

Enter Stage Left: ‘Recognition’, ‘Redistribution’ and the A-Affect

‘I think the eighties are going to be stupendous’, predicted the upwardly mobile Marlene in Caryl Churchill’s highly acclaimed, state-of-the-nation play, *Top Girls*.¹ ‘Who for?’, asks her working-class sister, Joyce, who juggles four, low-paid, cleaning jobs and is the unpaid carer of Marlene’s daughter. ‘For me’ comes Marlene’s reply, ‘[a]nd for the country’ with ‘Maggie [Thatcher]’ to ‘[g]et the economy back on its feet’.² In staging the political tensions between the two sisters one matter becomes abundantly clear: if Marlene’s career and ‘the country’ is set to be ‘going up up up’³ this will be at the expense of a materially disadvantaged majority of women. Thus, Cassandra-like, Churchill prophesies the future as ‘frightening’:⁴ Thatcher’s trenchant endorsement of neoliberal capitalism will go on to consolidate a nation economically divided by the haves and the have nots.

Over thirty years later, an enduring and ‘frightening’ regime of economic neoliberalism has produced ever widening economic and social inequalities. Setting out to contextualise and trace feminism and feminist-theatre’s contemporary objections to the neoliberal hegemony, I argue a return to socialist feminism and a renewal on the part of feminist theatre to ‘enter stage left’. The terms of this renewal – politically and aesthetically – are taken up and pursued in case studies of two productions: Laura Wade’s adaptation of Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (Lyric Hammersmith, 2015) and Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (Royal Court Theatre, 2016). In one way, these case-study choices could not be more opposite: Wade’s, popularly formed, uplifting anthem to gay/women’s rights; Churchill’s apocalyptic unveiling of global annihilation. In part, these radically different choices reflect what I have argued elsewhere as the importance of recognising contemporary feminism as

¹ Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (London: Methuen [1982] revised 1984), p.83.

² *Ibid.*, pp.83-4.

³ *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.87.

performing across a heterogeneous mix of theatre and performance.⁵ But crucially, as will become clear, these two performances are explored as complementary parts to socialist-feminist claims-making.

Neoliberalism, Individualism and the State of the Welfare Nation

As Churchill's Joyce surmised, the eighties were to prove 'stupendous' for the materially enfranchised 'top girl' at the expense of her disadvantaged 'sisters'. The writing was written on the wall of Thatcher's economic policies: her espousal of neoliberal capitalism with its attendant philosophy of the self-empowered individual and diminished state responsibility for the welfare of its citizens. Thus, as Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall argue in their nuanced account of the Thatcher years, while there were improvements to the lives of some women, those 'already in a reasonably favourable position', it was nonetheless the case that '[f]or others, probably the great majority, life got harder'.⁶

However, such hardship was occluded by the relentless rise of the 'material girl' whose success was charted by Madonna some two years after *Top Girls* – her voicing of the girl who embraces 'living in a material world' and fashions her style of sexualised, self-liberation accordingly.⁷ And as the eighties segued into the nineties, the Spice Girls' anthem to 'girl power' precipitated a wave of the self-empowered, can-have-it-all girl.⁸ With the mass media's endorsement of 'girl power' credentials and its post-feminist insistence that feminism was over and redundant, so a climate of what I previously termed 'feminism

⁵ See Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *A Good Night Out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and Aston, 'Agitating for Change: Theatre and a Feminist "Network of Resistance"', *Theatre Research International* 41: 1 (March 2016), 5-20.

⁶ Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.54.

⁷ Madonna, 'Material Girl', from the album 'Like a Virgin', 1984.

⁸ For an overview of nineties 'girl power' from the more politically voiced, punk-influenced 'Riot Grrrl' phenomenon in the US to the erosion of the subversive 'Grrrl' edge by female bands such as the UK's Spice Girls, see Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: The Women's Press, 2000), Chapter 2, 'Girl Power?', pp.37-57.

fatigue' threatened the socially progressive, emancipatory vision of feminism's Second Wave.⁹ In particular, the socialist-feminist struggles for a radical transformation of the inequalities produced by the capitalist 'material world' were significantly dissipated. In short, very much as Churchill had feared, feminism refashioned in the guise of the 'material girl' was in danger of exiting 'stage right'.

