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## DAVID GREIG: GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL RESPONSES

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### ABSTRACT

Parallel to the UK, the last decade in Scotland has been a remarkably productive period for new writing for the stage thus this paper draws the attention to a Scottish playwright David Greig who has become an international success before long and his play *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* (1999) which exemplifies the flourishing artistic practice in Scotland as a regional response in an age of global challenges.

**Key Words:** David Greig, Scottish drama, English drama, new wave playwrights in the 1990s, *cosmonaut*.

### David Greig: Küresel Sorunlara Bölgesel Yanıtlar

#### ÖZET

İngiltere'ye paralel olarak, geçtiğimiz on yılda, İskoçya'da pek çok tiyatro oyunu yazılmıştır. Bu çalışma uluslararası tiyatro alanında başarı göstermiş 'yeni dönem' İskoç oyun yazarı David Greig ve 1999 yılında yazdığı *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* isimli oyununa dikkat çekmektedir. Greig, İskoçya'da sanat adına büyük adım atan yeni dönem oyun yazarlarını temsil ederken, günümüz küresel sorunlarını bölgesel yaklaşımlarla çözmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** David Greig, İskoçya tiyatrosu, İngiliz tiyatrosu, 1990'lar yeni dönem oyun yazarları, *cosmonaut*.

### INTRODUCTION

Aleks Sierz pinpoints the recent dramatic rise in the last past decade on British stages in his 2001 influential study *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. With *In-Yer-Face*, a storm of new writing about contemporary life has occurred. Without doubt, David Greig is among the new playwrights with Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Joe Penhall, Phyllis Nagy, Patrick Marber, and the late Sarah Kane whose works relate directly to key issues facing contemporary British theatre and society. The new generation of playwrights deconstructs and questions the English playwriting tradition in an age of information revolution in biology, genetics, and digital technology. Like Sierz, Ken Urban, too, comments on the nature of this new theatre writing:

London became ground zero for a revitalization of British art and culture whereby a group of largely white middle-class male writers in their

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twenties had now come to represent the entire geographical and cultural diversity of Britain. (Urban, 2004: 355)

This article exemplifies postmodern politics of millennial topics such as nationalism, globalization, Green/environmentalism by exploring David Greig's *Cosmonaut* that adopts a rather revolutionary concept of theatrical space both as a playtext and a production. As a Scottish playwright, Greig contributes to the value theater has in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Reminiscently, the social and political forces created a revolution in theatre after the second world-war with the angry young man movement of Osborne, Beckett, Pinter and Wesker fifty years ago. Recently, the previous revolution has been replaced by a new postmodern politics of sexuality and the environment, together with questions of race, cultural identity and internationalism to adapt for the stage the changing face of contemporary Britain.

#### **DAVID GREIG IN BRITAIN'S THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE**

Theatre cannot change the world, but it can allow us a moment of liberated space in which to change ourselves. (Greig, 2007: 220)

Greig is the most prolific playwright in Britain today. He began writing for the theatre in the early 1990s. Meanwhile he also co-founded the Suspect Culture Theatre Group with Graham Eatough. He collaborated with Suspect Culture in numerous productions.<sup>1</sup> He has written plays for radio<sup>2</sup>, plays for children<sup>3</sup> besides translation and adaptation works.<sup>4</sup> He is currently dramaturge of the National Theatre of Scotland. As Brian Logan mentions "he is the most eye-catching of a mini-movement of fine young dramatists north of the border." (Logan, 2000). Hitherto, at the age of 40, he has written 40 plays, which have been performed in Scotland, Europe and North America.

Greig, whose initial arrival on the national playwriting landscape is viewed as a young Scottish writer and whose name is later included in *In-Yer-Face* movement, in fact represents a unique significance with his Scotland-set plays that are concerned with millennial issues of nationalism, internationalism, globalism, politico-cultural identity and alienation within "the liminal borders of postmodernity." (Billingham, 2007: 94). Billingham convincingly claims that

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<sup>1</sup> *Stalinland* (1992), *Stations on the Border / Petra's Explanation* (1994), *One Way Street* (1995), *Airport* (1996), *Timeless* (1997), *Mainstream* (1999), *Casanova* (2001), *Lament* (2002), *8000 M.* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> *Nightlife* (1996), *Copper Sulphate* (1996), *Swansong* (2000), *The Commuter* (2001).

