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Border Aesthetics, Resistance, and Europeanness in David Greig's "Anti-Brexit" Theatre

Contemporary Scottish playwright, and current artistic director of Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum Theatre, David Greig once admitted that "theatre cannot change the world" but, "if the battlefield is the imagination, theatre is a very appropriate weapon in the armoury of resistance" (Greig 2008, 219-220). Although it cannot change the world, theatre may be considered a special form of *artivism* awakening the audiences' conscience about the injustices and discriminations of contemporary society. Inspired by Bertolt Brecht's epic or dialectical theatre, his *Lehrstücke* in particular, Greig conceives each staged play as a crossing of the border between fiction and reality, as well as a laboratory in which producers, actors, and the audience all take part in a public debate meant to raise open questions, provoke critical thinking through *Verfremdung*, and effect some kind of social, and individual, (trans)formative process.

As scholars such as, *inter alia*, Clare Wallace, Verónica Rodríguez, Anja Hartl and Anja Müller have underscored,¹ for Greig, theatre is an act of resistance when, through an open dialectic, it awakens the audience's critical awareness in the face of compelling human concerns. In order to express such resistance, the playwright often resorts to a border aesthetics with which he engages the audience by posing crucial questions, such as: "What do you do when you encounter that which is different to you? Do you welcome it? Are you afraid of it? Do you fall in love with it? Do you overwhelm it? Does it overwhelm you?" (Hemming 2019). These interrogations are implied by the images of walls, boundaries, and frontiers that pervade Greig's plays – now representing insurmountable division lines, now sites of mutual exchange and encounter. As Anja Hartl has observed, for the Scottish dramatist, a border "is not only a geographical line of separation, but also a heavily loaded symbol that creates both opportunities and obstacles for the play's characters" (Hartl, 2022, 35).

Greig, in other words, shows us that the border is Janus-faced. When it is porous, permeable, negotiable, and penetrable, it may, on the one hand, become a threshold in which cultural difference can be negotiated and redefined. On the other hand, it can be a contentious contact zone, that is, in Mary Louise Pratt's germane definition, "[a social space] where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (Pratt 1991, 34). Like all liminal spaces, borders can give rise to experiences which "simultaneously reinforce and disintegrate social and political status and role, and structure and meaning, by putting into sharp relief the full range of our identities" (Donnan and Wilson 1999, 64).

Often located on, across or within borders, Greig's characters must negotiate their identities with various forms of alterity concerning culture, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. Their experiences convey narratives about the power dynamics of global

1 See Works Cited section for specific bibliographical references.

politics or the predicament of all those who embody transnationality either as an opportunity or as a drawback. Thus, for them border-crossing may mean free movement for tourism or business, but also forced escape from war, intolerant regimes, prosecution, and poverty. In fact, Janus-faced borders, in Greig's dramaturgy, characterise human relations in general: between nation states, East and West, diverse cultural systems, but also within the nation, the community, or even the single individual.

By looking at two textual examples, this article addresses Greig's border aesthetics and poetics and how they often embed – directly or vicariously – ideas, or narratives, of Europe and Europeanness. The two plays under scrutiny provide significant evidence of these imbrications – albeit in different ways. The setting and action in *Europe* (1994) were inspired by the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Yugoslav wars, but the play engages with transhistorical issues within the European context, such as socio-cultural integration and the refugee crisis. *Dr Korczak's Example* (1999) evokes the trauma of the holocaust by re-telling for a young audience the story of the legendary Polish pedagogue and paediatrician Janusz Korczak (pen name of Henryk Goldszmit), who refused to negotiate with the Nazi regime for his own life and chose instead to remain with the two hundred children under his care in the Warsaw Ghetto, and eventually accompany them to the concentration camp of Treblinka. His life paradigmatically serves as an exemplum of resistance against discrimination and disrespect, while also showing the tragedies taking place in contested border spaces, which often entail questions of life and death.