Although a reprieve from the draconian measures and socially conservative outlook of successive Tory regimes, the New Labour government that came to power in 1997 did little, or at best not enough, to reverse a materially divided nation. As Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack observe, while the Labour governments from 1997 onwards did pursue a reduction in poverty through changes to the benefit system, nonetheless the 'emphasis was still on enabling the individual to lift themselves out of poverty rather than tackling structural economic inequalities'.¹⁰

Just as those 'structural economic inequalities' persisted so too did neoliberal capitalism as an internationally escalating phenomenon whose hubris was spectacularly exposed in the banking crash of 2007-8. Disillusioned with bankers and politicians of all persuasions, in 2010 the British electorate voted in a hung parliament; the upshot was a Coalition government led by Conservative David Cameron. 'Cameron's coup' as Polly Toynbee and David Walker title it,¹¹ was neither to pursue an alternative economic policy nor to redress inequalities, but to keep faith with an ailing neoliberal capitalism, propped up by austerity measures that ensured even greater material and social divides. Where Thatcher

⁹ Elaine Aston, 'Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting', *Theatre Journal* (December 2010), 575-591 (p.583).

¹⁰ Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack, *Breadline Britain: The Rise of Mass Poverty* (London: Oneworld, 2015), p.66.

¹¹ Polly Toynbee and David Walker, *Cameron's Coup: How the Tories Took Britain to the Brink* (London: Guardian Books, 2015).

‘attacked the postwar consensus on what the state should own, Cameron went further by attacking what the state should provide’.¹²

This abject state of unequal affairs accounts for the unleashing of feminist energies, the like of which have not been seen since the seventies wave of Women’s Liberation. From around 2012, a groundswell of feminist activism, notably among younger generations of women, has given rise to numerous, issue-based campaigns ranging from objections to misogyny to the gender-pay gap.¹³ In brief, recognition of a persistent patriarchal set-up and the social inequalities of neoliberalism are refuelling the feminist imagination.

Significant in this regard is the revival of a critique of capitalism that, as US feminist Nancy Fraser insightfully observes, was overshadowed in the aftermath of the Second Wave by the larger feminist concerns with ‘recognition’ rather than economic ‘redistribution’. She explains that while the ‘shift in the centre of gravity of feminist politics’ was not intentional, the assumption that feminist attentions to identity and material concerns would harmonise proved erroneous. Consequentially, ‘the feminist turn to recognition has dovetailed all too neatly with a hegemonic neoliberalism that wants nothing more than to repress socialist memory’.¹⁴ Although the British feminist movement has a much stronger history of working-class, socialist affiliations than is the case in the US,¹⁵ it too has suffered from the gravitational swing Fraser describes. However, the austerity of this age of neoliberalism is such that feminism appears to be recalibrating its claims to ‘recognition’ *and* ‘redistribution’, and is once more set to ‘enter stage left’.

¹² Toynbee and Walker, *Cameron’s Coup*, p.292.

¹³ For details see Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (Guardian Shorts: e-book, 2013).

¹⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), p.160.

¹⁵ See Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p.62 for details of the British Women’s Liberation Movement’s connections to socialist groups and organisations.

Contemporary Feminist Theatre and the A-Affect

This shift is evinced in the contemporary feminist-theatre turn to the nation's abject inequalities and injustices – trenchant critiques that make visible the political ideology of neoliberalism: individualism and reduced social welfare as the companions to a free-market economy. For instance, an eschewal of the neoliberal 'top girl' has come increasingly to the fore in plays such as Lucy Kirkwood's *NSFW* (Royal Court Theatre, 2012) and Penelope Skinner's *Linda* (Royal Court Theatre, 2015), both of which address femininity in the commercial domain, and refute the idea of feminism fashioned as the high-achieving career woman. Equally, Zinnie Harris's *Hold Your Breath* (Royal Court Theatre, 2015) maps out its women-centred critique of bourgeois privilege across a Western Europe experiencing economic meltdown and bankrupted systems of social welfare.

Performances addressing the underprivileged side of the social welfare divide have multiplied. For instance, Carran Waterfield's solo performance of *The House* (Martin Harris Centre, University of Manchester, and various sites, 2015) presents a biographically inflected paralleling of women in the nineteenth-century poorhouse and today's welfare system. That a charity-dependent nation is not a thing of the past is also the political message of Laura Wade's online microplay *Britain isn't Eating* (*Guardian* and Royal Court Theatre, 2014), in which a female politician disavows the escalating need for foodbanks.¹⁶ The state's failure to care surfaced again in Clean Break's *Joanne* (Soho Theatre, 2015), a monologue drama that builds into an epic account of the British welfare system at the point of collapse, seemingly beyond saving. Equally, the major revival of Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* at the National Theatre (2014) – a women-centred portrait of Northern, working-class austerity in

¹⁶ *Britain isn't Eating* can be viewed at <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=britain+isn%27t+eating&qpv=britain+isn%27t+eating&view=detail&mid=475F2BDC312D3000F03B475F2BDC312D3000F03B&FORM> (accessed 13 October 2016).

fifties Britain – felt as though it could have been written for Cameron’s welfare-deprived nation.

