



## ‘Sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England’

**6: Ernst Renan famously claimed that ‘Forgetting [...] is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation’. How do your chosen plays and performances negotiate between remembering and forgetting in relation to nation, and to what effect?**

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Nationhood can in many ways be seen as a cognitive affair; the construction of nation is a continuous, non-linear process, one that often must take place in the minds of its members, as a ‘limited and sovereign’ imagined community<sup>1</sup>. Nation is also inherently bound to memory - one often speaks about a cultural or national memory - but the specifics of this are variable and problematic. Renan’s above quote speaks to this idea, cognisant of the ‘deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations’, and the need, in pursuit of unity, to forget them<sup>2</sup>. In this essay I hope to explore the applications of remembering and forgetting to nation-building, considering *Bubbling Tom* (2000), and *Albion* (2017). I hope to argue for the case that Mike Pearson’s site-specific performance, *Bubbling Tom*, breaks away from Renan’s idea through its central focus on the act of memory (rather than the repression of it). Pearson acknowledges both the inevitability of forgetting and the imperfectability of remembering, and incorporates the two into the form of his performance which, with the help of the active audience, arguably contributes to a palimpsest of local memory for a landscape that might be regarded as forgotten by the larger national body - a re-remembering and reclamation of nation, perhaps. I will consider the implications of *Bubbling Tom*’s temporalities and spatialities as they connect to key ideas such as localism in the face of the national or even global, site-specificity, Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* and the role of the audience/witness<sup>3</sup> in the act of memory. I will also view Mike Bartlett’s play through the lens of these ideas. *Albion* is also concerned with both memory and place in its own distinct manner, and the two remain interwoven both with each

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1 Benedict Anderson, 'Introduction', *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 2016), p.14

2 Ernst Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, in Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 11

3 Clifford McLucas, ‘Ten Feet and Three Quarters of an Inch of Theatre’, in Cathy Turner, ‘Palimpsest or Potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific Performance’, *New Theatre Quarterly* 20:4 (2004) p.374

other and with current events. Jen Harvie asserts that 'remembering may be a progressive or regressive political act'<sup>4</sup>, and this is something that will inform my discussion, secondary to Renan's 'forgetting... is a crucial factor...'. When reading the two performance texts with the founding ideas or ideology of Brexit in mind - arguably a knee-jerk regression on a national scale - I hope to make my reasoning for this clearer.

To best consider how a performance negotiates between remembering and forgetting, I believe that physical space is of great importance. Few places more so than in the site-specific performance. *Bubbling Tom* is contingent upon place, even down to its title, referring to a brook. It provides an anchor from which to explore both space and time. The village of Hibaldstow serves as an archive of sorts, or a raw material from which new meaning can be forged. Pearson describes of his creative process, 'work[ing] with fragments, with material traces, with evidence, in order to create something, a meaning, a narrative, a story, that stands for the past in the present'<sup>5</sup>, echoing Harvie's argument that site-specific performance is 'especially effective at remembering and constituting identities that are significantly determined by their materiality and spatiality'<sup>6</sup>, in that identity can be constructed from these spatial reference points: 'the soft oolite of a farm wall, the lichen-encrusted timber of a decayed fence'<sup>7</sup>. It is significant to note that Pearson's aim with *Bubbling Tom* does not appear to be to create a total and complete memory of Hibaldstow, his childhood, or anything else. The performance is in a sense about its own incompleteness; *Bubbling Tom* seems to recognise the tension between memory and forgetting, and to accept it: 'the past is haunted by *absence*'<sup>8</sup>. Absence is always present, and thus it becomes another part of the performance - the 'corrugated-iron church hall' has disappeared, and yet Pearson, through performance, is able to revisit it through this compound of memories<sup>9</sup>.

