



# The "devenir-French" of the Play: Contemporary British Theatre in France and in French

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## ► To cite this version:

Elisabeth Angel-Perez. The "devenir-French" of the Play: Contemporary British Theatre in France and in French. Coup de théâtre, 2019, Crossing Borders, HS5. hal-03377572

**HAL Id: hal-03377572**

**<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03377572>**

Submitted on 14 Oct 2021

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## CROSSING BORDERS

### **The “devenir-French” of the Play: Contemporary British Theatre in France and in French**

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Abstract: I will concentrate on the contemporary British plays that have recently been staged in France and in French and, while focusing on the reasons behind the French stage directors' choices, I will try to elucidate what intrinsic qualities of this imported theatre are revealed when it is appropriated by French directors. Finally, I will consider the extra amount-of-being granted to the original by the 'devenir-French' of the play.

“The French understand nothing to what I’m doing, no need to insist”. These were Pinter’s words after the disastrous reception of his first play to be performed in France and in French – *Le Gardien* (*The Caretaker*) – in Roger Blin’s 1961 production at the Theatre de Lutèce in Paris. Fortunately, time has passed since the French theatres’ categorical refusal to stage new voices from across the Channel (be they Irish or British, Beckett’s or Pinter’s) and fortunately Claude Régy, after Roger Blin’s miserable attempt, dug out *The Lover* and *The Collection* from the bottom of a forlorn drawer and brought together Delphine Seyrig and Jean Rochefort (Théâtre Hébertot, 1965) in a successful production. He had a second equally triumphant go at Pinter with *The Homecoming* in 1966. An avid discoverer of new voices, Claude Régy – who also revealed Gregory Motton, David Harrower, among so many others in France –, has been essential in the development of new British voices and aesthetics on the more than overcautious French stages. His Pinters were followed by Jean-Laurent Cochet’s new production of *Le Gardien* featuring brilliant actor Jacques Dufilho. All these productions were to become the kick off of Pinter’s magnificent career in France and, around Pinter, this was to trigger a new departure

for British playwrights alongside the always very much in favour Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, William Douglas Home or Noel Coward.

The question of the circulation of texts and spectacles across borders is an invitation to ponder on what this circulation reveals of plays written in England, when appropriated by European directors, actors, translators. I shall concentrate on the French example and leave aside the question of the British stage directors or companies coming to France with their British productions (Simon McBurney's *The Encounter*, Strange Entertainment's *Table Top Shakespeare*, for instance). What it is that French directors go for when they decide to stage a play written by Howard Barker, Sarah Kane, Edward Bond or Martin Crimp, by Simon Stephens, Dennis Kelly, Alice Birch or Debbie Tucker Green in French and in France? What is it that they find in these texts during this process of appropriation, that they do not find in plays written in their own language and by people sharing the same immediate culture? What does this reveal of the intrinsic quality of the imported theatre?

Conversely, whereas it certainly is a rich experience for the author to see his text translated and propelled to live a life of its own – Mark Ravenhill, for instance, loves the “resonance” a play has, at the international level, once the immediate concrete creation has taken place, when the play is passed along to and appropriated by other cultures: this exchange, he says, makes him be “a better writer” (in Rebellato: xiii) –, is it not an equally rich experience for a stage director to stage a play not in its original language but in translation? Could we suggest that the original text, when translated, contrary to the “traduttore traditore” motto, gains a richer substance? Could we claim that translation into another verbal language – and not only translation from page to stage – confers the play what I would like to call an ‘extra amount of being’? Is a translated text – and as a matter of fact a text translated and retranslated many times – somehow closer to the ‘unconscious’ of the text, as Régis suggests it in an luminous interview he gave to Jerome Hankins? In this interview, Régis pleads for translation: “it is only by the sum of the translations – and we’re getting close to quantum mathematics –, it is only by the synthesis between the different possible translations of a text that we perhaps could be allowed to touch upon what belongs to the inviolable unconscious of this text,” Régis states, adding that a many-times-translated text would therefore come close to “an ideal tongue”

which “would not be a tongue that one could speak out” but a tongue that remains in the/an idea.” (Régy and Hankins).

I will start by giving a brief and inevitably very partial panoramic survey of British theatre in France and in French, and, while focusing on the reasons behind the French stage directors’ and translators’ choices, I will try to elucidate what intrinsic qualities of this imported theatre are revealed when it is appropriated by French directors. And finally, I will tentatively try to grasp the nature of this potential ‘extra amount-of-being’ granted to the original by the ‘devenir-French’ of the play<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. Brief panorama of British theatre in France and in French**

Probably because there has been an incredible upsurge in dramatic creation in Britain from the 90’s onwards, a large number of British plays have been performed in France. While some important 20<sup>th</sup> c playwrights made their way to the Comédie-Française (Pinter, Stoppard, Bond), or to other prominent institutions (Pinter, Barker at the Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe; Bond and Kane at the Théâtre National de la Colline), others, younger or less “established” playwrights inspired French directors in search of new and urgent voices (for instance, Arnaud Anckaert staged Alice Birch’s *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*; Rémy Barché, debbie tucker green’s *Mauvaise / Born Bad*).

