven ideologically by monetarism and economic liberalism, successive conservative administrations set about minimising the role of the state, cutting welfare spending to allow tax cuts, allowing wages and unemployment to float free and find its 'natural' level in a free market. The Labour Party, meanwhile, was riven with internecine disputes and alarmingly confused statements of policy, which culminating in polling 27.6% of the popular vote in the 1983 election, their lowest share for seventy years. They were, as a result, in no position coherently to oppose the dismantling of Welfare provision. By the mid 1990s, the residual affection of the British people for the welfare state was battling with their new affection for low tax rates, the standard rate of which had fallen from 50% just after the war to 25% by the time Thatcher was deposed as leader of the party. And it was to fall further.

In *The Architect*, Greig is charting the historical decline of an idea. Leo's failure to persuade anyone to take seriously his interest in planning and design replicates the faded memory of a political time in which people believed in the rightness of central government planning. His first speech is a bold statement of the purpose of architecture, visionary and confident in an almost Victorian manner, the kind of statement an Ibsen character might make. That Leo is so swiftly undermined by his bored and easily-distracted son plays out in miniature the discrediting of such grand aspirations.

But the play is deeply ambivalent about the collapse of confidence in grand theory. The play clearly condemns Leo's abdication of responsibility toward those his social housing scheme was supposed to help. His debate with Sheena over the future of the Eden Court estate comes to an abrupt end when he is goaded into the unfortunate remark: 'I won't see good ideas blown up just because some people can't see beyond their own misery'. [41](#) And while we are sympathetic to Leo's attempt to keep his family together, the very traditional family model to

which he aspires has been rightly critiqued by feminists, and seems particularly inappropriate to the untraditional lives his children are living. His luckless attempt to maintain patriarchal authority in the family echoes his equally ill-starred attempt to defend paternalism in architectural practice.

And yet, while the play's distribution of misery across its characters shows us a deeply fragmented society, this is nonetheless a social vision, which seems theatrically to survive the delegitimation of such a viewpoint within the play itself. The yearning for contact between the characters, to which I shall return, survives the severing of all civil and familial bonds that we are witnessing. The need for such a vision remains important and it is a council of despair when Leo, in his attempt to claw back some control in his work, decides, 'No more big projects. [ . . . ] They run away from you. We'll stay small . . . keep everything under control'. [42](#)

In 1999, James Wolfensohn, the president of the World Bank, talking of the system of global finance admitted, 'at the level of people, the system isn't working'. [43](#) This curiously Leo-like remark—at what level *is* it working then?—reminds us of the urgency of the dilemma: how can we maintain a grand vision of society when such large-scale thinking has been socially rejected, and where the collapse of such thinking has prompted such a fragmentation of the very notion of society in the first place?

The anxiety expressed in the plays at human contact is perhaps part of this ideological shift. At one point, sitting at the dinner table, Leo airily opines, 'I never understand the point of table manners you know. Fork this side, fork that side. It's all class. There's no beauty in it. No truth'. [44](#) In *One Way Street*, we follow John Flannery as he walks around post-unification Berlin trying to write a guidebook. He explains why he stopped writing letters home to his family: 'I stopped writing because I couldn't stand writing all that rubbish just to please them. Nothing stuff. No truth in it'. [45](#) The similarity between the phrases corresponds to the similarity of the sentiments, a disdain for the niceties of human contact. The same contempt is shown in a more clearly critical light in *Victoria*, when the new wife of Lord Allan's Nazi-sympathising son explains her husband's absence from his own wedding celebration: 'I think he cherishes the solitude one finds in remoter places. Social occasions seem like a burden to him. And to me. To me as well. I find socialising so trivial sometimes, don't you, so, frustrating'. [46](#)

The withdrawal of governmental commitment to maintaining the institutions of civil society and the deification of the individual consumer has greatly attenuated the bonds holding people together in a society. This was itself part of an ideological principle: a move away from a conception of human nature as altruistic, to one of humans as competitive. It is in this context that Greig's ambivalence towards human contact should be seen. In *The Architect*, Paulina's fear of the environment is perhaps a symptom of this disdain for community

experience, as is her aspiration to altitude. The same is true of the viciously misanthropic Flannery in *One Way Street*, whose rejection of his family and of his pregnant girlfriend, Greta, is expressed in crude and physically revolted terms. The same sociopathy underlies his rather unlikely and hypochondriac belief that he has contracted syphilis from Greta. [47](#)

Yet if contact with other people seems to offer nothing but annihilation, isolation seems no better. In *Europe*, a group of sacked furnacemen nurse beers and imagine what they would do if they could have any wish they wanted. Their dreams of splendid isolation quickly take a downward turn:

**billy** . Seriously, I might build a house maybe . . .  
**berlin** . A cabin in the forest.  
**horse** . A bachelor pad.  
**berlin** . With your own hands . . .  
**billy** . Miles from anywhere.  
**horse** . Only the wolves for company.  
**berlin** . Hunt your own food . . .  
**billy** . Self-reliance.  
**horse** . You could live . . .  
**berlin** . Until you died . . .  
**billy** . In the middle of the forest.  
**horse** . No one'd ever know. [48](#)

But again, this does not demonstrate the presence of an overriding pessimism that sees hope neither in companionship nor solitude. What is marked again and again in Greig's work is the simultaneous fear of contact and the overwhelming need for it. Often the moments where connection fails is a form of connection in itself. After all, in *Cosmonaut*, the Edinburgh couple's television loses its signal just as the cosmonauts in the orbiting space capsule attempt to repair their communication. The interruption to communication becomes in itself a strange act of communication.