In my view, Pearson's approach could imply memory as bifaceted - first almost external, or in a state of passivity, and then an internal product, once processed and reckoned with. My idea is arguably backed up by Harvie's assertion that the location of a site-specific performance can act

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4 Jen Harvie, 'Remembering the nations: site-specific performance, memory, and identities', in *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.41

5 'Village', from Mike Pearson, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p.25

6 'Remembering the Nations', p.42

7 'Village', p.21

8 'Village', p.28

9 'Village', p.21

as 'a potent mnemonic trigger', enabling a negotiation between meanings of different times<sup>10</sup>. Pearson himself attests to something similar, in fact: using 'the rediscovered landscape as a mnemonic [...] relocating myself in a place once intimate; re-embodiment, [...] remembered actions'<sup>11</sup>, where he demonstrates the importance of physicality in the act of memory. Indeed, *Bubbling Tom* as a performance event facilitates this very need, and not just for Pearson - a topic to which I will return after a discussion of *Albion*.

Though not site-specific in a dramaturgical sense, *Albion* is preoccupied with a specific space, its meanings, its effects, and its possibilities. The garden of Albion can be said to serve as a liminal space, forming a 'traditional metaphor of national identity'<sup>12</sup> - an allegorical slant that distances it from the likes of *Bubbling Tom* or *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) in that it is using place as a portal through which to access 'something else', rather than stopping to consider the place itself (the place being fictional, after all). The garden is an explicit site of negotiation on multiple levels. Most personally, it is a point of conflict between Audrey and Anna over how best to remember the deceased James. Upon Audrey's scattering of James' ashes in the garden without anyone else's consent or knowledge, the meaning of the garden shifts for everyone, particularly Anna. Suddenly, memory has been painfully *implanted* into this physical space, and as such she becomes emotionally - bordering physically - bound to the garden for a large part of the play in order to access these memories: '[w]ell now he's in the ground this has become my ground. My garden. My plants and my place'<sup>13</sup>. Through Audrey's actions, the garden has become a *milieu de mémoire* for Anna, an environment of reflection and remembrance, 'in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting'<sup>14</sup>. A useful way to illustrate this outlook may be to turn to Anna's reaction to the 1920s themed event in Act Two, where she exclaims 'I have no idea what [Audrey is] doing! Why's she trying to pretend this whole place hasn't moved on?'<sup>15</sup>. Anna seems able to negotiate between constructed past and present in a manner not available to everyone in the play.. Nonetheless, though somewhat unhealthy, the garden becomes a 'home' for her, defined by Sierz as 'a center of meaning and a field of care'<sup>16</sup> where Anna submerges herself in memory, or memorialising: 'I couldn't stop

10 'Remembering the nations', p.42

11 'Village', p.24

12 Aleks Sierz, 'British Theatre after Brexit: One Year On', *Performing Arts Journal*, 120 (2018) p.62

13 Mike Bartlett, *Albion* (NHB Modern Plays), (Nick Hern Books, 2017) p.60

14 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', in *Representations*, 26 (1989) p.8

15 *Albion*, p.51

16 Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) p.24

coming here. To be with him. I’ll never stop coming here’<sup>17</sup>. Similar to the construction of identity in site-specific performances I mentioned with *Bubbling Tom*, a chunk of Anna’s identity is tethered to this garden, and to access it she must occupy this space. Unlike the constructive memory-making of *Bubbling Tom*, Anna risks becoming beholden to her memories in *Albion*, especially after Audrey wrests authority over them away from her. I believe all of this demonstrates the quote from Harvie I included in my introduction; memory, for Anna, is a consistent source of tension, where she teeters on the edge between both progression (as demonstrated at the party) and regression (her extended periods of seclusion and mourning in the garden).