An overall survey reveals that, Pinter apart, Sarah Kane and Martin Crimp come first, at the top of the list: there are more than thirty-three Kane plays listed in the BNF database only over the past five years. When one looks at the programmes of (mainly State-funded) French theatres over the past ten years, one realises that some British writers are overpresent while others, although celebrated in the UK and translated, find it hard to make it to the forefront of the French stage. Yet, the general impression is one of a powerfully asserted, even if irregular, presence of British theatre on the French stages. Whereas Mark Ravenhill, Dennis Kelly, and Simon Stephens<sup>2</sup> constitute a group of (very) often staged dramatists, David Harrower,

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is focused on the French language but could certainly be conducted for other target languages for which I have no competence.

<sup>2</sup> Ravenhill’s *Shopping and F\*\*\*ing*, *Some Explicit Polaroids*, *Handbag*, *Pool (No Water)* were very often done ; Simon Stephens’s *Pornography* (trans. Severine Magois, dir. Laurent Gutman), *Bluebird* (trans. Severine Magois, dir. Claire Devers) or *Harper Regan* (trans. Dominique Hollier, dir. Lukas Hemleb) were very successful.

David Greig, Butterworth now have a confirmed a reputation in France, while Nick Payne, Mike Bartlett, Tim Crouch, Alice Birch are powerfully emergent new voices. Even if more confidentially, Debbie Tucker Green or Nick Gill, for instance, have aroused the interest of several stage directors while for some reason, leading dramatist Caryl Churchill, whose *Cloud Nine* and *Fens* were done by Paul Golub and Le Théâtre du Volcan bleu at La Cartoucherie some thirty years ago, announcing a luminous French career, had their work only partially promoted in France by directors who could afford taking chances (Peter Brook and *Far Away*, Ostermeier's reading of *This is a Chair*) or by (younger) stage directors who were brave and adamant enough in their commitment to try: Aurélie Van Den Daele with *Top Girls* in Paris, Catherine Hargreaves with *Un grand nombre (A Number)*, in Lyon, Rémy Barché with *Coeur Bleu (Blue Heart)*, in Reims, or, Guillaume Doucet with *Love and Information*, in Rennes, among others, were part of them.

Another striking phenomenon is that France has also been the place where a number of playwrights who were not or no longer produced in Britain were and still are celebrated. Of course Edward Bond and to some extent, Howard Barker, are particular cases. Edward Bond's privileged relationship with Alain Françon at the time when Françon was at the head of Le Théâtre de la Colline, his partnership with Christian Benedetti and the Theatre-Studio of Alfortville for whom a number of his shorter plays were written and his historical friendship with Georges Bas and Jerome Hankins as his translators and director for the latter gave the French audience prevalence over the British public to discover some of his most important plays: *The Colline Pentad* was explicitly written for Françon and the world creations of these plays occurred in France. *The Sea* was recently done at La Comédie-Française, also directed by Françon.

Another mal-aimé of the English stage, poorly treated at home in spite of flamboyant debuts, Howard Barker, has also made it more easily abroad than in his own country. Yet, For Barker, France was not an easy target and it needed the implication and commitment of audacious directors (Hélène Vincent, Jean-Paul Wenzel, Jerzy Klesyk), of very brave publishing houses – Les Editions Théâtrales and Les Solitaires intempestifs – to have him make his way to what was to be his French consecration: the Barker season at l'Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, programmed by Olivier Py in

2009, followed more recently by his *Und* with Nathalie Dessay staged by Jacques Vincey in Tours, Paris and all over France (2015-2017).

One last figure of notorious outcast needs to be mentioned here: that of Gregory Motton, revealed by Claude Régy who staged *Chutes (Downfall)* (Théâtre Gérard Philippe St Denis, 1992) and *La Terrible voix de Satan* (TGP, 1994). Gregory Motton made his way to the Odeon (*Cat and Mouse [Sheep]*), la Comédie-Française - Vieux Colombier in 2004 (*Gengis chez les Pigmés*, dir. Thierry de Peretti)<sup>3</sup> at a time when he had only been produced once in the past fifteen years in Britain in a theatre with more than ninety seats. In 2004, British critic Michael Billington noted Motton's presence abroad, which he interpreted in the following manner: "Ignored in his native Britain, Gregory Motton is widely performed in France and, watching the premiere (at the Comédie-Française) of his latest piece, it is not difficult to see why. Motton studiously rejects naturalism and instead offers a comic-strip satire on capitalist consumerism in the style of Jarry, Ionesco or Vian. He is like an absurdist with Marxist tendencies" (Billington).