<sup>3</sup> *Danny 306 + Me Forever* (1999), *Dr Korczak's Example* (2001)

<sup>4</sup> *Candide* (2000), *Oedipus* (2000), *Caligula* (2003), *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing* (2004).

"Many characters experience life from the border of margin, metaphorically, in terms of an alienated, fragmented interiorized angst." (Billingham, 2007: 94)

In a 2005 BBC interview, Greig points out that Scotland does not have a theatre tradition in the same way that England or Ireland does. He relates the reason for this lack to Calvinist/Protestant background which has not allowed the development of a theatre tradition. (Bakewell, 2005). Only recently Greig and his generation of playwrights have produced numerous plays that illustrate how far Scottish drama has progressed thematically and aesthetically. Zenzinger articulates that formerly Scottish plays have depicted the rural and idealized settings, which later have given way to a starker urban realism strengthening the Scottishness of the dramatic tradition. Similarly, David Hutchison's claims about the weakness in Scottish playwriting deserve some notice. He argues that "outside Scotland Scottish drama tended to be aesthetically insignificant" to the fact that few Scottish dramatists have shown the capacity to "move from documentation to metaphor." (Zenzinger, 2005: 261). With the new writing, however, Scotland has internationally renowned theatre practices and Glasgow-based *Suspect Culture* has become a strong voice in today's thriving and diverse theatrical landscape.

A great number of research studies also configure this ground-breaking phase that Scottish theatre has gone through. Namely Philip Howard notes in his introduction to *Scotland Plays* that all the playwrights, one of whom is Greig, in the volume "share a rigorous determination to avoid being seen as insular or inwardlooking, preferring instead to pursue wider concerns." (Howard, 1998: vii). Greig is a major forerunner in pursuing wider issues contributing not only to reforming Scottish theatre but also to diversifying and enriching British theatre in the global perspective. Zenzinger is another critic who identifies Greig as a representative of a new school of Scottish writers who work in a European, globalized context (Zenzinger, 2005: 280).

While Greig distinguishes between his generation and the previous generation of post-war "Angry Young Men", he emphasizes that *Suspect Culture Company* has been trying to "anatomize our generation." (Bakewell, 2005). He accuses the post-war British dramatists of being like "columnists, tape recorders and archivists for the sake of realism." (Bakewell, 2005). He strongly avoids the "bed-sit" and stretches open spaces and different countries to identify a new kind of culture of fear which is rather dissimilar to the post-war generation of British playwrights such as Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Edward Bond, Nobel Laurette Harold Pinter and Sir David Hare. Greig wishes to break free from the English "realism": "in English realism the real world is brought into the theatre and plonked on the stage like a familiar old sofa." (Greig, 2003). Identifying a problem with mimicry that it must always look backwards at some other reference that gives it meaning, Greig contrarily

believes that "plays that create their own world are able to look forward as well as back - they seem prophetic."<sup>5</sup> Saunders and D'Monte have also concentrated on the thematic diversity between new and older generation of playwrights in *Cool Britannia?: British Political Drama in the 1990s*: Saunders and D'Monte chart the major feature of the new writing in the 1990s as a deliberate rejection of older, self-consciously political writing. Mel Kenyon, the literary agent who represents writers such as David Greig, Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Judy Upton, summarizes this generational difference in a parallel mode:

To write these big political plays full of certainties and resolution is completely nonsensical in a time of fragmentation. When you want to create a political piece of drama, there is no point in mimicking the form of resolution and certainty in a time of complete uncertainty. (Urban, 2004: 39).

The following section will analyze *Cosmonaut* as an innovative play in which Greig plays a game of postmodernist pastiche as he pastes, sticks, mixes and clutches fragmented scenes and characters together.

#### **EXPLORING INDEFINITE GEOGRAPHIES BEYOND *COSMONAUT'S* THEATRICAL SPACE**

We know that, left to itself, nature is attracted towards chaos. We know that, left to itself, human life descends into violence, atrocity, and injustice.<sup>6</sup> (Greig, 1999: 35).

In 1995 Una Chaudhuri's suggestion that "modern drama" begins with "the characterization of place as problem" marked a valuable intervention in a critical field that too often ignored the significance of place. (Chaudhuri, 1995: 17). In *Cosmonaut* the issues of globalization, cyber space and timeless space require new ways of interpreting theatrical space in contemporary postmodern uncertainty. As the play strongly puts to the test complex themes of space, dislocation, character, alienation and memory it should be read in a global context. Greig's play is reminiscent of Lefebvrian space as it is set in an urban world of airports, anonymous bars, underground clubs, hotel rooms and the immaterial space capsule of the cosmonauts.