Read in our present time, these plays encourage us to re-think post-1989 European identity in the light of modern globalisation, Brexit, and related phenomena, such as the reinstatement of borders, the resurgence of nationalist ethnocentrism, xenophobic formulations, and false myths of national sovereignty. For this reason, they can be regarded as *ante-litteram* anti-Brexit dramas: both were written and staged before the rupture of Anglo-European relations, but they are anticipatory in condemning some of the political, ideological, and cultural implications underpinning it. In this sense, they can be added to the list of those literary works that the critic Kristian Shaw has seen as predating the so-called "BrexLit" published in the wake of the Referendum. Although he mainly focuses on "Euro-sceptic British fiction [...] dating back to the United Kingdom's first attempt at joining the European Economic Community" (Shaw 2018, 27) in the Seventies, the case he makes, i.e. that many novels anticipate the thematic concerns of BrexLit, is relevant to other genres, too.

1. David Greig and Brexit

"Something unique is afoot in Europe, in what is called 'Europe' even if we no longer know very well what or who goes by this name" (Derrida 1992, 5): in this epigraph placed before the text of *Europe*, Greig shows his concern for the endurance of a European identity in spite of its internal differences many years before the UK's separation from it. Derrida's own dystopian book, *The Other Heading* (1991), from which the quotation is taken, originally published under the title *L'autre cap* in *Liber, Revue européenne* (1990), seems to foreshadow the threat of continental fragmentation represented by current national divisive policies, protectionist measures, and extremist

views on cultural identities and formations. The French philosopher wrote it in the wake of the unification of Europe and post-Sovietism, but the present cogency of the following words is perspicacious:

Hope, fear, and trembling are commensurate with the signs that are coming to us from everywhere in Europe, where, precisely in the name of identity, be it cultural or not, the worst violences, [...], the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism, are being unleashed, mixed up with each other, but also [...] mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very 'spirit' of the promise. (Derrida 1992, 6)

Greig has interpreted and appropriated the meaning of these words in both plays under scrutiny, suggesting, in Derrida's footsteps, that the concept of Europeaness has been and still is continuously challenged by paradoxes and contradictions due to the continent's cultural, linguistic, and social diversity. Like his predecessor, moreover, he points to the European central institutions' duty to turn this diversity into a source of enrichment rather than allow it to become an expedient for the most extremist fringes in support of their nationalistic agendas. As Derrida, an Algerian by birth and an expatriate in France, regards himself "no doubt a European intellectual" but not "European in every part," that is a European "*among other things*" (1992, 82-83; original emphasis), Greig, who was born in Edinburgh but raised in Nigeria, eschews essentialist identity definitions and a fixed national belonging. On the contrary, he embraces difference, changeable routes rather than anchored roots, hybridity, and the crossing of cultural boundaries as life principles, without denying, however, that he is, *inter alia*, Scottish, British, and European.

Nor has Greig ever concealed the difficulties inherent in in-between or transcultural conditions: "Being/not being Scottish is a matter of profound uncertainty for me. It's perhaps the defining plank on which my identity is built and yet it's uncertain," he once admitted (Rodosthenous 2011, 5). By the same token, on various occasions, he pointed out the fact that, in all his works, there is the underlying attempt to look at an Other and to find that, in fact, there is no Other as such, because we are the Other and the Other is us. In other words, he always defines identity by means of alterity: this is a pervasive message in his plays, which he conveys by recreating foreign historical contexts resonating with domestic questions (as in *Dr Korczak's Example*), or by problematizing the borderline between the Self and the Other, the local and the global (as in *Europe*).