Audrey’s relationship with the garden in *Albion* is used by Bartlett, more than Anna’s, in the evocation of wider political contexts. *Albion* can be called a ‘Brexit play’ - a fact that the play demonstrates with about as much subtlety as any other discourse on Brexit: with Sierz describing it as ‘writing that has one hand on its heart, and is annoyingly declamatory. Bartlett can sometimes be over-explicit’<sup>18</sup>. For Audrey, the garden central to the play can be read as a *lieux de mémoire*, ‘where memory crystallizes and secretes itself’<sup>19</sup>, and where she is driven by the need to contain, reconstruct, and restrict. In the play’s final moments, she becomes incensed, desperate to continue with the project that, between Act Three and Four, grew clear was not possible: ‘I’m not moving. I will fix it all piece by piece, inch by inch of this garden, I’ll do it myself’<sup>20</sup>. The word choice of ‘fix’ could be read either as to correct, or to solidify: to make static. I would argue the latter exemplifies Audrey’s approach to memory: viewing it as something tangible to be obtained, fully known, and controlled - something reflected in her treatment of James’ ashes - and often taking the form of ‘restorative nostalgia’, where she is literally trying to ‘rebuild the lost home’<sup>21</sup>. The nature of the garden as a discrete, bounded place reflects Nora’s conception of *lieu de mémoire*: ‘moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death’<sup>22</sup>. The garden under Audrey’s ownership is isolated, anachronistic, and languishing, as shown by the fluctuations in its health at the beginning of each act, particularly the almost decadent, overgrown state in Act Three contrasted against the lifelessness of Act Four. Its natural processes are disrupted, to use

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17 *Albion*, p.65

18 ‘Theatre after Brexit: One Year On’, p.63

19 ‘Between Memory and History’, p.7

20 *Albion*, p.102

21 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Simple Books, 2002), p.49

22 ‘Between Memory and History’, p.1

Nora's metaphor, 'by running a knife between the tree of memory and the bark of history' - a tree that Anna is content to sit under<sup>23</sup>.

Allegorically, *Albion's* garden cannot thrive any more than the ideological pretext for Brexit can, as both are founded upon wilfully, problematically incomplete renderings of memory. Audrey echoes the sentiment of the Renan quote which frames this essay; her memory-making is selective, and utilised to achieve particular goals. Even when it comes to her own son, Audrey has 'no desire to hear the gruesome details' behind James' death<sup>24</sup>. When extrapolated, this results in her wilful ignorance of a whole set of contexts pertaining to her own nation of England and its foreign policy decisions that led to the loss of her son. In order to construct her garden utopia, Audrey must wall herself in, insulate herself from a host of national memories and their familial implications. Bartlett's play also touches on other contentious issues, such as EU migrant labour and multiculturalism. Economic downturn in recent decades is often blamed on European migrants or other scapegoat groups, an age-old and recurrent habit that skirts around the problem's true sources; concurrently, Ashcroft and Bevir argue that 'the economic and social rights granted during the postwar expansion of British citizenship have been gradually eroded since Thatcher, and hit hard by austerity'<sup>25</sup>. Though there is no explicit hostility towards Krystyna in the play, there is a subtle sense of otherness haunting the exchanges concerning her: 'Do you like it here?/This area?/Britain./Oh.'<sup>26</sup>. This mirrors the 'where are you really from?' refrain, and brings heavy political baggage when it comes to defining nation. We might question what markers there are to differentiate Krystyna from the others beyond the superficial, and what role a memory gap in the English political consensus has to play in distorting the social, cultural, and economic connections between England/the British Isles and mainland Europe. Audrey provides us with a good example of this in Audrey's discussion of the south of France, where she hypocritically says, 'No offence [...] but the people. My god! So rude' - evoking an arbitrary, grossly generalised distinction that attributes character traits by nationality<sup>27</sup>.

Though not a perfect translation, Audrey also evokes the figure of the upper-class patron who, as described by Berbereich, through their patronage of the arts had 'their ideal version of

23 'Between Memory and History', p.10

24 *Albion*, p.61

25 Richard Ashcroft and Bevir, Mark, 'Pluralism, National Identity and Citizenship: Britain after Brexit', in *Political Quarterly* 87, 3 (2016), p.356