Greig challenges our notions of theatre and the society we exist in 2 acts, 42 scenes. There is a celebration of postmodernist plurality: plurality of settings, acts, scenes, characters, and events. The characters consist of two

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<sup>5</sup> According to Greig, Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* are two plays that seem to speak prophetically about the recent war. David Greig, "A Tyrant for All Time". *The Guardian*, 28 April 2003.

<sup>6</sup> All paranthesised references are to this edition: David Greig, *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union*. London: Methuen, 1999.

astronauts forgotten and lost in space; a married couple whose marriage has become mundane and monotonous; a young Russian table-dancer who has an affair with the husband and, whose father is one of the astronauts; a speech therapist (the wife from the marriage) and her patient. The cosmonauts are trapped and deserted in their Soviet space station in which they continuously struggle to make contact with the world that has long forgotten them. The metaphor the play powerfully employs is that of the dislocation of the former Communist Empire into its component nation states. Billingham persuasively articulates "the weightlessness of an entire historical-political project: the former Soviet Union" (Billingham, 2007: 107). The physical separation of Oleg and Casimir represents both their own alienation and the impotent, fragmented Soviet Union. It is vital to give an explanation from Zenzinger here. Zenzinger accounts that the play is inspired by a historical event which began in May 1991, when the Soviet cosmonaut Sergej Krikalev was sent to the space station MIR for a period of five months. While he was fulfilling his scientific mission up in the sky, the Soviet Union disintegrated into several independent states. There were no clearly defined areas of responsibility any more, and it took another five months before Krikalev was eventually allowed to come down in Kazakhstan (Raab). (Zenzinger, 2005: 274).

In this magnificent play about "language, space and love" (Watson 1999) the playwright starts with a poem, "Thoughts of a Module" by Edwin Morgan - a Scottish poet of space, science and technology<sup>7</sup> to draw the attention to the gap existing among people and the silences surrounding human communication amidst a vast variety of technological advancement. The world of the play is the modern digital age society through which the playwright seeks to achieve a sense of dislocation and millennium madness: a world, however, in which the characters are concerned with the problem of connectedness in human relations. They desire to communicate and connect, yet their connection almost always appears to fail. In that sense, the play presents displaced characters in a world where politics and technology blur the borders.

One may continue to explore a Lefebvrian reading of space as it is experienced in the everyday life of home and city in our modern times. The audience witnesses a global flow of international characters, and information as

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<sup>7</sup> ....Space dark I see.  
Is my men last. Men are that first.  
That moon is there. They have some dust.  
Is home they know. Blue earth I think.  
I lift I see. It is that command.  
My men go back. I leave that there.  
It is bright so.

the play mediates between the Cosmonauts' space and a vision of a new type of social space in the contemporary cities. The setting of the play is cosmopolitan, with scenes located in Scotland, London, Oslo, Provence and Outer Space. Zenzinger reflects on the disjunction between place and identity. He notes how a 'sense of metaphysical homelessness' permeates the play with its dispossessed characters. (Zenzinger, 2005: 276).

Having been betrayed by the sudden change in the political landscape and forgotten in the chaos that followed, two Soviet Cosmonauts, Oleg and Casimir, "attempt to maintain their sanity." (Monji, 2005). They were on a secret mission, but now they are left in space by a country that no longer exists. Casimir imagines his daughter, Nastasja as an adult, wondering if she will remember him. He suffers because of the weakening memory of his daughter and Oleg longs to say something deeply romantic to a woman he once loved. He is haunted by the memory of one peaceful weekend with the woman with whom he then lost contact. In between, the men quarrel over and complain about trivial things in the grimy space station. On stage, it is an interweaving of electronics, hanging from above at the centre backstage, just above a domed area that suggests the planet Earth. The Cosmonauts, being suspended from above in an open steel capsule, rotate above the stage which is propped by technological facilities.