Similarly, the violence that seems ever-present in relations between people often coexists in Greig's work with kindness and tenderness. This is beautifully expressed in the relationship between Dorothy and the lorry driver, Joe, in *The Architect*. He confesses that her sleeping presence on the seat beside her as he drove inspired feelings of desire in him; but then he admits that he also felt sad and wanted to hold her. 'I wanted to protect you,' he explains. 'From men like me'. [49](#) Within Joe are two contradictory impulses, the selfish and the altruistic. As I shall show later, the plays return time and again to affirming the altruistic, in utopian, tenderly impossible ways.

This gives some shape to the uncertain identities experienced by so many characters in Greig's work; the ideological shifts of the last twenty years have rendered it difficult to decide where one person stops and another ends, the rights and duties we owe to one another, all of which gives rise to confusion in our understanding, even experience, of ourselves.

But in Greig's case there is another, even more immediate context in which his scepticism about identity should be seen. It is the ambivalent status of Scotland itself, within or outside the 'United Kingdom', which animates some of Greig's concern for identity. His plays are frequently marked by witty asides at the expense of Scottishness. [50](#) In *Caledonia Dreaming*, Stuart McConnachie, a Member of the European Parliament, always raises good laughs from the audience with his hopeless ambition to bring the Olympic Games to Edinburgh. [51](#) The same audiences laughed generously at Lord Islay's statement in *The Speculator* that 'the advantage of being Scottish is there's always somewhere better to go'. [52](#) Many of his characters are even more sharply hostile to the country of their birth, from Euan's claim in *Victoria* that 'In Glasgow there's rubbish lying in the streets, strikes everywhere—folks sat on their arses all day moaning like janitors. We're a nation of bloody janitors' to Mrs Tennant's terse judgment in *Casanova* that Scotland is 'cold, mean, ashamed, stupid, violent and straight. / This is a country which badly needs a fuck'. [53](#)

These deprecations should not be taken too seriously. Greig's writing career has neatly coincided with a renaissance in Scottish cultural life (a renaissance in which he has played no small part) and also of Scottish nationalism. The Scottish National Party (SNP) had enjoyed rising success from the late sixties and a Royal Commission, set up to consider the constitutional relations between England and Scotland, recommended the establishment of a Scottish parliament. The Labour Government agreed to hold a referendum, perhaps hoping that offering this concession to nationalist feeling would choke the rise of the SNP's electoral support. A last minute insertion in the bill stipulated that success would require the support of at least 40% of the entire Scottish electorate to pass. When the referendum was held on 1 March 1979, 51.6% of those voting had supported devolution. But because of the numbers who stayed at home, this was only 32.9% of the total electorate. It was the failure of this referendum that brought down the Labour government, and under the Conservatives, devolution was put on hold for almost twenty years. The recessions of the 1980s hit particularly hard at Scottish industries like shipbuilding, mining, steel and agriculture, unemployment and poverty dampening the ardour for change.

If two people can be said to have inspired a renaissance in Scottish nationalism, the first would be Alex Salmond, who became party leader of the SNP in 1990. Charismatic, good-humoured, a quick-witted speaker with a keen eye to presentation, under his ten-year leadership the SNP's share of the vote more than doubled. The second would be Margaret Thatcher. The inequitable

distribution of moneys accrued from the discovery of North Sea Oil off the Scottish coast, a series of misjudged reforms of Scotland's education system and, in particular, the imposition of the hated 'poll tax' on Scotland one year before it was introduced in England, [54](#) stirred and revived a Scottish antipathy to being ruled from London. In 1988, the drafting and publication of *A Claim of Right for Scotland* by a group of 'prominent Scots', arguing persuasively for a separate Scottish assembly, was the beginning of a revival, fuelled by the cultural revival, and stoked by unpopularity of Mrs Thatcher, of Scottish nationalism. Since the triumphant success of the second devolution referendum on 11 September 1997 more than one critic has commented that 'Lady Thatcher deserves a statue outside the Edinburgh Parliament' for her role in inciting the forces of nationalism.