In short, taken together, this chorus of dissent from the individualistic, ‘material girl’, along with objections to maldistribution and the erosion of state welfare, signals the call for an alternative, socially transformative future. As I have attempted to capture in this indicative feminist-theatre listing, the swell of opposition to the neoliberal hegemony is pulling the ‘center of gravity of feminist politics’ back towards ‘redistribution’ and thus opening the way for a re-engagement with socialist-feminism. In what follows, it is the terms of a socialist-feminist renewal that I am primarily concerned with: how to ‘reconnect feminist critique to the critique of capitalism – and thereby reposition feminism squarely on the Left’.¹⁷

Working and thinking out of feminist theatre, the question of ‘how to’ also applies to aesthetic as well as political strategies. In the performances I cite above, as varied as these are in form, style or genre, a notable characteristic is the usage of presentational rather than representational techniques: strategies to de-familiarise the neoliberal hegemony, whether this takes the form of Waterfield’s solo embodiment of women’s poverty, past and present, or Harris’s epically formed tale of Europe in economic crisis. As such, this suggests a genealogical connection to the Brechtian tradition that influenced socialist-feminist playwrights and practitioners during the seventies and eighties.

At this time, Brechtian theory and practice were explored and adapted by feminist playwrights and practitioners to reveal gender norms as socially constructed; to make visible the dual systems of capitalist and patriarchal oppression; and thus, to urge the political necessity of socially transformative action and change. With Brechtian-derived strategies for rupturing the representational apparatus and its attendant conservative gender politics, such theatre had its sights firmly set on the ‘not yet’ socialist-feminist horizon.

¹⁷ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, p.225.

As I turn to *Tipping the Velvet* and *Escaped Alone*, a Brechtian-inflected reprise is palpable. That said, any such reprise needs ‘updating’: it must take account of today’s socio-political climate that is characterised by an ever-deepening sense of what Brecht described as the way in which ‘it seems impossible to alter what has long not been altered’.¹⁸ In other words, dramaturgically, the question is what might serve to imagine and renew feminist-political energies for the *still-not-yet* horizon of feminist-socialist emancipation? How best to address the disaffection, the negativity and even impossibility that the qualifying ‘still’ represents? And it is in this regard that I am encouraged to postulate the A-affect.

For Brecht, the alienation effect was a way to achieve the ‘detached eye’ of seeing ‘socially-conditioned phenomena’ in a new light – no longer ‘familiar’ but rendered strange and alterable.¹⁹ No less committed to the estranged eye of socially aware seeing, the A-affect works through strategies of heightened affectivity. Instead of a detached, observational mode of spectatorship, the objective of the A-affect is to *move* audiences towards a reorientated perception of ‘socially-conditioned phenomena’. Thus, a technique of affectively realised distanciation might serve as a means to reawaken critical perceptions blunted or anesthetised by the ideological and economic forces of neoliberalism – to elicit an urgently needed political sensing that *still the world might be otherwise*.

Tipping the Velvet: Sweethearts and Comrades

In the formation of its politicising aesthetic, Wade’s adaptation of Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*, directed by Lyndsey Turner,²⁰ draws on the popular, nineteenth-century tradition of

¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht in *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and edited by John Willett (London: Methuen, [1957], 1964), p.192.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Wade and Turner had previously collaborated on the production of Wade’s highly acclaimed *Posh* (Royal Court Theatre, 2010; West End premiere, Duke of York’s Theatre, 2012) – a forensic examination of ‘posh’ boys from a privileged class of young men destined for power and politics, altogether the opposite end of the social and gender spectrum to *Tipping the Velvet*.

the music hall. An opening sequence comically scrolls back through theatre history: mimics a contemporary European avant-garde aesthetic, ‘pauses’ on Pinter, and satirises bourgeois theatre with ‘*a snippet of a scene from a 1930s potboiler*’²¹ before announcing its music-hall destination. With its playful rejection of theatre for a cultural elite, *Tipping the Velvet* proclaims its popular, theatrical and class-inclusive credentials. Conceived for the Lyric Hammersmith, London,²² and Edinburgh’s Royal Lyceum, both theatres with histories dating back to the late nineteenth century, the show embraces the proscenium stage with variety’s ‘cornucopia of delights all the marvels of the present age’²³ With its Brechtian-informed, historicising tactics, exemplified by the anachronistic use of twentieth and twenty-first century popular songs arranged and delivered in the style of the music hall, *Tipping the Velvet* connects past struggles for women’s sexual and political emancipation to the present conditions of persistent inequalities.