Greig's interest in and engagement with European culture generally, and theatre in particular, has been evident since the start of his career when, in the early 1990s, with Graham Eatough and Nick Powell, he founded the Glasgow-based experimental theatre group Suspect Culture, which toured all around Europe and enjoyed enormous success. The underlying idea of the project was to produce a theatre drawing from and intermeshing British and European traditions, as well as adopting a variety of visual and musical media. On several occasions, moreover, Greig has admitted being more influenced by continental (mainly Brecht² and French playwrights) than British

2 On Greig and Brecht see Wallace (2013, 31-68); Hartl (2018); and Rodríguez (2019a).

dramaturgy, and he drew on further models from the classical theatrical tradition, as is testified by his adaptations and reprises of Greek tragedy.³

Greig's transnational outlook accounts for his hostility to border-closing attitudes as expressed by the fierce Brexit campaign and the contentious responses and results it led to. In an interview given after the Brexit Referendum, he remarked on Scotland's "Remain" majority and the crucial function that an *engagé* theatre can have in carrying on an act of resistance against English insularity. He said, "we will no longer be able to take our Europeanness for granted; we will have to prove it" (Gardner 2018). Greig's voice is one among many who, as critic Alex Sierz argued, saw Brexit as leading "to an understandable fog of gloom in the theatre community" (2017, 5). For instance, playwright James Graham wrote a drama for television significantly entitled *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019) which depicts the scenario underlying the Vote Leave campaign directed by Dominic Cummings – an ideological terrain which a play like *Europe*, as shall be shown, astonishingly prophesised.

As was the case with the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, Greig revealed the Brechtian legacy in his playwriting when, in the context of the EU referendum, he resumed the experimental "twitter play" begun in 2013,⁴ in order to allow audiences the possibility to take part in the debate and express, if nothing else, their embarrassment. The playwright carried on, albeit less directly, this debate in the post-Brexit historical radio drama *Adventures with the Painted People* (2020), about the Romans' failed attempt at conquering Scotland and related issues of national identity, authority, cultural domination, and ethnic diversity – all resonating with the sensibilities at the basis of the Leavers' political motivations.⁵ Interestingly enough, the Roman Empire is an image of the European Union, but, at the same time, it evokes the British colonial past, suggesting an ambiguity which is deliberately meant to blur the boundary between apparently opposite factions, and, implicitly, to denounce the absurdity of seeing sameness and otherness as dichotomous rather than interchangeable terms.

In the play *Europe*, borders are made and unmade, according to the characters' individual experiences and responses to the effects produced by coterminous social and historical causes. If in the Vote-Leave campaign Europe emerged as "the quintessential 'Other'" (Stolz 2020, 88) from which the British Self intended to divorce, in *Europe*, Greig shows that internal discourses of othering have mimed the integrity of the continent at various historical moments, producing cultural as well as economic fractures that have persisted until nowadays.

3 Greig revisited Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus respectively in his *Oedipus the Visionary* (2005), *The Bacchae* (2007), and *The Suppliant Women* (2016).

4 Between December 2013 and April 2017 Greig used the social media platform Twitter (with the account @YesNoPlays) to write an online drama entitled *Yes No Plays* meant as a contribution to the Scottish Independence Referendum. See *The Yes No Plays, Twitter*, <www.twitter.com/yesnoplays> [accessed 15 September 2021].

5 See McMillan (2020) and Hartl (2022).

2. *Europe*: Bordering and Debordering

First performed at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 1994, Greig's play *Europe* has now become immensely relevant again. The episodic narrative unfolding in twenty short scenes is about the change and conflicts created by the arrival of two war refugees in a small, unnamed, decaying border town somewhere in Central Europe. In the incipit, the eight interwoven voices of the First Chorus immediately focus on the border as an image of instability, fluidity, and change, which, however, is paradoxically, and ironically, counterbalanced by the *taedium vitae* and utter stillness that paralyse its inhabitants:

The First Chorus

1 Ours is a small town on the border, at various times on this side,
 2 and,
 3 at various times
 2 on the other,
 1 but always
 1, 2, 3 on the border.
 [...]
 All but we've remained,
 5 a rockpool on the shoreline,
 6 inhabitants on the shoreline, inhabitants of the tidemark,
 7 the place where driftwood is deposited,
 8 beyond the cleansing reach of the waves. (Greig 2002, 5-6)