The list the British plays done over the past ten years, in a small number of significant State-funded theatres in Paris and elsewhere in France may be helpful to understand the various reasons that account for the circulation of some texts rather than others. Over the past ten years, L'Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe which had a British season as early as in 1993-94, dedicated a whole cycle to Howard Barker (2008-2009) and then welcomed the successful productions of Pinter's *Le Retour* (*The Homecoming*, directed by Luc Bondy in 2011-12), Warlikowski's *Phèdres* (montage of texts by Kane, Euripides, Seneca, Coetzee, in 2015-2016), and of ground-breaking Simon McBurney's *The Encounter* in 2017-2018<sup>4</sup>. An even much bigger representation of contemporary British drama is to be found when considering the programmes of La Colline (whose vocation it is to stage

<sup>3</sup> *Chutes* was presented at the TGP, Saint-Denis, in 1992, directed by Claude Régy (TGP, Saint-Denis, 1992). *Ambulance*, by Antoine Caubet (Dijon, 1994, and TGP, 1995). *Reviens à toi (encore)*, by Éric Vigner (Albi and Théâtre de l'Odéon, 1994). *La Terrible Voix de Satan*, by Claude Régy (TGP, 1994). *Chicken*, by Henri Bornstein (Bayonne, 1996). *Loué soit le progrès*, was created by Lukas Hemleb (Odéon - La Cabane, 1999). *Chat et souris (moutons)*, directed by Gregory Motton et Ramin Gray was created in French at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers en 1999. *L'Île de Dieu*, by Catherine Marnas (Marseille, 2000). *Un message pour les cœurs brisés*, by Frédéric Bélier-Garcia (Théâtre de la Tempête, 2001). *Gengis parmi les Pygmées*, by Thierry de Peretti (Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, 2004). *Des Vacances au soleil*, Festival de la Mousson d'été, broadwast on France Culture en 2007.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theatre-odeon.eu/fr/mediatheque-et-archives#programmes>

contemporary voices), Théâtre de la Ville, le Théâtre des Célestins (Lyon), or La Comédie de Reims.

#### **Théâtre National de La Colline**

2001: Martin Crimp's *La Campagne* (*The Country*) / Luc Bondy  
2008-2009: Crimp's *Face au mur* (*Fewer Emergencies*) / Hubert Colas  
2010-2011: Simon Stephens's *Pornographie* / Laurent Gutmann  
Dennis Kelly's *Occupe toi du bébé* (*Taking Care of Baby*) / Olivier Werner  
2014-2015: Crimp's *La Ville* (*The City*) / Rémy Barché

along with various festivals (festival Impatience; Festival des écoles publiques, etc.), during which such plays as

Dennis Kelly's *DNA* or Caryl Churchill's *Coeur Bleu* (*Blue Heart*) / Barché or *Ceci est une chaise* (*This is a Chair*) / Julien Fisera

#### **Théâtre de la Ville**

2008-2009: Martin Crimp's *La Ville* / Paquien  
David Harrower's *Blackbird* / Claudia Staviski  
2010-2011: Complicite's *Shun-Kin*  
2011-2012: *Dr Seuss* / Kathie Mitchell  
2012-2013: Pinter's *Une petite douleur* (*A Slight Ache*) / Marie Louise Bischofberger  
Crimp's *Tendre et Cruel* (*Cruel and Tender*) / Brigitte Jaques-Wajman  
Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* / Mélanie Leray  
2015-2016: Howard Barker's *Und* / Jacques Vincey

#### **Comédie de Reims**

2009-2010: Sarah Kane's *Manque* (*Crave*) / Simon Delétang  
2012-2013: Crimp's *La Ville* / Rémy Barché  
Crimp's *Play House* / Rémy Barché  
2013-2014: Crimp's *La Ville* / Rémy Barché  
2015-2016: Pinter's *L'Amant* (*The Lover*) / Rémy Barché  
Crimp's *Play House* / Rémy Barché  
debbie tucker green's *stoning mary* (*lapider marie*) / Rémy Barché  
2017-2018: Crimp's *Le traitement* / rémy Barché  
2018-2019: Dennis Kelly's *Debris* / Le collectif du Corpus Urbain  
Pinter's *La Collection* / Ludovic Lagarde  
(John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* / Ian Burton, Robert Carsen)

#### **Théâtre des Célestins (Lyon)**

2009-2010: Anthony Neilson's *Le Monde merveilleux de Dissocia* (*The Wonderful World of Dissocia*) / Catherine Hargreaves  
David Harrower's *Blackbird* / Claudia Staviski  
2012-2013: Pinter's *Une petite douleur* (*A Slight Ache*) / Marie Louise Bischofberger  
2013-2014: Howard Barker's *Innocence* / Association nÔjd and Howard Barker, Gerrard McArthur  
2014-2015: Pinter's *Dispersion* (*Ashes to Ashes*) / Gérard Desarthe  
2015-2016: Mark Ravenhill *Piscine* (*pas d'eau*) (*Pool, No Water*) / Cécile Auxire-Marmouget  
2016-2017: Barker's *Tableau d'une exécution* (*Scenes From an Execution*) Claudia Stavisky  
Barker's *Und* / Jacques Vincey  
David Greig's *Les Événements* (*The Events*) / Ramin Gray

This eminently partial survey, which says nothing of the commitment to new writing of so many fantastic other big and small places throughout France, nonetheless gives

important information as to the visibility of certain playwrights. Looking at these data makes one wonder what is the mechanics at work in the circulation of these texts in State-funded theatres in France.