Hammering home the point that patriarchy is not relegated to the past but persists as an obstacle to women’s emancipation, is the gavel-banging Chairman (David Cardy). A controlling presence throughout the show, he orchestrates the episodically arranged scenes that tell the adventures of Nancy (Nan) Astley (Sally Messham), an oyster girl from Whitstable, who falls for a music-hall star – the male impersonator, Kitty Butler (Laura Rogers). This epic, picaresque tale follows the highs and lows of Nancy’s romantic adventures: her masquerade as a rent boy; her time spent as the plaything of the upper-class Sapphist and ‘Queen of Pain’ Diana Lethaby (Kirsty Besterman); and her union with the East End, socialist-feminist, Florence Banner (Adelle Leonce).

Staging Nancy’s adventures in the popular tradition of the halls, *Tipping the Velvet* is replete with alienation affects as it ‘entertains’ feminism through viscerally styled acts of

²¹ Laura Wade, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Oberon Books, 2015), p.10.

²² Class-inclusive credentials also extend to the Lyric itself which operates a First Free Nights scheme for people either living or working in the local district of Hammersmith and Fulham.

²³ Wade, *Tipping the Velvet*, p.

socially aware, potentially transformative perception. For instance, one highly theatrical, affective and austerity-marked episode occurs after Nancy flees from a cheating Kitty (discovered in bed with their impresario-manager) to take refuge in Smithfield meat market. ‘Not Smithfield like you know it now’, explains the Chairman, ‘posh sausages artisan bakery, cocktail in a jam jar, no. Smithfield where your shoes stick to the pavement and there’s blood running in the gutters, air heavy with blood and flies’.²⁴ Dressed in white and streaked in blood, Nancy is strung up like a carcass of dead meat in a row of butchered pigs and sings of her broken heart. But what begins as a sentimental, lovelorn lament is undercut by the pigs – puppets who chorus her sorrow and whose ribs are percussively struck like a xylophone. Through sheer theatricality, this episode animates and heightens a sensory perception of the abandoned, corpse-like woman whose material circumstances are such that she has ‘nowhere to run to’.²⁵

Equally, the use of the music hall act or variety turn during Nancy’s masquerade as a rent boy in Soho Square exemplifies the A-affect as gestically and experientially conceived. This involved a seaside peep board, with holes for the faces of five Victorian gentlemen to appear and flaps at the crotch for Nancy to play a note on the ‘*cock-instruments*’²⁶ – musical instruments that pop out of the glory holes to be played (pleasured) for financial reward. Nancy perfects her craft to the tune of the national anthem and by way of a finale, all five ‘cocks’ simultaneously ejaculate (confetti cascades from the glory holes). This carnivalesque masquerade in which girl turns boy to cheat the Victorian gent of his assumed homosexual pleasure points to the facade of heteronormative respectability. And, on the occasion I saw the Lyceum production, the heightened affectivity of this cock-playing scene was evinced by the communal, raucous laughter of the predominantly female audience.

²⁴ Ibid., p.49.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p.56.

In contrast to the comedy of the seaside peep board that presents the phallus as an object of ridicule, Wade felt that the show's lesbian sex scenes called for a method 'to embrace the sex without it being too titillating'. The solution she and Turner found was to opt for an 'ostentatiously theatrical way' to capture 'the novel's sexual frankness' and 'to create something that presents how that encounter feels rather than what it actually looks like'.²⁷ Thus, Nancy's sexual encounters with Kitty and Diana are both 'show stopping' moments performed in the style of an aerial circus act. First Nancy and Kitty are lovingly entwined on aerial silks; then, by contrast, as a reflection of Nancy's dangerous, 'unbalanced' liaison with Diana, given the latter's sexual and social domination, the two women climax and close the second act by swinging far more precariously from a metal, chandelier-styled structure. As 'moving' moments – in the dual sense of bodies in motion that move the audience through the visceral risk-taking labour on the part of the performers²⁸ – these aerial borne scenes deflect a prurient, 'titillating' gaze and de-familiarise the explicit attentions to lesbian sex and sexuality for which *Tipping the Velvet* is popularly known.²⁹ Although some reviewers expressed concerns that the theatricality of these lesbian sex scenes (and the show overall) detracted from the representation of 'queer women's culture' and sexuality,³⁰ their rendition was nonetheless open to interpretation as bodies in flight from the earthbound constraints of gender norms – fleshly, sensual acrobatic embodiments of same-sex desire that suspend the socially and culturally dominant narrative of heteronormativity.