The Chorus speaks at the beginning of each of the two Acts and represents the voice of the community conveying the general sense of loss and waste that dominates the place. By the same token, a stage direction at the beginning of Scene 3 suggests the stagnation of the unnamed provincial town in the heart of Europe where the action takes place and the uselessness of its railway station, in which trains no longer stop: "The predominant mood is of a forgotten place. Timetables, out-of-date posters and sadly decrepit information signs hang from the walls" (7). Despite its desolation, this place becomes a contact zone for eight different people: Morocco, an entrepreneur; Fret the stationmaster; Adele the porter; the foreigners Sava and Katia; and Berlin, Horse, and Billy, three furnace workers.

Katia and her father Sava have presumably fled from former Yugoslavia and take shelter in the defunct railway station. At first, Fret, the stationmaster, tries to evict them but gradually starts sympathizing with Sava's love of railways and nostalgic feelings for an old Europe that is gradually disappearing. Adele, the station porter, is immediately attracted, even erotically, to the young refugee Katia, because she sees her migrant condition as an opportunity for border crossing, so that she can abandon her condition of internal exile and her stifling married life with her husband Berlin. The latter and his friend Horse have lost their jobs at the steelworks, and yet, in contrast to Morocco and Billy, who have tried and will try their luck elsewhere, they decide to stay, despite their sense of displacement and loss. Both find a possible loophole from despair in joining a xenophobic local gang of skinheads who identify the origin of all their misfortune in refugees, blacks, or "boat people" (24), as they call them. Their anger will burst into physical violence against the refugee Sava and ultimately into burning down the station in which Sava and Fret will be killed. Adele and Katia manage

to leave the town and plan to travel across Europe as inter-railers. In the last scene, entitled "Europe," lost in reverie, they list all the European cities they dream of visiting, almost in an attempt at remapping Europe. It is no coincidence, as will be clarified later, that Greig gives the arsonist Berlin the very last speech of the play, which is interspersed with the two women's words: "now they know," he says, watching the TV reports on the firebombing of the station, "they know that, in our own way, we are also Europe" (89-90).

The play came out after the Schengen Agreement and the Maastricht Treaty, but it pictures a post-1989 fragmented continent, reflecting what critic Roberto Dainotto (2007) has defined as 'Europe in theory,' showing how since the foundation of the EU the myths of *e pluribus unum* and of a united Europeanness have been shaken by a north-versus-south oppositional paradigm based on a neoliberal capitalist logic, which is a legacy of the Hegelian concept of the 'two Europes' (nowadays rephrased as 'two-speed Europe'). Catalysts for Greig's thought-provoking drama were his journey around Europe shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s, ethnic cleansing, masses of people migrating from east to west, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the consequent re-shaping of cultural, political, and geographical territories.

Europe is almost prophetic in depicting a continent torn by concurrent opposite drives: towards debordering, on the one hand, under the effect of migrancy and globalisation, respectively embodied by the refugees and Morocco; and towards re-bordering, on the other, a hyper-protectionist response to migration flows that Berlin and Horse enact by resorting to violence. Such dynamics involving the characters of the play can be examined by adapting the critic Alisdair Rogers' illuminating thesis that European transnationalism does not simply entail moving across borders but also borders moving across people (2004, 171), owing to the impact of cultural, geo-economic, political and social transformations. Thus, Adele, Morocco, Billy and the two migrants are characters who geographically and mentally move across borders for different reasons, and who, willingly or necessarily, open themselves up to new perspectives: cultural and sexual otherness, in the case of Adele; socio-economic opportunities for Morocco and Billy; hope of survival and a fresh start for Katia and Sava.