[55](#)

Yet rising confidence in the nationalist project has not necessarily been able to rely on a clear and unambiguous sense of Scottish identity. In *Airport*, a Scottish traveller identifies himself to a Spanish check-in clerk by using a few handy emblems of his nationality: malt whisky, kilts, and the Loch Ness Monster. Malt whisky we can leave alone, but the other two choices sound an ironic note. The Loch Ness Monster is, of course, fictional, at the very best legendary. But the tartan kilts, which are still a major part of Scotland's iconography to the world, are in some ways no less so. Far from being the ancestral clan uniform of the Scots as they are sometimes made to appear, the array of tartans carefully labelled and distinguished in every Highland tourist shop were to a very large extent invented in 1822, when George IV paid a royal visit to Edinburgh:

The king spent two weeks in the Scottish capital and a series of extraordinary pageants, all with a Celtic and Highland flavour, were stage-managed by Sir Walter Scott for his delectation. What ensued was a 'plaided panorama' based on fake Highland regalia and the mythical customs and traditions of the clans. [56](#)

National feelings could sometimes overlap with an empty patriotism, as in the anti-English sentiments whipped up by the film *Braveheart* (1995), a proud statement of Scots pride, directed by an Australian in Hollywood. And while Thatcherite contempt and *Braveheart* bullishness certainly intensified calls for separatism, the question of what was particular to the Scottish identity and tradition could be deferred in the rush to oppose a common enemy. While the political renaissance has secured devolution for the Scots, the task of *identifying* the Scots has fallen to the cultural sphere. As Greig wrote in 1999, 'Scotland's political identity has only been recently reforged and is still evolving even as power is devolving. Politically, we are in the process of finding out who we are'.

[57](#)

The images of ambiguity in Greig's work, towards identity, communication, image, draws on an ambiguity in the image of Scotland. In *Caledonia Dreaming*, Stuart, the Edinburgh MEP, is trying to find a figurehead who can represent the new dynamic Scotland he wants to promote, and he states the dilemma:

Scotland is modern—yet old.  
Urban—yet rural.  
Friendly—yet canny.  
Strong—yet compassionate.  
Who is it?  
Who's Scotland? That's the question we need to answer. [58](#)

These barely reconcilable alternatives are the product of at least twenty years of social change. The recessions of the 1980s led to a shift in the employment base from agriculture and manufacturing to the tertiary and service industries; information technology and tourism now overtook shipbuilding and steelworks as major employers. In this sense, Scotland's economy was beginning more closely to resemble the rest of Britain, but it hastened the flight from the land and the growth of the major cities, and anyone visiting Glasgow at the beginning and end of the 1990s will have been struck by its apparent rise in prosperity as well as its increasingly middle-class cultural profile. This is the root of the agnosticism in Greig's work about the relative value of old and new Scotland and they are often held in taut suspension. Dorothy, in *The Architect*, hearing that Glasgow is supposed to be friendly, remarks that she had always thought it was violent. He agrees: 'Violent but friendly. That's supposed to be the characteristic'. [59](#)

In *Victoria*, set in the West Highlands, a mountainous region with deep lochs that has seen its population drain away towards the cities throughout the twentieth century, the first part is set in 1936, the second in 1974, and third in 1996. In the first play, Victoria yearns to escape, longs to travel to Argentina. She feels oppressed by the landscape:

Size of the mountains here.  
Depth of the loch.  
What am I to them?  
Time there's been before me, and time there'll be after, makes me nothing.  
Turns me to stone. [60](#)

By the third part, Euan, a wealthy entrepreneur, having made his money in oil is now levelling the mountain for aggregate. Euan belittles the importance of the mountain, calling it 'a scraping of land on top of rock', the same phrase used by Victoria in sixty years previously. [61](#) Given the curious process whereby the Highlands moved from being an embarrassment to the Anglo-Scottish establishment in the eighteenth century to becoming the fictional source of their

iconography in the nineteenth, the play seems deliberately torn between love for the ageless beauty of rural Scotland and sympathy for the modern reinvention of Scottishness in the cities.

The final scene of the play offers a bleak refinement of this question. Victoria—Euan's daughter—has met up with an old friend Billy, who in turn had befriended Oscar, a veteran of the International Brigades. Oscar has just died, and Billy and Victoria disinter his body, take it up to the mountain and burn it, along with his unpublished memoir of the Spanish Civil War, and all her money. The moment seems to chime with her earlier desire for a freedom unencumbered by the residues of society; the image, however, also suggests a destruction of history itself, and take its place within a pattern of references to a cleansing fire which we first heard articulated by the Nazi apologist, David, in 1936. Just before this scene, we have witnessed protestors setting fire to Euan's industrial machinery, a counter-image of destroying the future, and with the past and future burning around us, the scene remains deeply ambivalent about the cost of reinventing ourselves.