²⁷ Wade, quoted in Claire Allfree, 'Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* Adapted for the Stage: Laura Wade Puts Lesbian Sex on Stage', *Independent*, 4 September 2015 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/sarah-waters-tipping-the-velvet-adapted-for-the-theatre-laura-wade-puts-lesbian-sex-on-stage-10486079.html> (accessed 12 October 2016).

²⁸ The actresses are not circus performers. For these aerial sequences, they were trained by the National Centre for Circus Arts. See: <https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/services/casting-and-consultancy/past-projects/tipping-the-velvet-lyric-hammersmith> (accessed 12 October 2016).

²⁹ This was particularly the case after Waters's 1998 novel was adapted by Andrew Davies and serialised for BBC television in 2002.

³⁰ Alice Saville, Review of *Tipping the Velvet*, *Exeunt*, 7 October 2015, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/tipping-the-velvet/> (accessed 12 October 2016).

Heterosexuality is repeatedly estranged by Nancy's multiple, episodic moments of coming out, although, as Wade observes, *Tipping the Velvet* is 'not classically a coming-out story. Nan's sexuality is for her an entirely normal and joyous thing'.³¹ This arguably contrasts with the less assured process of Nancy's political, self-discovery: her coming out as a socialist-feminist. A social awakening arises out of Nancy's relations with Diana's servant girl, Blake (Sarah Vezmar), that evince embryonic signs and stirrings of class-based solidarity. Defying her mistress by siding with Blake against being publicly humiliated by the upper-class Sapphist set (they demand to see her backside), and further rebelling by privately partying with and making-up to Blake, leads to the dismissal of both women. Only the spectre of poverty keeps Nancy pleading with Diana not to be cast out. 'You had better rejoin your own kind', admonishes one of the lesbian clique; in reply Nancy curses them 'all for a set of bitches'.³²

What these events reflect is the warring of sexual and class identifications. As Slavoj Žižek insightfully observes in his analysis of the dynamics of 'race-gender-class', where 'anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles are guided by a striving for the full recognition of the other, the class struggle aims at overcoming and subduing, annihilating even, the other'.³³ Thus, the 'horizontal logic of recognition of different identities' (in this instance, of lesbian identities) is at odds with 'the logic of the [class] struggle with an antagonist'. If the 'liberal left', as Žižek attests, has been too concerned with 'the logic of the recognition of difference',³⁴ or if the feminist-left, as Fraser advises, has attended to 'recognition' at the expense of 'redistribution', then it follows that feminism's socialist renewal to dismantle the capitalist system needs to balance identity politics with the antagonistic 'logic' of the class struggle.

³¹ Quoted in Claire Allfree, 'Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* Adapted for the Stage'.

³² Wade, *Tipping the Velvet*, p.85.

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), pp.33-4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.34.

Coming back to the show, it is in the latter part of the second act that Wade foregrounds identity and the class struggle as a ‘balancing act’. Where reviewers tended to find this dull by comparison with Nancy’s earlier adventures,³⁵ the socialist-feminist twist to Wade/Waters’s queer tale is, I would argue, core to the show’s demonstration of a still-not-yet horizon of socialist-feminist emancipation.

As the setting of *Tipping the Velvet* moves to the East End of London, home to Florence and her brother Ralph’s (Andy Rush) working-class, Labour community, sexuality communes with socialism. Still role-playing, to earn her keep Nancy performs as the Victorian ‘angel in the house’.³⁶ Not yet at the activist table, she is seen administering to those attending the socialist meetings in Florence’s home, this as a comic-balletic choreography of domestic multi-tasking – dispensing tea and sandwiches, while carrying around an orphaned baby.³⁷ The comedy of this relentless, repetitive, excessive feminine labour climaxes in Nancy finally contributing to the socialist cause by painting the banner for the forthcoming rally. In one way, this spectacle of femininity overburdened by the domestic revives a socialist-feminist concern with the unequal division of labour (women’s dual home/reproductive and paid/productive labour); in another it also demonstrates domestic duties as subtracting from the time available for women to make a political difference.

Other aspects of socialist-feminism’s former (and still on-going) struggles are touched upon, from the difficulty of convincing the Labour movement to recognise women’s rights (‘The woman question isn’t a socialist matter, is it?’ queries one activist)³⁸ to the battle for feminist voices being heard in the public sphere (it is Ralph who has been delegated to speak on the woman question). That said, the show’s final episodes that conclude in the socialist

³⁵ See reviews by Victoria Sadler, *Huffpost Entertainment*, 30 September 2015 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/victoria-sadler/review-tipping-the-velvet_b_8217008.html, and Alice Saville, *Exeunt Magazine*.