The play contains a series of characters, narratives and locations which Rebellato suggests a "postmodern pick'n'mix from the Baudrillardian hypermarket." (Rebellato, 2002: xxi). Meanwhile, down on earth, from Edinburgh to London to Oslo and Provence, the lives of Nastasja (a displaced person who has moved from her Russian home to England to become a film star), Keith (a civil servant), Vivienne (a speech therapist), Bernard (a retired, lonely astronomer who used to be a former worker on the European Space Agency Arienne rocket project), Eric (an important World Bank bureaucrat), and a policewoman interact with one another as they try to make sense of love, life and the universe. Weaving their way around various metallic bars and constructions, the characters come together and separate, connect and abruptly disconnect. As the trapped cosmonauts float aimlessly in orbit, the play follows a loosely connected group of people spread across Europe who depict the homogenizing effect of globalization. The displaced characters in the play symbolize the vanishing borders in Europe. The play suggests that there is a need to redefine the status and function of 'Eurocentrism' in the new millennium.

Clare Wallace argues that most of the relationships are established by accidental encounters. (Wallace, 2006: 295). Keith's relationship with his mistress Nastasja is driven from the painful contact with alienation, too. Nastasja works in the sordid nightclubs of Soho. She longs for love and looks

up to the sky where her father has disappeared. Keith, who is caught between Nastasja's growing possessiveness and his comfortable life with his wife Vivienne, decides to end his life. He fakes suicide and disappears by leaving his car and clothes on a remote beach. Overwhelmed by her husband's suicide Vivienne sets out to her husband's last whereabouts. Her neighbour, Claire, has given her a vital clue in that Keith had bought a tie just before he disappeared. This tie, a reproduction of Cezannes's famous painting of Mont Saint Victoire, leads Vivienne to a French mountain where she meets an isolated French UFO researcher, Bernard, instead of her husband. But they don't speak the same language, so they drink red wine and dance under the stars. Vivienne promises to look after Bernard and will help him recover his ability to communicate: "It's OK. I understand." (Greig, 1999: 96). According to Zenzinger "Keith drowns himself to re-emerge as a new man in the last scene." (Zenzinger, 2005: 278). He is found by Sylvia, Eric's emissary, whose spouse also left her. In the concluding line of the play, she gives her reason for coming to see him: "Only to talk." (Greig, 1999: 99).

The play intelligently uses double casting of actors in different roles. In Billingham's words:

This emphasizes that strong sense of X-ray, ghost image resonance of these characters caught between the former meta-narratives of history and political change, and a post-modern combination of dark, dizzying chaos and indeterminacy. (Billingham, 2007: 110).

In the mosaic of the play one can also discover important social and moral issues. The characters refer to so many diverse contemporary issues from organ donation (Claire comments on Keith's suicide as a "waste" and that "Someone else could have had his life," 59) drug use, endangered minority languages (Claire emphasizes that it would be a waste if nobody speaks Gaelic, 30), to the possibility of staying local in a global age and that one can maintain local and national identity with the help of technology. There is also a reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Eric flies to The Middle East to "negotiate a peace treaty between two warring factions", 35). Eric and Keith are civil servants and Eric identifies being a civil servant as "We serve. We civilise. ... We are the bulwark against the flood." (Greig, 1999: 35) Similarly, Zenzinger emphasizes the courage to establish new alliances and offers a political reading of Eric's peace negotiations: "The level of personal relations can easily be extended to the political level" (Zenzinger, 2005: 279). Though Greig is mainly concerned with the dilemma of man living in the age of technology, he also identifies and reviews aforementioned millennial issues.

The plot revolves across Europe where a crowd of loosely connected people struggle to communicate, and to find love. However, communication



constantly collapses. The end is, like the cosmonaut's final message, a bit of disappointment:

This is the last entry in the log. The mission is now over. The results of the experiment are as follows. The limit is this. I am at it. I can go no further through time alone. I don't know what else to say. If anyone finds this log...I am over Europe. It is night. Moving east. I have set explosive charges throughout the craft. In a few moments the ship will consume itself. Somewhere on earth is a woman I once loved. Who has most probably forgotten me. If she looks at the sky. Or takes notice of the stars. She may notice the disappearance of the Harmony module. Or maybe not. This is my final statement to her. End of entry. (Greig, 1999: 93).

Critic David Pattie exposes that the message that Oleg sends is not only directed to a person who no longer exists, but also toward a country that no longer exists – Oleg has been in space for twelve years, and does not know about the break up of the Soviet bloc. (Pattie, 2007: 153).