In contrast, the territorialized Berlin and Horse are border-crossed characters: after losing their jobs, they both become internally fractured by their sense of dislocation and trace hard borders between themselves and the two refugees, because they see them as an external threat now turned into an internal enemy, or enemy within, unsettling their lives and, therefore, to be eliminated. At the beginning of the play, "the wolves" often referred to in the play would seem to refer to Sava and Katia, but, later on, in particular in scene 19 of Act Two, entitled "Wolves," by means of a reversal of perspective, Greig encourages the audience to realise that the real wolves, the enemies within state borders, are often people like Berlin, Horse and the fascist locals, who justify violence to defend their territory according to false ideas of security and possession.

On hearing strange sounds at the station, Fret tells Sava that they might be caused by wolves: "There's a pack in the forest. They crossed the forest when the borders came down" (Greig 2002, 85), he says, to which Sava, prone to idealism despite his predicament, replies that "it's just imagination," and that he should not "let the old mind

invent things to frighten itself" (86). Unluckily, the threat is real and, since it derives from within the state, it can be read through Derrida's political bestiary in the series of seminars entitled *La bête et le souverain* (2001-2002): like a sovereign, who resorts to fear and coercive means in order to protect the state and ensure the respect of the law, Berlin and Horse paradoxically legitimise violence against what they see as an illicit invasion of their *polis*; in other words, they enact Plautus' maxim *homo homini lupus* without realising the absurdity of their ideological position as alleged defenders of socio-political rights, which they are unable to acknowledge in other cases of subalternity.

In very complex ways, Greig engages with Europeanness and the continent's internal divisions by means of his characters' different conceptions and articulations of the image of geophysical, mental, and symbolic borders. Berlin allusively condemns internal European boundaries determined by economic disparities but defends hard borders as barriers against the arrival of foreigners. For migrant subjects like Morocco and Billy, the border is, respectively, "a magic money line" (33) across which a new prosperous life is plausible, and "the horizon" to "swim for [...] while [his] head's above water" (26). For the dreamy cosmopolitan Adele, the border is a fluid boundary existing only to be crossed in order to explore new possibilities, as she tells Berlin:

Look – see there ... at the edge of the forest. You can see the border. Just. There. You can make out the wire.

[...] Hardly visible. Like a thought.

[...] It's as if the border's hardly there, as if you could imagine it away. [...] As if you could just walk through it ... just cross the line. (11)

Crossing or being crossed by borders in the play suggests different narratives of Europe. Critic Janelle Reinelt refers to the 'New Europe' idea emerging mainly after 1989, with the dismantling of the Iron Curtain; in fact, an unfulfilled promise, an "open and elusive term of great/little significance and power" (2001, 365) rather than a realised project. She describes it as "a liminal concept, fluid and indeterminate, and most importantly, a site of possible struggle" (365). In line with such a challenging definition, Greig's Europe, too, as envisaged in the play, is a construct "of great or little significance and power" (365) depending on how human communities or single individuals intend to effect it. There is no denying the fact that all the characters' experiences, however diverse, are marked by struggles, conflicts, and tensions that make it impossible for them to endorse a common idea of Europe. Their frustrations and expectations shape it as either a (utopian?) borderless supra-nation or as a fragmented entity made up of separate nations with delineable borders.

An example of the former is conveyed by Adele's ideals of flux, mobility, and change symbolised by the image of the trains in motion, which run through the station without ever stopping. The young woman gives voice to a cosmopolitan idea of positive rootlessness and non-belonging which, nonetheless, comes near a utopia, if we consider the tragic denouement of the play and Berlin's final cynical remarks about the inequalities and injustices marring the European project. Adele naively idealises Katia's diasporic condition, and she romanticises Morocco's trading across borders, while, in fact, Katia can be hardly reconciled with her migrancy, and Morocco somehow remains attached to his roots, even if he undertakes new routes. When Adele asserts that "travel broadens the mind," Katia rebuts her conviction saying that travel, on the contrary

"stretches [the mind] like skin across a tanning rack [...] a pegged skin out to dry" (Greig 2002, 53). As regards Morocco, he has become a cosmopolitan and transnational subject for opportunistic reasons, rather than having firmly embraced cultural deracination as an elective condition. On the one hand, he tells Katia that "nothing's more of a prison than a home" (71), but, on the other hand, he says to Billy: "I may have been away, but I see the old faces, smell the old smells. [...] Believe me your memories are more valuable than money" (32-33). Thus, his position about homelessness and cosmopolitanism remains ambiguous throughout the play.