³⁶ Wade, *Tipping the Velvet*, p.100.

³⁷ The baby has been adopted by Florence and Ralph; ‘adopting’ Nancy compounds their alternative family.

³⁸ Wade, *Tipping the Velvet*, p.98.

rally, gesture to the ‘recognition’ of differences as allied to the class struggle against economic maldistribution. Significant in this regard, for instance, is the way that when Wade includes a vignette of a lesbian community enjoying their own separatist, underground bar, she also depicts these women as participating in the socialist rally. In other words, the dis-unifying dynamic of competing identity claims that proved the undoing of feminism’s Second Wave are overcome through coalition, rather than separation, between the ‘recognition of difference’ and participation in the ‘antagonistic’ class struggle.

Such an overcoming necessitates belonging to a ‘community of ideas’, as Florence declares, one committed to a socialist vision of ‘a better future life for everyone’.³⁹ When I saw *Tipping the Velvet*, the participatory invitation to the audience to rally to the socialist cause by chorusing along with Nancy’s anthem to women’s rights (to the tune of ‘These Boots Are Made for Walkin’), was the most affective, feminist-politicising moment of the show. As the cast (and audience) rally to the cause, only two figures contest this vision: the Chairman and Kitty. Both are banished: Nancy wrests power from the Chairman, seizes the gavel to take control of the show; Kitty, who still refuses to give up her sham marriage and rebuffs an invitation to speak for the socialist cause, is firmly rejected by Nancy in favour of Florence. Their union will be one of ‘sweetheart’ *and* ‘comrade’.⁴⁰

Overall, then, the show demonstrates what Lovenduski and Randall posit in the aftermath of Thatcher’s neoliberalism and the fragmentation of feminism’s Second Wave, as ‘the necessity to acknowledge oppressed identities and the necessity to make political coalitions such as parties, movements, and groups’.⁴¹ It is a difficult balancing act to achieve, but not beyond the bounds of possibility – a possibility that *Tipping the Velvet* invites

³⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁰ Wade, *Tipping the Velvet*, p.126.

⁴¹ Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p.92.

audiences to feel through its A-affective staging of the still-not-yet horizon of socialist-feminist emancipation.

Escaped Alone: 'Tea and Catastrophe'

There are strong economic parallels between the capitalist age of the music-hall 'empire' and today's neoliberalism. As Fraser writes: 'What we today call "neoliberalism" is nothing but the second coming of the very same nineteenth-century faith in the "self-regulating market"'.⁴² In her digest of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944), she observes that the 'capitalist crisis' Polanyi traces from the industrial revolution to World War II was also a 'social crisis' precipitated by the socially disadvantageous 'efforts to commodify nature, labor, and money'.⁴³ In Fraser's view, it is the analytic weave between economic and social crisis-ridden states that makes Polanyi's study a source of inspiration for today's project of feminist emancipation. This is not least, she argues, because renewed attentions to redistribution must find ways 'to overcome the deficits of discredited economic [Marxist] approaches'.⁴⁴ Where *Tipping the Velvet* overcomes the 'deficits' of a feminism unable to balance identity politics with a socially transformative agenda (i.e. socialism), in *Escaped Alone* Churchill unveils the crisis of economic neoliberalism as an epically formed, social and ecological crisis. Thus, if an initial process for a renewed feminist activism is the kind of coalition-building *Tipping the Velvet* reflects, as it 'enters stage left' feminism also needs to expand its critique of neoliberal capitalism to encompass the full range of its damaging economic and social and ecological effects.

⁴² Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, p.229.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.228-9. Italics in original.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227

As my introductory headlining of *Top Girls* attests, Churchill's commitment to socialist feminism is longstanding, though never at a standstill.⁴⁵ From the dialectics of the class/gender debate that a play like *Top Girls* presents, she has moved through her critique of an ecologically damaging capitalism (*The Skriker*, 1994) to the 'frightening' scenario of the girl-child who grows into a world of global warfare (*Far Away*, 2000). In *Escaped Alone*, directed by James Macdonald, she returns to the apocalyptic hue of global extinction.