It would be wrong, though, to see Greig's scepticism towards Scottish identity as negative. One of the purported stumbling blocks to devolution was the 'West Lothian Question' (named after its most ardent advocate, the West Lothian MP Tam Dalyell), which concerned the anomaly of Scottish MPs being able to vote in Westminster, but English MPs not being able to vote in Holyrood (the site of the Scottish Parliament). Since devolution it has become clear that this is a trivial anomaly of the kind that all constitutions have within them, and in *Caledonia Dreaming*, it is delightful to see this pompous debate punctured by a scene which proposes the *real* West Lothian question: 'why is it always raining in Harthill?' [62](#) And, although Stuart's Olympic aspirations are certainly preposterous, his description of a proposed opening ceremony is heart-swellingly fine. [63](#)

Over and above Greig's scepticism, his ambivalence, and his careful use of theatrical ambiguity, there is a profound affirmation of a desire for something better. The Olympic ceremony is just one instance of a recurrent motif of the positively-valued utopian impossibility. In *The Architect*, Dorothy gets an attack of nausea and Joe imagines that she might receiving signals from somewhere, like dolphins calling to each other across the ocean floor. Later, we see him in his truck, alone, making the sounds of a dolphin, calling out to Dorothy across the spaces. Underscoring this, the song he is listening to is Emmylou Harris's 'Boulder to Birmingham', written by Harris after the death of her great friend, Gram Parsons: it is a love song, written to a dead man. [64](#) Throughout *Cosmonaut*, similar kinds of impossible communication are scattered through the play: a woman in a London street shouting at an aeroplane, an astronomer randomly beaming music into space trying to make contact somewhere, and the climactic moment that gives the play its title: Oleg, a stranded Cosmonaut,

detonates his capsule, hoping that it might be seen by a woman with whom he spent one idyllic weekend and never saw again. Considered in the light of the analysis offered by *Timeless*, there is a beautiful perfection in such desperate acts. The reaching-out of one person to an unknown or unseen other, unspoiled by the social and temporal dangers that may attend actual contact.

This desire for purity is sometimes recast as a projection of a utopian future. In the third act of *Timeless*, the characters imagine themselves saying unambiguously what they really mean.

**veronica** . My voice is not high.  
My voice is not crackly.  
Today God has reached down and pulled all the stupid words from my throat.  
He's taken them to the beach we went to that one time.  
And he's thrown them on the fire. [65](#)

and Martin confesses that,

If I could reach out my hand and say . . .  
If I just had that touch.  
A touch that could transmit that thing you want.  
That thing women want which is . . .  
Whatever it is.  
I would. [66](#)

Picturing the scene, he states, 'I reach out my hand, with a kind of infinite slowness, / And say the perfect thing'. Which is: 'blah blah blah blah blah'. [67](#) The perfect thing cannot, of course, be represented, but the nonsense words stand in for it, holding it tantalisingly out of our view, but marking the space in which they would take place. The simple movement of a hand becomes a gesture towards utopia.

Greig's early plays focus very intensely on the relationship between artists and tyranny. Caliban, in *A Savage Reminiscence*, builds a sculpture to Miranda, his lost love, and recalls the despotic regime that Prospero maintained on the island. In *And the Opera House Remained Unbuilt*, a left-wing theatre director stands in the uncompleted building which was to be his cultural cockpit in the revolutionary struggle and confesses how his music became an inspiration only for partisans in the Second World War to commit atrocities. 'I went looking for pure art,' he says, but it was just 'exhortation to murder'. [68](#) For *Petra*, Greig drew on the true story of a group of Serbian actors who, national pride fulfilled by a day filming a re-enactment of the Serbian defeat on the Field of Blackbirds, Kosovo Polje, in 1389, turned vigilante and rampaged through the Kosovo Albanian population, their art having inspired them to kill. [69](#) Josef's perfect vase, in *Stalinland*,

suffered from the eternal dilemma of artists under a dictatorship: the perfection of the vase was to be that it had no feature which would let it be incorporated into the value system of the regime. However, 'the trouble with the vase was that it went unnoticed . . . it was so pure that nobody saw it in the shop'. [70](#) In these early plays, there is absorption into the culture or nothing. But as Greig's work develops, from around *One Way Street* onwards he begins to explore a structure of feeling beyond the known.

A recognisable, if coded, image of contemporary western society is given, alongside a frequent theme of escape. In *Europe*, the successful entrepreneur, Morocco, returns to his middle-European border town. He reduced the complexities of living on a possibly contested territorial border in a speech about the magic of international finance; for him a border is 'a magic money line. See. You pass something across it and it's suddenly worth more. Pass it across again and now it's cheaper. More . . . less . . . less . . . more . . . fags, drink, jobs, cars . . . less is more, more or less . . . see . . . magic money just for crossing a magic line'. [71](#) The forces of global capitalism are depicted unobtrusively but consistently, from Karin who reinvents the poverty-stricken communist town as a dictatorship theme park called Stalinland in the play of that name, right up to *The Speculator*, about the eighteenth century banker, John Law, whose Parisian scheme for issuing bank notes in place of gold and silver has strong resonances with today's dematerialised global network of virtual financial transactions.