26 *Albion*, p.38

27 *Albion*, p.30

the countryside’ become the norm that persists to this day<sup>28</sup>. This helped shape the image of England ‘as a green and pleasant country idyll’, while hiding the ugly truth (or ‘gruesome details’) of ‘smoking chimneys, ugly factory buildings and unhygienic slum dwellings of their work force [that] did not fit their world view’<sup>29</sup>. Of course, this is far from the scale of Audrey’s activities in *Albion*, but there remains a similar lack of recognition of the less ‘desirable’ supporting factors that enable their worldview. Audrey shirks any notion of ‘civic responsibility’, saying ‘the truth is I just don’t see it like that’, which is a stance she has the privilege to take, at least to begin with<sup>30</sup>. As with Anna and James’ ashes, Audrey has the socioeconomic power to refuse engagement with the communities that she is so often engaged in reverie over. This stance circles back to Brexit, and the post-referendum narrative that the regions of England were not listened to; Audrey arguably embodies this idea (for which migrants and the European Union were scapegoated). When inhabiting Weatherbury’s house, one of the social and symbolic centres of the village, Audrey is blind to any of the meanings and stories she might find in the village, and so are we as the audience - we never see anywhere beyond the property. Because of these fetters, we are excluded from many of the local memories that might be found there: they are drowned out by Audrey’s project. Even those we do gain access to, such as Cheryl’s cancer, are of secondary significance to any transactions she wishes to make. The context of the play’s production arguably limits the play’s potential in this regard further. *Albion* was first staged at the Almeida Theatre, North London, positioning it close to the institutional centres of the nation, theatrically, economically, and in terms of government<sup>31</sup>. Thus, the material event of the play does not work to resist the London-centric status quo of English national identity, and physically ‘forgets’ other regions before the curtains have even opened.

Even if Audrey - not to mention Zara and Paul - were to pay more attention to the happenings of the village, little would meaningfully change. As Sierz states: ‘if those areas of the country which voted most strongly to Leave [...] are the most socially and economically deprived, then simply listening to their fears and prejudices can surely do little to encourage either good or provocative drama’<sup>32</sup>. This, I would argue, is where the strengths of *Bubbling Tom* become more apparent. Though predating the EU referendum by sixteen years, the performance plays close attention to

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28 Christine Berberich, ‘This Green and Pleasant Land: Cultural Constructions of Englishness’, in Burden and Kohl (eds.), *Landscape and Englishness* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2006), p.209

29 ‘This Green and Pleasant Land’, p.212

30 *Albion*, p.53

31 *Albion*, p.4

32 Aleks Sierz, ‘Dark Times: British Theatre after Brexit’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 115 (2017) p.4

the village of Hibaldstow in a manner that many institutions have failed to match in the ensuing decades. In fact North Lincolnshire, where Hibaldstow is located, voted to leave with a majority of 66.3%<sup>33</sup>. Brexit is widely regarded as a fit of national nostalgia, with news publications hailing a 'retreat into the falsehoods of the past', and a 'haunted dreamscape of collective dementia'<sup>34</sup>. While somewhat dramatic in delivery, Byers touches on the significant manipulation of memory around the EU Referendum: a reliance on aged iconography and delusions of grandeur (such as Empire). A notable absence to this is of course any mention of concrete local identity that is rooted in place. *Bubbling Tom*, though from a different time, consciously serves as an antidote to this issue, engaging in intimate self-reflection and shared memory, with Pearson saying 'everything of value – communality, generational communication, sense of place – might be at stake' and working, through performance, towards an 'evocation of the past: rather than a reconstruction of the past from its surviving remains'<sup>35</sup>. He exhibits an awareness of the risks inherent in memory - of progress or regress - and the fact that memory is always an act of 'mediation' and production<sup>36</sup>. I would argue that the performance's effectiveness (as much as I can speak to the subject, having not been present) owes much to the involvement of the witnesses present in Hibaldstow. *Bubbling Tom* shows a communitarian politics in its acceptance that 'there are always those who remember us, remember for us, better than we do ourselves'; memory appears as a collective *effort* here, and a unifying act<sup>37</sup>. A wealth of different memories, as audience-members interject, become 'part of the weave of a performance within which meaning was constantly negotiated'; Pearson makes memory democratic through his recognition of its plurality and his abandonment of any pretense of its objectivity<sup>38</sup>. Conversely in *Albion*, Audrey imposes historical narratives and assigns value without any similar considerations. The garden is 'of vital historical importance'<sup>39</sup> as she decrees, but will not listen to Edward when he says 'the house, and its garden, have been used by the village for decades'<sup>40</sup>. Audrey is shaping memory to 'omit or forget features that trouble the image [...] [she is] striving to create', as Harvie outlines as one of its potentially destructive uses<sup>41</sup>, rather than