## **2. Why circulate these plays? What does this circulation reveal of their poetics?**

The nature of the British plays translated into French and done in France reveals very different economic logics at work on both sides of the Channel. Whereas Gregory Motton's plays attracted the best French stage directors, Jez Butterworth's major success, *Jerusalem*, has not even been translated. What is there, then, in these contemporary British plays, that motivates the interest of stage directors, translators and agents? If audience response in the original country does not account for the choices made over here, the reasons have to be looked for in the poetics of the plays themselves. What is it, then, that the directors find there and that they cannot find in French theatre?

### **2.1. Poetic Motivations**

To try and answer this question, I have interviewed several stage directors, among whom Rémy Barché, Christian Benedetti and Marc Paquien – and read quite a number of directors' comments on their choices when interviewed to speak of their productions and I will, in this article, try to synthesize them. Leaving aside the still much in favour traditional British humour, these poetic reasons fall in three sometimes overlapping categories: novelty of the approach, strength of the dramaturgy, capacity to address immediate contemporary issues.

The novelty of the approach is perhaps best exemplified by science-oriented plays, a thriving trend in Britain as brilliantly shown by Kirsten Sheperd-Barr, Liliane Campos and Solange Ayache, which has hardly any equivalent at all in France<sup>5</sup>. These scientific plays or "epistemological comedies" (a kind of drama in which wit blends in with philosophy and with science [Campos: 336]) have aroused the

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<sup>5</sup> with the notable exception of Le Théâtre de la Reine Blanche in Paris, run by a physicist, and entirely dedicated to science-oriented plays (those of Jean-François Peyret, Alain Prochiantz, for instance).



interest of Catherine Hearn (Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*), Arnaud Anckaert and Marc Paquien (Nick Payne's *Constellations*), and some time ago, of Philippe Adrien (Stoppard's *Arcadia*). The aim of these plays is to propose new metaphors to understand humanity: chaos mathematics and unpredictable determinism in the case of *Arcadia*, superimposed states ('multiverses' vs universes) in the case of *Constellations*, for instance. Science allows for a new analytical prism and also contributes new structures to the plays themselves: the parallel universes of Nick Payne's *Constellations* account for the rhapsodical, paratactic structure of the play; Simon Stephens's *Maria* takes its cue from the Fibonacci sequence.

This new focus, therefore, does not only affect the themes of the plays but also renovates dramaturgy and strengthens the quality of the writing, two reasons that rank first in the reasons mentioned by my interviewees. Claudia Staviski, when staging Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution*, made this very clear: "this language is extraordinary: there's no fat at all, it's all muscles"<sup>6</sup>. Christian Benedetti, as for him, celebrates Sarah Kane's mastery of dramaturgy – "the last scene of *Blasted*, on the devastated stage," says he, "encapsulates the entire history of theatre and of the Christian western world".

Yet, more important than anything, is the capacity British plays have to address immediate contemporary issues. Laurent Gutmann, who created *Pornography* by Simon Stephens in France (La Colline 2010, in the trans. by Severine Magois ) comments: "What I am interested in – and this is what French theatre doesn't do much of – is the way British theatre brings in immediate history. In France I feel like an orphan in this respect. Why have we, in France, installed such a distance between the stage and the representation of the world? As if theatre was bound, in order to be theatrical, to introduce this distance between the stage and the world?"<sup>7</sup>

All these dramatists endorse their contemporaneity such as described by Agamben: "The contemporary is he/she/they who firmly hold(s) their gaze on their own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the

<sup>6</sup> *La Terrasse*, 25 oct. 2016, n° 248.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.telerama.fr/scenes/lever-de-rideau-5-laurent-gutmann-monte-pornographie,63484.php>

person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping their pen in the obscurity of the present" (Agamben: 28). All these plays address urgent and immediate issues radically, frontally, often in a style that breaks free from realism while nevertheless maintaining concrete situations – and this is the tour de force. Edward Bond's plays for young audiences such as, for instance, Jérôme Hankins's *Le Bord* (*The Edge*) or Christian Benedetti's *Existence* are of this nature. Edward Bond's great cause is to create the conditions of our better understanding of what is going on in the world, and this is only possible through emotions and affect – precisely what theatre can create: emotions help us rationalise, Bond says. How can one get to address the contemporary issues of the world while not giving up the concreteness of the situation which is the guarantee of emotion? Probably by maintaining both the idea of a story and the necessity to reach out beyond it: Sarah Kane, Alice Birch, Debbie Tucker Green are dramatists who do not dismiss the "story" but who transcend anecdote to the benefit of a broader (more epic?) scope. These playwrights create a new drama, which subsumes the fictions they write. Their plays, therefore, propose a superimposition of the intimate and of the historical and this is of much interest to a number of French stage directors.