This adds shape and substance to the world represented in Greig's plays, and the various crises of identity and community are given force by the references out to this global picture. It adds to our understanding of the cold, featureless locations of the Suspect Culture shows; certainly in *Candide 2000*, we are encouraged to see the shopping mall in which it is set as an image of contemporary Britain: constantly subjected to surveillance, offering enormous consumer choice, finally sterile. The presence of abundant food outlets selling produce from all over the world in commodified form adds to the sense that we are seeing an image of globalization. The Panglossian hysteria of the characters, who seem to believe that every reverse in their fortunes—including unemployment and divorce—brings them one step closer to freedom, recalls the triumphalist rhetoric of 1990s turbo-capitalism.

It is this totalising style, released from its fetters by the collapse of alternative—if wretched—communist models, that prompts a correspondingly exorbitant vision of what escape might mean. We have already seen the pastoral fantasies of natural living indulged by various figures in the plays, but the escapology becomes even more fantastic. Flannery escapes his fantasy by wandering aimlessly through Berlin (as befitting his name, a corruption of flâneur). Dorothy, in *The Architect*, wants Joe to take her 'somewhere far away. As far away as possible'. [72](#) In *Timeless*, Stella's dream of a kind of total pollutedness from

which you can never get clean requires an equally extreme form of escape:

I imagine owning some kind of a car and just getting into it and driving off to the furthest place away I can think of. Like fucking Russia or fucking Alaska and my skin's going to crack open like one of those snakes or lizards or something and a new Stella's going to slide out of my skin and fall onto the snow. [73](#)

St Antoine in *The Speculator* describes a similar kind of rebirth after his fantastic journey walking from France to America. [74](#) The extravagance of these trajectories reflect the omnipresence of the new world order. But it is important that usually the more extreme the escape speech, the more free of irony it is. Greig gives serious theatrical weight to the utopian desire for somewhere else.

The backdrop of globalization adds a further level to our understanding of those utopian acts of unrequited communication. *The Speculator* shows us a world in which everything is for sale: art, nations, at one point even the months of the year seem to be being hawked. And if, as Marivaux discovers, identity itself is simply a product to be floated on the market—'There's no person. / Nothing beneath. / Only the scale.' [75](#)—there seems no area of human life that cannot be bound into systems of economic exchange. Yet the act of communication without hope of return may perversely break this cycle of exchange. Here Greig's work reveals an affinity with some of the recent writings of Jacques Derrida. This is not an unlikely coupling: Greig must surely be the only British playwright to use a sentence by Derrida as an epigraph to a play (*Europe*).

In *Donner le temps 1: La fausse monnaie* (1991), Derrida considers the structure of the gift, in ways which shed light on the impulses in Greig's work. He argues that because a gift is a one-way transaction that presupposes nothing in return, it is a structure which 'interrupts economy [ . . . the gift is] that which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange'. [76](#) But such pure gifts are hard to achieve, since gifts can give rise to feelings that one should reciprocate, and 'if the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift'. [77](#) The gift must therefore not incur a debt, or an expectation of what Derrida calls 'countergift'. If pure giving is achieved, as in Greig's succession of utopian and unheard acts of communication, the act involves the suspension of more than just exchange. Drawing on Heideggerian themes, Derrida claims that the cycles of exchange are tied to the cycles of time, and 'there would be a gift only at the instant when the *paradoxical* instant [...] tears time apart'. [78](#) The gift is, in a sense, timeless. Also, because the giver of the gift may congratulate him/herself for their generosity and thus 'give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give', [79](#) a pure gift will also involve the abnegation of the subject: 'one would even be tempted to say that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift'. [80](#) Pure giving must therefore be entirely altruistic or, as

we say in English, 'selfless'. And because the pure gift must be free of all calculation, it

will always be *without* border. What does 'without' mean here? A gift that does not run over its borders, a gift that would let itself be contained in a determination and limited by the indivisibility of an identifiable *trait* would not be a gift. As soon as it delimits itself, a gift is prey to calculation and measure. The gift, if there is any, should overrun the border, to be sure, toward the measureless and the excessive. [81](#)

The gift, then, is boundless, selfless, timeless. These are, of course, the very motifs which Greig's work has continued to explore in his utopian transcendence of the present, in that gesture towards the measureless and excessive. In *The Speculator*, Lord Islay, a penniless aristocrat from Scotland, is given five thousand livres by John Law. He has fallen in love with a nun and decides to spend it on her. Knowing that she will not want to accept the gift, he ensures that the gift cannot be returned in any way; he eats the receipts, and informs the shopkeepers that she is mad and that they must on no account accept return of his presents. [82](#) The unreturnable gift is a strikingly Derridean interruption of a play so dominated by exchange.

The triumphalism of neo-liberalism can so easily drown out any other voices, and it often can seem unthinkable that things could be different. Although in the early plays, Greig sometimes appeared defeated by the task of finding an emancipatory space beyond power, this pessimism is replaced in more recent work by a series of utopian gestures. These moments, by interrupting the present do nothing so programmatic as to lay before us a plan for the good society, but rather affirm our residual aspiration for it, and begin to allow us to experience the contours of what it might *feel* like. Like Martin's 'blah blah blah' in *Timeless*, these moments gesture towards it.