Billingham likens the forgotten astronauts to the redundant gods from earlier cultures and ideologies who once entered via the *dues ex machine* into human affairs. (Billingham, 2005: 108). Correspondingly Zenzinger correlates Casimir and Oleg's state in outer space to Beckettian existential dilemma. Like Krapp, Oleg's frustrated attempts to record his 'last message' imply the insufficiency of language to express his feelings. (Zenzinger, 2005: 274). In postmodern life, too, nothing is settled tidily and almost everything is disconnected, dislocated, disoriented, isolated and desperate. The speech between the Proprietor of Heathrow Airport and Nastasja is recognizable as he asks her:

What are you? You French? You German? You a Yank? You Spanish? You Brazilian?...You a tart? You looking for business? I'm interested" (Greig, 1999: 17).

There are a few other instances to demonstrate that language is stasis and an endgame in the play. When Casimir establishes communication, he cannot find words to describe his rage: "Fuh...fuh...God. *A pause. Casimir can find no words, no vocalisation with which to encapsulate his emotion.*" (Greig, 1999: 15) Similarly, The French UFO researcher Bernard, too, has "*a desperate attempt to speak which fails*" (95) as he lies on the ground with Vivienne in his garden. Likewise, the astronauts are talking though no one can hear them, the childless married couple has nothing left to say, the patient has memories but no words. In the same way, even Nastassja, the spirited young Russian woman, has one empty word for everything: "fuckshitty".

Most probably, the audiences cannot discover a way of rational reasoning, or an internal order easily. Thus the transition between scenes is

almost always through memory and dream which also reflects the remarkable changes in theatre design with the use of technology. Blanford emphasizes the power of technology in performing globalization in the play: "There are constant reminders of the context of the rapid race of globalization and the virtual shrinking of the world through the power of technology." (Blanford, 2007). As the scenes change with breathless speed, the audience is fascinated by the comparable challenges of love, loyalty and identity in an ever-alienating world. Greig's massive, complex and vague story is also a challenge for directors. Colin Macnee emphasizes Greig's intelligence: "He combines the intimate with the epic, the timeless with the modern, a global vision with an acute sense of place." (Thorn, 2004). He finds the story "very affecting both at an intimate human level and in terms of a world view of globalisation and the break up of Eastern Europe." (Thorn, 2004). In his inventive production of this complex, multi-stranded play, the director has chosen to combine filmed scenes and special effects with the live performance in order to create the claustrophobic, mimetic world of the cosmonauts. The play continues to be a challenge for the critic Jeremy Austin, too, who maintains in a somewhat ironic way that Greig's play opens in an unnatural, uncommunicative manner that leaves the actors struggling to find any definition or direction in the squeaking dialogue. (Austin, 2005). Similarly, Vicky Featherstone, argues that Greig is a playwright who is "trying to stretch the boundaries. (Gardner 1999). She believes that Greig is one of the few writers who do not repeat themselves, and who is really "experimenting with the brain of theatre itself, the things that set it apart from TV or film." (Gardner 1999).

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper has explored new topical and spatial issues in an innovative play by David Greig - a Scottish playwright who has already established himself in the theatre world of Europe. The theatrical space, both mimetic and diegetic, is decoded through the verbal channel in which the visible acting area and the unseen theatrical space become bordered by the language, movement and gesture of characters and with the aid of props, scenery, lighting and acoustics. Greig overcomes the limitations of the traditional "bed-sit" stage and employs a multi-dimensional theatrical space to depict an image of today's vibrant and disjointed world. As the action shifts from Scotland to the forgotten cosmonauts floating in their capsule above the earth, geographical boundaries and self-identity become amazingly transferred to multiple identity that is 'deeply Scottish yet at the same time leaps over national boundaries.(Billington 1999).

Greig is concerned with identity and an anonymous place stretched to different countries in the world, and its relationship to society outside it. He is fascinated by a "constant pull between actually wanting to find something that

roots us and is local, whilst at the same time wanting to embrace the global." (Bakewell, 2005). He states that he is very fond of internationalisation as "we rediscover our heritages or traditions." (Bakewell, 2005). By presenting characters with distantly connected lives, Greig examines the emotional impact of personal isolation in a frightening world of helplessness but desperate for establishing connections. The play itself, in its unique, imaginary, totally intriguing and inventive way, has captured the international, multifaceted, multimedia nature of our society. Greig has become one of the rare dramatists who have moved beyond Scotland. Undoubtedly, he continues to produce revolutionary plays and contributes to the state of dramatic arts in national, transnational and global milieu with his great energy.

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*Dilek İNAN*

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