For instance, Hubert Colas, who directed plays by Sarah Kane and Martin Crimp, said he wanted to direct *Cleansed* of course because of the challenge it represents but above all because: "there was something in her (Kane) that was being abused by what was/is happening in the world and that she was expressing in her writing, that she was expressing from where she was, that is to say England, and from this difficulty to live, from the ambivalence (her being in two places at once) she was experiencing and from the confrontation of this ambivalence with a society that seeks standardization at all costs." (Colas: 38) Indeed, Kane's drama is both intimate and historical. Kane constructs a subject-world for herself, for 'hermself', maybe for hermselves: "-- I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy...", her characters says in *4:48 Psychosis* (Kane 1999: 25); Kane makes of her character's body the *locus* of the intimate and of the historical or of the collective, somehow radicalizing what was already at stake, although in a different way, Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*, in which Rebecca tells of her own intimate history as metaphorizing and epitomizing the barbarity of the Shoah.

To synthesize, let us say that what deeply crystallizes the French directors'

interest in contemporary British drama is its demanding and challenging dramaturgy and its radical political commitment.<sup>8</sup> The sense of urgency which animates it prompts new theatrical and poetic forms to shock us awake and aware of the emergency. British theatre emerges as a sort of theatre that compels you to take your stand in the world. This political radicalism – what Bond calls “the reason for theatre” – urges the plays to embrace, endorse, address the issues of the world at large thus contributing to reinvigorating the community of humans we are part of.”<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2. Shared traumas

In spite of the Brexit, one of the intrinsic qualities of contemporary British theatre lies in its capacity to import other countries’ concerns and traumas, and particularly historical traumas, onto its own stage. I will suggest that this capacity to elaborate British stories on traumas taking place elsewhere predisposes it to being, in its turn, circulated. This section will concentrate on a sample of plays that were significantly done in France and that reveal a predisposition to give the community access to situations originating elsewhere.

Of course Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (*Anéantis*) does just that. The play premiered in Louis-Do de Lencquesaing’s production at Théâtre National de la Colline, before it was done over and over again, and most noticeably by Christian Benedetti at Théâtre Studio of Alfortville, or by Daniel Jeanneteau and Thomas Ostermeier (Avignon and Schaubühne), while in Belgium Yves Bombay was doing it just after the Marc Dutroux case. The play, as is well known, relocates Srebrenica in Leeds, and beyond Leeds, reconstructs Srebrenica as an emblem of War, since Kane blotted out the reference to this particular war when she decided to replace the Soldier’s name, originally named Vladek, by the generic SOLDIER. Therefore, Srebrenica as the metonymy for war is relocated in a luxurious international hotel room which could

<sup>8</sup> Christian Benedetti insists on Britain’s specificity, compared to other European countries: “they had Thatcher! Thatcher’s social violence necessitated radical plays: writers have been obliged to struggle so that theatre could remain this place which allows for the other political spaces to exist – theatre guarantees democracy” (interview with the author, sept. 2018).

<sup>9</sup> When asked what is “the reason for theatre” (Bond’s terminology)? Laurent Gutmann answers: “to alleviate one’s solitude. One starts directing plays to alleviate one’s own solitude and then one goes on because one understands that this motivation is also the spectator’s” <https://www.telerama.fr/scenes/lever-de-rideau-5-laurent-gutmann-monte-pornographie,63484.php>

be anywhere in the western world. Similarly, Pinter relocates the Shoah in London with *Ashes to Ashes*, which was staged in France several times since its creation, in 1998, by Pinter himself with Christine Boisson and Lambert Wilson at the Théâtre du Rond Point in Paris.<sup>10</sup> Crimp situates his *Cruel and Tender* and the Iraqi /Second Gulf War (2003) context in one of these “nonplaces” that Marc Augé theorizes (Augé ; Schaaf 2016): “a temporary home close to an international airport”. This “nonplace” allows for an essentialization of what is at stake in invasion and terror independently from the geographical-political-social chronotope of the play. This is, of course, made all the more possible thanks to the Greek hypotext as the play is a rewriting of Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*. The play was created by Luc Bondy in London and Paris and then done in French in the wonderful production of Brigitte Jaques-Wajeman (2013, precisely at the time of the operation Serval in Mali and at the time of Opération Sangaris in Central African Republic). The same Crimp imports Iraq in smug Suburbia in his very cynical *Advice to Iraqi Women* (Royal Court, 2003), done in France by Hubert Colas. The opening of a shared traumatic stage is also what animates David Greig’s *The Events*, for instance created in France by Ramin Gray (Théâtre de la Manufacture, festival Ring 2016, trans. Dominique Hollier) which transplants Norwegian Anders Breivik’s 2011 slaughter in a different community every night. Each night, a local non-professional choir is assembled and placed under the conduct of fictional Reverend Claire and a member of the choir is, at the last minute, given information that they are the ones who perpetrate the attack. Greig explains: ‘I wanted the audience to watch the choir watching and experiencing the play – part of the play is the experience of watching the choir be affected.’(Griffiths; Schaaf 2018)