A different counterpart to Adele's idealistic unhomeliness and imaginary map of a borderless, inclusive Europe is embodied by Berlin's opposite vision of an internally divided Europe marked by economic as well as geographic boundaries. In fact, Berlin and Horse's xenophobic claim to rebordering and closure towards the threatening Other is also a consequence of their being first of all victims of an invisible dividing line that separates the rich and the poor of Europe, of a disadvantaged, anger-provoking condition which leads them to blame similarly miserable foreigners as potential job stealers. At the end of the play, Berlin's role is partly rehabilitated by his becoming a mouthpiece of social misfits and wretched individuals. In a sense, Berlin hyperbolically ventriloquises Greig's own questions about European identity and unity. His closing words commenting on the media attention aroused by the conflagration at the station – "And now they know [...] that, in our own way, we are also Europe" (90) – invite us, like Derrida in *The Other Heading* (1992), to ask what Europe is and what being European involves.

In an interview, Greig once said that "[y]ou cannot have a democracy if you are not actively questioning the perspectives of other people" (qtd. in Hemming 2019). In *Europe*, the most obvious candidates for 'other people' are the two refugees, whose predicament encounters both empathy and rejection. However, on another level, the 'other people' are also those who, like Berlin and Horse, represent the subaltern Europe of the poor, the unemployed, the invisible, whose desperate call for attention often goes dangerously unheeded – as Berlin's concluding speech appealing to European government authorities (referred to as 'they') wants to demonstrate. Interestingly enough, Berlin's words at the end refer back to the beginning, when the First Chorus addresses the audience thus:

All We ask for very little here
7 With things as they are we daren't ask much.
8 Except that as you pass,
5 on your way to an older,
6 more beautiful
7 or more important place,
8 you remember that we are,
All in our own way,
1 also Europe. (Greig 2002, 6)

Berlin's plea, in other words, is not isolated but gives voice to the distress of an underprivileged community – "I'm here on behalf of a ... on behalf of the community" (69), Berlin says to Fret, when he shows a petition signed by all those who want to drive the refugees away.

A further narrative of Europe in the play is that conveyed by Fret, the station master, and the refugee Sava. Both are anchored to the nostalgia for the by-gone, pre-1989 Europe, which, to them, meant the certainty of a fixed home and a stable job – a structure dismantled by the war and the impending capitalist economy. Fret's words describing the decrepit station, once the symbol of a perfectly regulated system but now crumbling together with the world surrounding it, are paradigmatic in this respect:

Not just the station, not just us but ... everywhere I look ... It feels like things are crumbling ... I've seen buildings go up and come down, I've seen street ... names change... it's formed around me like geology. And now it's wearing away. It's eroding the wind. Losing tiny particles of substance every day, getting smaller, breaking up. (77)

"Steel and tracks and trains like blood muscle and arteries," Fret says, used to "[hold] the continent together" (53), and Sava still believes that such cohesion and interconnectedness symbolised by the railway system might be preserved. Despite his condition of refugee, in the play he is the main mouthpiece of a humanistic ideal defining the European identity which Berlin and Horse's incendiary act will eventually burn down. Before this final physical and moral conflagration, he tries to convince his sceptical, disenchanted daughter that, although they are distant from home, they will be "looked after" where they are, because they are not in "some savage country on the other side of the world" but "still in Europe" (29), a transnational entity that Sava associates with progress, civilization, and shared citizenship.