Gestures are themselves a prominent characteristic of the work of Suspect Culture, and the work of its artistic director, Graham Eatough. Their miniature forms of physical theatre involve sequences of tiny repetitions; the way someone pushes a baggage trolley, a woman accidentally touching another woman's arm, two people laughing at a bar. Josef's pure vase was intended to be unique, to be untouched by time and tyranny, yet it was also mass produced ('we have a box full'). The tension between repetition and uniqueness creates a faultline in the individual instance, since a gesture, like any communicative act, must become meaningful through its insertion in a structure, a code.

To illuminate this, we can look to Wittgenstein, who provides the opening words of David Greig's first play: 'in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound'. [83](#) In

*Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued that a language is not a simple unitary phenomenon with unchangeable rules that govern its use; instead, a language comprises a large number of 'language games' which are the particular activities in which language-use takes place. The language game comprises a set of rules that we learn as members of a language community. We might add that because any community necessarily exists within particular cultural and historical circumstances, the desire to issue in inarticulate sound may be an attempt to escape participation in a language game, and therefore transcend the circumstances of a particular society.

This is where we see a change of strategy in Greig's work. The early desire to find a pristine vase-like utterance that stands apart from society is replaced by an attempt to find the excesses within utterance, those aspects of utterance which are not wholly contained by the language game, or signifying chain. In *Suspect Culture's* work, the repetition of gestures draws our attention to the 'gestureness' of the gesture. Just as repeating a word often enough can defamiliarise it, make it sit strangely in the mouth, the repetition of a simple gesture in a *Suspect Culture* piece serves to suspend the code on which it is based, sever its links with the context it emerged from, make it, in a sense, timeless. The theatre is an ideal form for such experiences, since, despite the extension of global finance into every corner of our lives, the theatre's liveness makes it curiously resistant to complete exchange. If Marx is right and the market is a machine for turning use values into exchange values then the theatre's radicalism derives from the fact that it is useless: as Greig put it, 'its uselessness is its value'. <sup>84</sup> In *Mainstream*, while two of the actors were playing a particular scene, the remaining two often played it out in dumbshow at the edge of the stage, sometimes offering alternative versions of the same encounter. The use of four actors to play two characters creates a distance between the material embodiment of the narrative and the story which is told.

Puns are separate from, and irreducible to, the semantic and syntactic function of a language, and Greig draws the punlike functions of theatre to mark a kind of excess to the narrative. In *Cosmonaut*, there are three proprietors of bars: one in Heathrow airport, one in Provence, and one in the West Highlands of Scotland. They are all played by the same actor. We are used, in the theatre, to accepting that one actor may play different characters, and there is no realistic possibility that they are the same person, just as there is no realistic possibility that a truck driver can signal to a distant girl by making dolphin noises. But the play gives us cause to doubt this easy division by making pointed connections between them. An astronomer, chatting to the proprietor of the Provençal bar, gloomily predicts that 'One day, I tell you this, there will come a time when all the stories humanity has ever told will have been made into films set in American high schools'. <sup>85</sup> Later in the play it appears that *Oedipus Rex* has suffered this fate, as the West Highlands bar-owner reads from the newspaper: 'there's a film I want to see. *One Crazy Motherfucker* it's called [ . . . ] It's set in an American high school. [ . . . ] A cunt kills his dad in it. / He doesn't mean to like. But fuck it. It's a crime against

nature'. [86](#) Throughout the play, Vivienne is seeking her runaway husband, Keith, but the same actor also plays Sylvia, whose husband also left her. At the very end of the play, the text informs us that Sylvia walks into the bar and sees Keith. On stage, of course, it is hard entirely to know which woman has found Keith, or even who she's found. These ghostly doublings, these corporeal puns, emphasise, beyond the power of the narrative, the non-identity of things with themselves.

Dozens of such congruences create connections across the expanse of this play and others, giving the separate stories a ghostly collectivity. In *Airport* the same childhood memory is incomprehensibly shared by all of the characters. In *One Way Street*, Flannery's misanthropic isolation is both emphasised and counterpointed by the monologue form of the play: the hated others that Flannery tries to evade are necessarily embodied by the same actor, creating a visual unity that defies his desire for escape. In *The Architect*, the central family unit of Paulina and Leo Black and their two children, is echoed by the three outsiders, Joe, Sheena and Billy. But again, though it is never pinned down, tiny hints—Joe and Billy's shared liking for country music, Billy and Sheena's son's inclination to run off tall buildings—allow for the possibility that they, too, are a family, a ghostly possibility that shadows the Blacks.