Simon Stephens’s post-July 2005 *Pornography* (Edinburgh, then Birmingham Rep.) created in France by Laurent Gutmann, (La Colline, trans. Séverine Magois), addressed the London bombings by developing a particular poetics which consists in obliterating the monstration or even the narrative of the trauma. The play, on the contrary, concentrates on different kinds of more or less ordinary people who all, but to various degrees, committed a transgression. The only reference to the bombings comes in the shape of the list of victims – an intrusion of the real in the

<sup>10</sup> The play has been recently revived, among others under another title – *Dispersion* – at the théâtre de l’Oeuvre, Gérard Desarthe, 2014, precisely in a growing context of anti-Semitism in France.

fiction – whose lives are briefly described in the very last section of the play whose names are spelled out at some stage during the play. This traumatic aesthetics – *troumatic*, as Lacan puts it (etymologically, trauma, means ‘wound’), pierces holes (*trou*) in the fabric of life –, while speaking of British people, also speaks of people belonging to all societies in which terror is developing. Being entirely constructed around an absent centre and an ellipsis, *Pornography* is easily transportable. Not only are the 2005 London bombings addressed, but also the Charlie Hebdo 7/1 attack or the Bataclan slaughter 13 November 2015 in Paris, or the Molenbeek events in Brussels 22 march 2016, or Barcelone in 2017.

The circulation of traumas in these terror-based plays does not obliterate their specificity yet addresses everyone of us and allows for an ethical engagement from all. The presence of somehow dis-identified subjects makes them both capable of addressing contemporary topical urgency, and eligible for the community of humans we are. This is very clear in debbie tucker green’s perhaps even more destabilizing and deterritorialized plays with their decentered subjects. The aids infected patient, child-soldier or stoned woman, in *stoning mary* (trans. by Emmanuel Gaillot, Blandine Pelissier and Kelly Rivière), created in Reims by Rémy Barché are enacted by white actors/tresses: “The play is set in the country it is performed in. / All characters are white.” (tucker green 2005: 2), the note on the text says, even though they share the same often ethnicized diction.

As a matter of fact, apart from *stoning mary* and *born bad*, debbie tucker green’s plays have not yet been translated, not because of a lack of interest on the side of French directors, but because of the author’s resistance to be translated when she doesn’t exactly know who the translators are, and what position of enunciation they have. In her plays, this circulation between black personae and white voices or vice versa, allows for the circulation of responsibility and points, as shown by Lynette Goddard, to the impassivity of the occidental world (Goddard: 183). Not only do they foreground an example of post-imperial ‘vision of colonial violence and disorder spreading back to the metropolitan center’ (Poore: 61), but, through a transnational, liquid approach, they also promote an ethical encounter with the other.

With these plays that welcome the trauma of the others, an unessentialist, fluid subject (Bauman: 2) is being composed which has more to do with cosmopolitanism than with universalism. If, as Mark Ravenhill points out in his

**a supprimé:** The only reference to the bombings comes in the shape of a random list of victims – an intrusion of the real in the fiction – whose names are spelled out at some stage during the play.

Preface to Dan Rebellato's *Theatre and Globalization*, "universal" often means imperialist... "cosmopolitanism" such as theorized and foregrounded by Rebellato is very convincing and helpful as a counter-discourse to either universalism and globalization (Rebellato: 67 sq.) to characterize the British stage. I would claim that British theatre produces another kind of space, in which the epic, the mental and the historical come together, another kind of space – some sort of "traumatopia," at the opposite of the re-Britishizing plays of the moment<sup>11</sup>, reinvigorating the community around a work which is therefore always in the making and always resistant to completion. This community, reorganized around a work perpetually uncompleted and in the making (see *The Events*) promotes the "inoperative community" that Jean-Luc Nancy has in mind. The inoperative community is elaborated around the idea that a community should be founded not on a project but on an ontology. Nancy always rejected the idea of a community founded on the completion of a work as an impassable horizon and preferred the idea of "désœuvrement" ("in-operability"), i.e. the work in its perpetual incompleteness (Nancy ; Aubert). This community around the never-ending and never to end work is what guarantees the being *with* and not only the being *for* or the being *in*, a space that speaks *with* all and not only *for* or *to* all: a traumatopia easily translatable or transportable and never completed.

This tendency to circulate issues and situations, and therefore to be circulated, points to the capacity these plays have to open meaning. This anti-essentialist vision of the subject promotes some kind of placelessness which is also eminently present in language: to pro-phasize, to vocalize the words of the other almost means that language contains the possibility of its own translation.