Ultimately, Greig provides no definitive answer to Derrida's question of "what or who goes" by the name of Europe. The play's pervasive "ambivalence" (Rodríguez 2015) vis-à-vis its semantic, narrative, and textual "holes" (Rodríguez 2019b) affords various hermeneutic choices. At the same time, one clear message gets through to the reader: that a Europe bolstering centre-versus-periphery models or arbitrary policies of inclusion and exclusion cannot go by the name of international community but remains, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, an "unfinished adventure" (2004). The implication is that only interpersonal relationships across geo-political and cultural borders can create cohesion. In the world depicted in *Europe*, this unity cannot be achieved because there are characters who insist on delineating a hard border between Self and Other, local and global, thus impeding the action of those who attempt to cross cultural, ethnic, and gender boundaries. By representing a community which is internally fragmented even before the arrival of the two strangers, Greig problematizes and questions ideological conceptions of otherness seen as the intrusion of an alien force that disrupts the domestic. The real threat comes from within the community, from the "dumb and blunt" (Greig 2002, 60) xenophobic creed of some of its members, whose blindness to humanitarian principles and uncontrolled violence are fuelled by economic hardship as well as by a desperate need to redefine power relations.

The unfulfilled border-crossing for most of the characters – except for the two women who leave and prefer statelessness to national belonging – is the failure of what British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah means by "conversation:" in "the human community, as in national communities," he writes, "we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together" (2006, xix). Such conversations are also made possible by a community's recognition of a shared cultural memory and heritage. In the words of another philosopher, Rodolphe Gasché,

The prime duty of the European is to take responsibility for this heritage, that is, the modern tradition of reflecting on European identity. This is so not only because these discourses concern being European but also because such identity is always established in relation to alterity, to the other, to the non-European. (2009, 266)

Essential components of any cultural and historical heritage are timeless narratives which can cross borders, that is, "travelling tales" (2005, 256), to adapt Appiah's ideas of cosmopolitanism and identity. One of them is told in Greig's play *Dr Korczak's Example*.

3. *Dr Korczak's Example: Resistance against Bordering*

Dr Korczak's Example paradigmatically provides evidence of the influence of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* on Greig's dramaturgy, which is similarly informed by the idea that theatre can fulfil an important pedagogical function for young and adult audiences alike. Greig conceived it as a children's play with a specific educational purpose; yet, the messages it conveys, chiming with current bordering tendencies within Europe and globally, transcend this original plan.

The play re-tells the story of the Polish-Jewish writer, paediatrician, pedagogue, and pioneer of children's rights whose work provided the basis for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by all world leaders in 1989.⁶ Korczak is also known for his opening of an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto, which was erected after the Nazis' invasion of Poland in 1939. On 5 August 1942, after refusing to save his own life, he was deported with the orphans to the Treblinka extermination camp – this is the pivotal episode around which the whole action in the play revolves. Inspired by the doctor's *Ghetto Diary*, in 2001 Greig staged, for Scottish secondary-school pupils,⁷ a story about resistance, resilience, and desperate attempts at border-crossing. These attempts are made in three main ways, and they involve both characters and spectators according to the anti-naturalistic performative technique that links Greig with Brechtian theatre.

First, the protagonist seeks to overcome – albeit in vain – the insurmountable divide between Nazis and Polish Jews, to straddle, that is, their opposite sides, by resorting to communication and passive resistance. Secondly, he tries to cross the border between his idealism and the pragmatism of the rebellious orphan Adzio, the leader of the Ghetto uprising. Against Korczak's diplomacy and pacifism, Adzio, like Berlin in *Europe*, vents his rage by violent action, although, in this case, audiences are encouraged to ask themselves what use ethical principles and utopian ideals can be to victims of totalitarian regimes. This is one of the unsettling, open questions the play engages with. Thirdly, Greig invites us to cross geocultural and historical borders by dealing with a European as well as global narrative engendering a transnational dialogue – regardless of ethnic belonging, language, religion or age. He accomplishes this task through

6 Janusz Korczak is the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit (Warsaw 1878-Treblinka 1942). After graduating in paediatrics, he gradually moved from medicine to education. On the centenary of his birth, UNESCO declared 1978-79 the Year of Janusz Korczak and the Year of the Child.