Greig's relation to the modern British theatre tradition is, appropriately enough, ambiguous. While he shares the philosophical concerns of the post-absurdist, he does so in a way that connects decisively, if delicately, with the totalising experiences of Scottish, British or European culture in the 1990s. His use of non-rational, idealised, utopian theatrical moments to carve out a sense of something other is far more politically engaged than it may at first seem. And it is not without precedent; Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (1993) was on one level a long-awaited confrontation between deconstruction and Marxism. But on another it is a work of theatre semiotics. Exploring the theme of the death of Marx, and the surprising frequency of references to ghosts in Marx's work, Derrida uses *Hamlet* to focus some thought on Marxism and haunting. His attempt to show that Marx can still live for us, but only as a ghost, is directly argued through a consideration of the troubled coupling of material signifiers and ideal signifieds in theatrical semiosis. There is something of the same affirmation of change in the work of David Greig, who rebuts the suggestion that a concern for theatrical form is in some sense apolitical: 'What I would call political theatre,' he writes, 'makes interventions into ideology. It deals into ideology. It poses questions about society to which it does not already know the answer. And perhaps most importantly, political theatre has at its very heart the possibility of change'. [87](#)

**Dan Rebellato**

## Chronology of Productions

- 1991 24 Apr *A Savage Reminiscence* Art is Nice TC: Hen and Chickens, Bristol
- 1992 16 Aug *Stalinland* Suspect Culture: Theatre Zoo (Roman Eagle Lodge, Edinburgh) [revived 13 October 1993 Citizens Stalls, Glasgow]  
17 Aug *And the Opera House Remained Unbuilt* Suspect Culture: Theatre Zoo (Roman Eagle Lodge, Edinburgh)  
30 Aug *The Garden* Suspect Culture: Theatre Zoo (St Columba's by the Castle, Edinburgh)
- 1993 16 Aug *The Time Before the Time After* Rough Edge TC: The Bedlam Theatre
- 1994 6 Jul *Stations on the Border / Petra's Explanation* Suspect Culture: The Arches, Glasgow.  
21 Oct *Europe* Traverse, Edinburgh
- 1995 1 Feb *One Way Street* Suspect Culture: Traverse, Edinburgh
- 1996 23 Feb *The Architect* Traverse, Edinburgh  
7 May *Petra* TAG TC: schools tour  
May *The Stronger* (after Strindberg) The Brewster Sisters: The Arches, Glasgow  
19 Jun *Airport* Suspect Culture: Traverse 2, Edinburgh  
1 Aug *Nightlife* BBC Scotland: BBC2 (dir. Patrick Harkins)  
10 Nov *Copper Sulphate* BBC Radio 3
- 1997 7 Jun *Caledonia Dreaming* 7:84: Traverse, Edinburgh  
27 Aug *Timeless* Suspect Culture/Tramway: Gateway, Edinburgh [transferred to Donmar Warehouse, London, 17 March 1998, as part of the 'Four Corners' season]
- 1999 20 Feb *Mainstream* Suspect Culture: MacRobert Theatre, Stirling  
15 Apr *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* Paines Plough: Ustinov Studio, Theatre Royal, Bath  
14 May *Danny 306 + Me (4 Ever)* Birmingham Rep & Traverse: Traverse, Edinburgh  
29 Jun *The Speculator* Traverse: Mercat de la Flors, Barcelona [in Catalan]  
16 Aug *The Speculator* Traverse: Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh [in English]

2000	12 Jan	<i>Outside Now</i> Prada Showroom, Milan
	11 Feb	<i>Swansong</i> BBC Radio 4
	9 Mar	<i>Candide 2000</i> Suspect Culture: Old Fruit Market, Glasgow
	18 Mar	<i>Oedipus</i> (after Sophocles) Tramway and Theatre Babel: Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow
	17 Apr	<i>Victoria</i> RSC: The Pit, London
2001	14 Feb	<i>Casanova</i> Suspect Culture: Tron, Glasgow

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## FOOTNOTES

[1:](#)

*Stalinland: Family History* . Typescript. Author's collection. 1992. p. 30.

[2:](#)

ibid., p. 11.

[3:](#)

See appendix for full chronology of Greig's work.

[4:](#)

*Victoria* . London: Methuen, 2000, pp. 14, 73, 86, 129; *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* . London: Methuen, 1999, p. 5.

[5:](#)

*Copper Sulphate* . Typescript - Revised draft. Author's collection. 26 August 1996. p. 74.

[6:](#)

*Airport* . Typescript - Performance Script (Spanish Tour). Author's collection. October 1996. p. 10.

[7:](#)

*Caledonia Dreaming: An Edinburgh Fantasy* . Typescript - Rehearsal draft.  
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[8:](#)

*The Architect* . Revised edition. London: Methuen, 1996, p. 65.

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[10:](#)

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[12:](#)

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[13:](#)

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[17:](#)

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[18:](#)

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[19:](#)

*Timeless* . Typescript - Timeless Tour. Author's collection. 1998. p. 44.

[20:](#)

*Victoria* , op. cit., p. 167.

[21:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 66.

[22:](#)

ibid., p. 25.

[23:](#)

ibid., p. 18.

[24:](#)

ibid., p. 42.

[25:](#)

ibid., p. 87.

[26:](#)

*Airport* , op. cit., p. 39.