33 'EU Referendum Results', *BBC News*, online at

<https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu-referendum/results>, [accessed 13/12/2020]

34 Sam Byers, 'Opinion | Britain Is Drowning Itself in Nostalgia', *New York Times*, online at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/opinion/sunday/britain-brexit.html>, [accessed 13/12/2020]

35 'Village', p.28

36 'Village', p.27

37 'Village', p.22

38 'Village', p.26

39 *Albion*, p.13

40 *Albion*, p.53

41 'Remembering the Nations', p.41

acknowledging that the house could have these dual meanings originating from different subjectivities and times.

*Bubbling Tom*'s engagement with time can best be described as one of layers. Temporalities rest on top of each other as Pearson and the audience sift through them together, enabled by conspicuous performance's 'subjunctive mode, seeing [place] imaginatively, differently'<sup>42</sup>. He describes how he 'points out this that still survives [...] that which has altered [...] and that which has disappeared', representing multiple sites that are at different stages of presence or absence<sup>43</sup>. All are given consideration: the focus is not on reconstructing what has been lost, nor ignoring the echoes of the past but instead, thanks to 'a temporal distancing', 'a revelling in and subversion of nostalgia'<sup>44</sup>. After all, visitors to Hibaldstow are also able to discuss and debate the location of *Bubbling Tom*. Because it is not a restricted or exclusively revered place, a milieu de mémoire can be formed. There seems to be an awareness of the performance of *Bubbling Tom* being only one moment in an environment that will continue to evolve; 'the transitory nature of the event is set against the longer durée of architecture'<sup>45</sup>. This can be connected to the idea of 'host' in site-specific performance, which includes the space's 'resonances of its former articulations', in *Bubbling Tom* - the performance event that can be seen as the 'ghost' haunting the site - these are explicitly attended to<sup>46</sup>. Cathy Turner proposes a 'palimpsest-like layering of "host" and "ghost" spaces', which suggests an imperfection and irregularity to the process<sup>47</sup>. The influence of the audience, a mixture of locals and those who have travelled from elsewhere, furthers this notion, as there becomes a range of different texts imposed onto one another to construct an inclusive, amorphous local identity. There likely isn't a surefire way to determine the accuracy of the resulting palimpsest of memory, place, and performance, but this doesn't have to be a point of conflict, and can still hold value as a form of negotiating with one's identity, past, present, and interrelation with others.

Memory is a realm as essential to the human condition as it is fraught with uncertainties and potentials, both positive and negative. Performance as an event has the capacity to negotiate

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42 Dan Rebellato, 'Nation and Negation: Terrible Rage', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 6:1 (2018), p.23

43 'Village', p.21

44 'Village', p.22

45 'Village', p.22

46 'Palimpsest or Potential Space?', p.374

47 'Palimpsest or Potential Space?', p.373



with memory and forgetting in a manner that intertwines the personal, the local, and the national. The idea of nation can be thought of as performed in everyday life, and so the 'symbolic act' of performance can be an invitation to explore facets of nation that are potentially harmful - such as an obsession with recreating the past - or that are omitted from shared memory - such as the experiences of local communities. In this essay it has been my aim to analyse my chosen plays' engagement with memory. *Bubbling Tom* has a more obvious focus on the topic, with Mike Pearson having written extensively on the topic, particularly as it relates to site-specific performance. Indeed, I hope I have shown the effectiveness of the site-specific performance event in healthily mediating with memory and between concrete space and the abstract idea of nation. *Albion*, through an allegorical use of place and the creation of both lieu and milieu de mémoire, allows for a more general discussion of nation, and critique of regressive attitudes towards British, or more specifically English, national identity. Neither plays 'solve' memory or the contentious issue of nation, but it is not the role of performance or any other art form to behave so objectively. Instead both performances, in their own ways, create vessels to chart small patches of what can often be murky waters. Memory, when shared and accepted as flawed, can certainly serve as a 'progressive political act', and perhaps, if only by a fraction, wake us from that 'deep, deep sleep of England'<sup>48</sup>.

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