Three women take afternoon tea in a backyard garden, naturalistically set in the Royal Court production with fencing, shed, turf and, as Churchill instructs, '*several unmatching chairs*'.⁴⁶ They are joined by Mrs Jarrett (Mrs J); all the women are '*at least seventy*'.⁴⁷ Their conversations make associative, quantum leaps between everyday topics from family to popular television programmes. At various points, these elliptically formed, dementia-like snatches of commonplace chatter are interrupted: a scene freezes and the conversation ceases for the individual, monologic voicing of fears and anxieties. One woman (Sally) has a phobia of cats, another (Lena) is agoraphobic, a third (Vi) killed her husband, while Mrs J is full of a '*terrible rage*'.⁴⁸ The garden scenes are also interspersed with and ruptured by seven monologues, all delivered by Mrs J (Linda Bassett). In contrast to the bright sunny garden, these voicings come from an uncanny void: Mrs J/Bassett appears on a blacked-out stage framed by dual rows of glowing lights.⁴⁹ 'Escaped alone' from the garden, she reports on globally occurring acts of socio-ecological destruction.

The production's strapline was 'tea and catastrophe', a gesture to tea-drinking as a passively marked palliative to the worst kinds of events life can throw at us – a soothing away of catastrophic happenings. Since Churchill specifies the '*action*' of the play as

⁴⁵ That commitment includes her enduring attachment to the Royal Court Theatre as a state-subsidised, new-writing venue.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4. The production's designer was Miriam Buether.

⁴⁷ Caryl Churchill, *Escaped Alone* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016), p.4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁴⁹ The lighting designer was Peter Mumford.

‘*continuous*’ but indicates that temporally it takes place over a ‘*number of afternoons*’,⁵⁰ the implication is that while the women repeatedly drink their afternoon tea, the world has hurtled towards global extinction. Trapped in a Chekhovian-like mode of paralysis, they focus on their ‘inner’ psychic struggles with fear, depression or anxiety. Whether it is Sally’s (Deborah Findlay) fear of cats, Lena’s (Kika Markham) incapacitating agoraphobia, or Vi’s (June Watson) memory of killing her husband in the kitchen, each is concerned to keep the ‘horror’ out, and yet the ‘horror goes on’.⁵¹ You can lock up the house, go around feverishly closing windows and doors, but never be certain that a cat has not crept in; or you can sit on the bed hoping for a good day only to find that the ‘air [is] too thick’ to move;⁵² or you can ‘put the kettle on’, feel better, but ‘in the kitchen it’s always there’.⁵³ Thus, the home as a place of relative safety is rendered uncanny: a private space that is not immune from the ‘horror’ that comes from without, however hard one might try to create personal systems of self-immunity. And in the dis-location between the naturalistically set, bright garden and the abstract, dark void, Churchill brings ‘home’ the point that personal anxieties often eschew the larger, social, catastrophic picture – registers the psycho-social breakdown between the personal and the political that she observes as intensifying under neoliberal capitalism.

As Dan Rebellato notes, throughout the history of capitalism ‘theatre was always there to subject it to fierce scrutiny’.⁵⁴ Crucially, that ‘scrutiny’ necessitates demonstrating how it is that people’s everyday lives are not divorced from but enmeshed in the capitalist system. As Žižek puts it in Marxian (and Lacanian) terms, it is ‘Capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes’: it is the ‘Real as the inexorable, “”abstract”” spectral logic of Capital that determines what goes on in social

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.4.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.41.

⁵² Ibid., p.32.

⁵³ Ibid., p.41.

⁵⁴ Dan Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.18.

reality'.⁵⁵ Since in modes of cultural and artistic representation it is often the case that 'social reality' occludes the 'Real', to stage a full Marxian grasp of both 'real life' and the 'totality of contemporary capitalism', the challenge is to find an 'aesthetic correlate' of the Real/Capital.⁵⁶

It is out of the abstract void that Churchill fashions the 'totality' of neoliberal Capital. That 'totality' encompasses the 'flashpoints of crisis' – the 'struggles over nature, social reproduction, and global finance' – that Fraser advises need to be included and addressed in socialist-feminism's more expansive claims-making.⁵⁷ In *Escaped Alone*, enmeshed in processes of commodification, the elemental forces of earth, water, wind and fire have all wrecked untold havoc: 'Four hundred thousand tons of rock' that we are told was 'paid for by senior executives', broke from 'the hillside to smash through the roofs, each fragment onto the designated child's head'.⁵⁸ In the flooding that ensued from a 'campaign to punish the thirsty', all manner of objects, from 'kayaks' to 'rubber ducks', 'floated on the stock market'.⁵⁹ It was the 'wind developed by property developers' that 'turned heads inside out'; and of the fire that 'broke out in ten places at once', three incidents were due to the 'spontaneous combustion of the markets'.⁶⁰

Further, the 'soul of social protection' that Fraser argues as one of the three 'major battles' for feminism in the twenty first century,⁶¹ is reported as a casualty of capitalism's inability to care: When 'chemicals leaked through cracks in the money', the consequences included escalating risks to women and children: more 'domestic violence', 'miscarriages',

⁵⁵ Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, pp.101-2.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Žižek's observations arise out of his analysis of realism the US television series *The Wire*.