### 3. The "Devenir-French" of the play

The last section of this article concerns language in its fluidity, in its "liquidity", in its openness, in its transposability. The paradox of these British plays is that they simultaneously sound very British (accent, rhythm, slang – "tip that wog", says Kane's Ian in *Blasted* –) and nevertheless are structurally ready to accept the other

<sup>11</sup> *Brexit Shorts: Drama from a Divided Nation* (2017) or as Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy's near verbatim *My Country: a Work in Progress* (National Theatre, 2017).

within themselves. This textual welcoming of the other, and maybe this textual “hermaphroditism,” to put it with Claude Régy, allows for the advent of an increased and more intense space of encounter.

### 3.1. “Linguistic hermaphroditism”

In an interview he gave Gwenola David, when asked why he directed so many foreign plays in translation, Claude Régy made this inspiring statement: “I finally realised that my taste for foreign plays was not due to mere chance, but that I loved to find myself in this ‘linguistic hermaphroditism’, in other words, I loved to situate myself in between two languages, neither totally in(side) one language nor totally in(side) the other.” (David)

In parallel, playwright Mark Ravenhill confesses:

I’m fascinated by the way a work mutates and is reborn through translation and re-production. I think, now, when I make a piece of theatre there is always the **concrete**; that is the beginning: how **this** particular actor with **this** particular audience can use **this** word or **this** gesture to better capture the sense of being alive at **this** moment in **this** city in **this** culture. But there is also **the resonant**. And this resonant is for me: I wonder what this will mean in other countries and cultures? (Rebellato, xiii-xiv)

Opting not for a play in its original version with subtitles, not for an “adaptation”, nor for a “tradaptation” but for a “translation”, has somehow come to mean that there is a palimpsestuous urge to feature the original identity of the play along with its newly gained French identity. We have known, ever since Claude Régy made it so brilliantly obvious, that what is at stake in translation is the opening of “a virgin space” which is so much more than the text. I will argue that translated plays allow for the original to expand and acquire an “extra amount of being”. This is what is at stake in their ‘devenir French’<sup>12</sup> which means, and I am quoting from Deleuze and Guattari’s *One Thousand Plateaus*, “-- with the shape one already has, with the

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<sup>12</sup> I like the explicit hybridity of the phrase and therefore decided to keep ‘devenir’ instead of the too monolithically British “becoming-French”.

subject one is, with the organs one has with the functions one fulfils-, to try and extract particles whose movements we make as close as possible to the thing we are becoming and thanks to which we are becoming this thing.” (Deleuze and Guattari: 334).

All good translation inscribes the text in this process of becoming and makes it clear that, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, all “becoming” is of a “molecular” nature: the good translation should escape being a molar entity (a French text as opposed to an English text) so as to constitute a molecular entity, thus creating a space of hybridization which re-authorizes the text. Hence translations allow the text to prosper and augment its depth by one extra layer so to speak.

Claude Régy, in the already mentioned interview he gave Jerome Hankins, about David Harrower’s *Knives in Hens*, points to the difficulty there is to translate – not the words themselves – but the immensity of what is not written. He insists on the necessity to create a language in between the target language and the source language, a gaping language, a frontierless language, which opens a chasm of possibilities for the actors and readers: “This liberates, Régy says, the presence of a life yet to be written at the heart of the writing. » (Régy and Hankins)<sup>13</sup>

I would suggest that this is an added richness which is not only due to the linguistic conjuncture (that is the sedimented history of those who speak a language, their “conception of the world”, in Gramsci’ words [Lecerclé: 100]) but to the fact that, according to Régy, there is an ‘unconscious of the text’ that pleads for an “ideal tongue” to be headed towards even if it is never to be spoken (Régy and Hankins).

Where Ravenhill conceives of a “resonance”, Régy of a “virgin space”, Barthes offers the very useful concept of “signifiante”, translated by Richard Miller in *The Pleasure of the Text* by “significance”. “Significance” is half way between semiotics and phenomenology: “What is significance? It is meaning in so far as *it is sensually produced*” (Barthes 1973: 97)<sup>14</sup>. Eliane Escoubas, in an article dedicated to Barthes

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<sup>13</sup> “Et il s’agit bien de faire naître une sorte de langue intermédiaire qui n’est pas tout à fait la langue d’arrivée telle qu’elle se pratiquerait si elle était autonome – et qui n’est plus non plus tout à fait la langue de départ. Une langue intermédiaire entre la langue de départ et la langue d’arrivée. Une langue béante, une langue sans frontières, qui ouvre beaucoup de possibilités au jeu des acteurs, mais, me semble-t-il, aussi également au lecteur. Cela libère la présence dans l’écriture d’une vie qui n’est pas écrite.” (Régy and Hankins)

<sup>14</sup> “ Qu’est-ce que la signifiante ? C’est le sens *en ce qu’il est produit sensuellement*” (Barthes 1973: 97)



as a phenomenologist, describes signifiante as “overbrimming the intended meaning”, as “a third level, on top of the signifier and of the signified” (Escoubas: 108).