[27:](#)

The exchanges are reprinted in Eugene Ionesco. *Notes and Counter-Notes* . Translated by Donald Watson. London: John Calder, 1964, pp. 90-112. See also Dan Rebellato. *1956 and All That: the Making of Modern British Drama* . London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 145-7.

[28:](#)

'Ronald Hayman Talks to Howard Brenton About His Work.' *New Review* . iii, 29. (1976), p.58.

[29:](#)

*New Theatre Quarterly* . iv, 14. (May 1988). p. 104.

[30:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 64.

[31:](#)

ibid., pp. 66, 88.

[32:](#)

ibid., p. 30.

[33:](#)

ibid., pp. 20-21.

[34:](#)

ibid., p. 51.

[35:](#)

*A Savage Reminiscence: or, How To Snare the Nimble Marmoset* . Typescript.  
Author's Collection. 1991. p. 4.

[36:](#)

*Caledonia Dreaming* , op. cit., p. 4.

[37:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 60.

[38:](#)

ibid., p. 51.

[39:](#)

ibid., p. 68.

[40:](#)

Quoted in Nicholas Timmins. *The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State* .  
London: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 358.

[41:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 71.

[42:](#)

ibid., p. 20.

[43:](#)

Quoted in Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens, eds. *Global Capitalism* . New York: The New Press, 2000, p. 93.

[44:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 27.

[45:](#)

*One Way Street*. in: *Scotland Plays: New Scottish Drama* . Edited by Philip Howard. London: Nick Hern Books, 1998. p. 254.

[46:](#)

*Victoria* , op. cit., p. 48.

[47:](#)

*One Way Street* , op. cit., pp. 253, 247, 231.

[48:](#)

*Europe*

[49:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 36.

[50:](#)

Greig himself once (in)famously declared 'I certainly hate Scotland, though this provocative remark was intended to illustrate the function of the playwright-as-irritant, who unlike creative writers in other forms 'seems to have a peculiar, ambiguous rootedness', yet works imaginatively to go beyond that: 'the theatre is a solid building, the audience present and usually all from one locality, the actors stand corporeal on the stage and yet the play is something different' ('Internal Exile.' *Theatre Scotland* . iii, 11. (Autumn 1994), p. 8).

[51:](#)

*Caledonia Dreaming* , op. cit., p. 11.

[52:](#)

*The Speculator*. in: *The Speculator & The Meeting* [by Lluïsa Cunillé]. London: Methuen, 1999, p. 13.

[53:](#)

*Casanova* , op. cit., p. 19.

[54:](#)

The poll tax, or 'community charge', was a replacement for the local rates system, distinctive for being a universal non-means-tested rate which recognised no differences between people's ability to pay, and which therefore disproportionately hit the poorest tax-payers. The charge was also very unpopular in England, and it Thatcher's stubborn adherence to this policy was probably the most significant factor in her downfall.

[55:](#)

Bruce Lanman, 'Caledonia's unwitting heroine,' *Times Literary Supplement* , 28 January 2000.

[56:](#)

T. M. Devine. *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* . Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000, p. 235.

[57:](#)

'Homage to Catalonia,' *Sunday Herald*, 7 Days Supplement (21 March 1999), p. 1.

[58:](#)

*Caledonia Dreaming* , op. cit., p. 41.

[59:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 102.

[60:](#)

*Victoria* , op. cit., pp. 35-36.

[61:](#)

ibid., pp. 133, 20.

[62:](#)

*Caledonia Dreaming* , op. cit., p. 47.

[63:](#)

ibid., p. 54.

[64:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 82.

[65:](#)

*Timeless* , op. cit., p. 66.

[66:](#)

ibid., p. 68.

[67:](#)

ibid., p. 61.

[68:](#)

*And the Opera House Remained Unbuilt* . Typescript. Author's collection. 1992.  
(Act III, no page numbers)

[69:](#)

*Petra* . Typescript. Author's collection. 1996, pp. 37-38.

[70:](#)

*Stalinland* , op. cit., p. 30.

[71:](#)

*Europe* , op. cit., p. 29.

[72:](#)

*The Architect* , op. cit., p. 24.

[73:](#)

*Timeless* , op. cit., p. 46.

[74:](#)

*The Speculator* , op. cit., pp. 18-19.

[75:](#)

ibid., p; . 83.

[76:](#)

Jacques Derrida. *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* . Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 7.

[77:](#)

ibid., p. 12.

[78:](#)

ibid., p. 9.

[79:](#)

ibid., p. 14.

[80:](#)

ibid., p. 24.

[81:](#)

ibid., p. 91.

[82:](#)

*The Speculator* , op. cit., p. 73.

[83:](#)

Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. Revised Edition. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1968, § 261, p. 93; *A Savage Reminiscence*, op. cit., p. 3.

[84:](#)

Quoted in Mark Fisher, 'Folding stuff gets into the act,' *The Herald* (17 August 1999).

[85:](#)

*Cosmonaut*, op. cit., p. 42.

[86:](#)

ibid., p. 97.

[87:](#)

David Edgar, ed. *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 66.