⁵⁷ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, p.229.

⁵⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, p.8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.12.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.28, p.37.

⁶¹ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, p.241. The 'soul of the market' and of 'emancipation' constitute the other two, key battles.

‘birth deformities’ and ‘school absenteeism’.⁶² An overstretched NHS is wryly noted as having a ‘three-month waiting time’ for protective ‘gas masks’; but if you could pay, these were ‘privately [available] in a range of colours’.⁶³

Offering these brief citations, I am attempting not only to headline the ‘flashpoints’ that are critical to Churchill’s socialist-feminist critique of Capital, but also to convey a sense of the A-affective mode through which her critique is formed. Reportage; the breaking of the fourth (garden) wall (Mrs J/Bassett steps out of the garden and into the void to speak directly out to the audience); and a monologic delivery that calls for a non-emotional style of acting, all evince a reprise of Brechtian estrangement. This combines with the highly affective, cumulative layering of Capital in all its dark, messianic ‘totality’ – a verbal layering whose gestic and affective qualities depend upon the surreal, absurdist logic of Churchill’s liturgical register. It is a further instance of what I have previously argued as Churchill’s modification of Brecht’s dialectically formed ‘not but’ seeing, to the affectively realised negative dialectic ‘but not that’:⁶⁴ in *Escaped Alone*’s Job-like, biblical incantation of reported calamities, the call for a recantation of capitalism (‘but not that’) is made abundantly and palpably clear.

Perhaps, Žižek speculates, such a recantation depends upon our withdrawal ‘into the role of a passive observer of the system’s circular self-destructive movement’:⁶⁵ to stand by like Mrs J and watch as capitalism’s diminishing capacities for reinvention see it hurtling towards ‘zero population, zero growth and zero politics,’⁶⁶ all of which are of its own self-destructive making. To reach the ‘zero point of abstaining from acts of resistance which only

⁶² Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, p.17.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Elaine Aston, ‘But Not That: Caryl Churchill’s Political Shape Shifting at the Turn of the Millennium’, *Modern Drama*, 56:2 (Summer 2013), pp.145-164.

⁶⁵ Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, p.109.

⁶⁶ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, p.37.

keep the system alive’, is potentially to achieve the ‘opening up of a space for radical change’.⁶⁷

Churchill does not show us that alternative, socially transformative space, rather at one juncture she invites us to *feel* it. The feeling of how the world might be otherwise resonates in the moment when the women ‘harmonise’ in a spontaneous and collective chorusing of the Crystals’ ‘Da Doo Ron’.⁶⁸ Visceral and upbeat, their voices soar above the depressive states or feelings of ‘terrible rage’. Bassett explains that the choice of song needed to be rousing, uplifting. The final choice fell to Churchill who remembered the Crystals’ number from the time in the early eighties when the Out of Joint Stock company was on tour with *Fen*, her critique of the capitalist exploitation of women labourers out in the fields of East Anglia’s fens. As Bassett recollects ‘we drove around the country in a minibus and used to sing it a lot’.⁶⁹ Thus, socialist-feminist histories ghost *Escaped Alone*’s reprise of the song: an anthem to past struggles and the still-not-yet horizon of emancipation.

In sum, neither *Escaped Alone*, nor *Tipping the Velvet* advocate reform from within the system of neoliberal capitalism; rather, feminist sights are firmly set on ‘radical change’. What Wade’s show reveals is the difficult but not impossible balancing act between recognition and redistribution: between identity politics and the class-based struggle to transform economic maldistribution. But socialist-feminist claims to an alternative, emancipatory future must also, as Churchill elucidates, take up the critique of Capital in all its socially and ecologically damaging ‘totality’. In the A-affective staging of that critique,

⁶⁷ Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, pp. 109-11. To clarify: it is the small acts of democratic repair that Žižek objects to, those that serve only to keep us locked into the damaged system of capitalism, instead of dismantling and transforming it.

⁶⁸ ‘Da Doo Ron Ron’ written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich, and Phil Spector, 1963.

⁶⁹ Bassett, quoted in Chris Wiegand, ‘Sunshine and Terrible Rage: Linda Bassett on Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone*’, *Guardian*, 10 February 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/10/linda-bassett-caryl-churchill-escaped-alone-royal-court> (accessed 21 October 2016).

theatre such as this invites us to feel our way through to seeing a feminism committed to 'enter stage left'.