To explore the relevance of this concept and analyse the “devenir French” of the text, let us consider Christophe Pellet’s translation of Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life*. Contrary to Kane’s preferred “neuter”, difficult to maintain in gendered languages, which foregrounds her quest for the plenitude of the androgyny<sup>15</sup>, Crimp’s obliteration of Anne as a woman – which is the main topic of the play – is made particularly perceptible in French. What I would like to contend is that Crimp in translation is augmented of the sensuous presence of Anne’s absence.

In the play, as we know, Anne is continuously reified and commodified. She is constantly decategorized by the metaphorical regime – much stronger than the comparative regime -- (Ann is a woman/ Anne is a cigarette/ Ann is a TV set) and indistinctly compared to human and non-human referents: “She’s a terrorist threat/She’s a mother of three/She’s a cheap cigarette/ She is Ecstasy” (Crimp 1996: 59); elsewhere Ann is a fast-running “car”, the “New Anny”... “The New Anny” -- in French ‘**une** voiture’ therefore -- “comes with electric windows as standard” (scenario 7, Crimp 1996 : 30) – des « vitres électriques » (feminine, again). In French, Crimp’s stage is almost systematically feminized: “une machine de guerre, une menace terroriste, une cigarette sans filtre, une pillule d’ecstasy, une lame tranchante (“the edge of a knife”)” (Crimp 2002: 183). All the words in the French version are feminine, although not all of them are feminine in other Latin tongues: in Spanish, for instance, in Rafael Spregerburd’s translation (that I could read thanks to Clara Escoda), a cheap cigarette is “*un cigarillo barato*” and “the edge of a knife” (“une lame tranchante” in French) is “*el filo del cuchillo*” which masculinises Ann precisely on two somehow phallic objects. The absent woman, the missing female, Anne, is never to be seen, but in the French version, her “being female” somehow resists and invades and shapes out everything around her, as if the whole objectal world around us, marked by HER absence, was somehow cognitively recategorized

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<sup>15</sup> Gendered languages make it difficult to maintain the ambiguities of the neuter which is so important for Sarah Kane. “Neutraliser l’identité sexuelle, ce n’est pas construire une rhétorique de l’exclusion (le narrateur ne serait ni un homme ni une femme) mais une dynamique fondée sur l’oscillation (le narrateur évoque parfois un homme, parfois une femme). » (Fort, 2008 : 78).

as feminine because used to predicate HER. Interestingly enough, the words Martin Crimp comes up with in English, out of a cognitive process of recategorization prompted by Anne as a MISSING FEMALE, so as to implicitly or analogically denote HER, become explicitly feminine in French.<sup>16</sup>

This is an example of the clandestine activity of the lexis, this extra-amount of being I want to elucidate. Christophe Pellet's translation tries to say what is not written but only sensed as being present, the "signifiante" of language, what overbrims the word in its acception: "À partir de l'en-deçà du texte, faire entendre l'au-delà du texte.", Régy says in his interview with Jerome Hankins (Régy and Hankins).

A slightly different but not less interesting vision of Ann emerges from the Spanish version with its well chosen occurrences of the masculine. We could argue that Crimp's stage "becomes" feminine as it becomes French: the Deleuzian concept is particularly helpful here in that it shows that the "becoming-woman" "*le devenir-femme*" of Martin Crimp's text– is not concerned with imitating what a woman is as an entity (what Deleuze and Guattari call "molar") but with producing "micro-particles" of femininity, "atoms of femininity" capable of shaping out and of impregnating the social/objectal field, and of producing a "molecular" woman in the virgin space of the translation (Deleuze et Guattari : 338).

To a certain extent, Crimp's text pleads for a "metramorphic" translation such as theorized by Bracha Ettinger and Carolyn Shread (Ettinger 1992; Shread 1999), i.e. a translation consisting in bringing out the marginal or prevented voices concealed within the text. One cannot not notice the feminized soundscape perhaps unconsciously conceived or experienced by Crimp and his gendered use of the however neutral English words (on gendered words, see Sardin).

Paradoxically, while Brexiters would tend to make us adhere to the idea of a reinforced identity politics in Britain, British theatre proves eminently circulation-prone and as if shaped by an inbuilt sense of 'resonance'. Stage directors,

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Cotte suggests that grammatical gender reflects the categorizing tendency of the mind (Cotte 1999: 55). Elise Mignot elaborates: "In [Cotte's] view, gender is metalinguistic, i.e. expresses (in an abstract way) what nouns do" (Mignot 2012: 39-61).

translators, agents, publishers who are committed to promoting this circulation have unmistakably sensed this.

The radicality of British texts, both in politics or in dramaturgy, along with their capacity to open an ethical space which keeps refounding the community account for their intense circulation. The 'becoming-French' of the playtext, its molecular transformation which is never completed makes it clear that, just as the staging is always engraved in ephemerality, the play-script appropriated by a French director and in French invites us to re-think about the concept of closure in a different manner. At the end of his already much cited here interview, Régy quotes Levinas who speaks of "an aptitude that the human speech has which consists in overbrimming the intentions that shape it". British theatre does just that. When translated, it does it even more.

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