7 In 1998, Greig was commissioned by TAG Theatre Company to write a drama about Korczak for a tour in various secondary schools in Scotland.

recourse to a dramatic strategy whereby the actor playing Korczak sometimes steps out of his *dramatis persona* and turns into a narrator or commentator of the story in order to present it from a different perspective.

The fourth wall is broken by having Korczak's player interact with the audience to create the diegetic frame, while the story is being enacted by a cast of three to five performers mainly playing the three protagonists: Korczak, Adzio and Stephanie, one of the orphans and Korczak's assistant. At the same time, numerous wooden dolls are added on stage to represent all the characters mentioned by the script, including Korczak himself. Greig explains that the use of dolls "is important both as a stylistic device for distancing the actors and audience from the story-telling and as a way of conveying the sense of a larger canvas" (2001, 8). One of Greig's greatest achievements in this drama is that distance is not a contradiction to proximity, since the figure of Korczak is never mythologized and his individual story bears a message that is closer to our time than one may think. Moreover, "the purpose is dialectical, attempting to bypass the division between performer and viewer and to challenge the preconceptions and attitudes to the problem" (Wallace 2013, 35) which is being posed.

This problem concerns the action to be taken when two parties confront each other without any apparent possibility of giving rise to a "third space," to borrow Homi Bhabha's (2006) concept, produced by the communication between them, and in which it would be possible to annihilate the hierarchical difference between Self and Other. Without taking sides but leaving readers and spectators free to make up their minds, Greig opposes Korczak's attempt to negotiate with the enemy and continue trusting human rationality to Adzio's violent reaction and impulsive desire of revenge. In other words, the playwright puts the audience face to face with a dilemma: aggressive resistance versus passive resistance by example – which of the two is to be endorsed in situations of inhumanity and coercion such as that provoked by Nazi occupation? As he becomes a source of turmoil for all the other orphans in the Ghetto, the doctor feels compelled to expel Adzio from the institution he founded. Yet, no easy solutions are suggested, since both the doctor and the orphan's rebellion acquire the significance of *exempla* for future generations:

ACTRESS: The uprising was defeated but,
like Adam Cerniakov,⁸
like Korczak,
like the march of children,
the uprising was an example,
that has become famous in history.
Because it showed the people would not accept the world the way the Nazis wanted it.
(Greig 2001, 69)

At the same time, Greig clearly accepted writing the play as a means of celebrating Korczak's ideas, which he defines as an "exciting counterblast" to the "rigid and disciplinarian approaches" that the New Labour government imposed on teachers and educators in the late Nineties (2). In his preface to the 2001 edition of the play, Greig says that the doctor's profound example "still challenges us," and that "it still asks

8 Head of the so-called Warsaw *Judenrat*, a council created by Nazis to act as intermediaries between themselves and the Jewish people.

questions of us that we must answer" (3): questions about the violence of raising walls between individuals and communities, yet also about the violence triggered by hegemonic discourses which corroborate racial and social discrimination, political oppression, and ethnic prejudice.

This is the reason why, despite having been performed many years before Brexit, *Dr Korczak's Example*, like *Europe*, resonates with a contemporary European scenario that, though on a different scale and with different nuances, evokes racial conflicts, human inequality, fundamentalist ideologies, and disrespect of cultural difference. Korczak's orphanage represents an island amidst the general horror of the regime and the holocaust. There he strives to teach and apply those humanitarian principles based on inclusivity that are daily being infringed upon outside his institution, including mutual respect and the freedom of choice and judgement – which the doctor grants his pupils, without regard to their age, religion, or ethnicity. Moreover, his attempt to communicate with the outer hostile world suggests, despite its failure, that it is always important to keep believing in human conversations across the lines, even in the most discouraging situations. In this respect, Adzio's ideology of hatred against the oppressors is implicitly condemned, as it replicates in reverse the sadistic violence exerted by the Nazis on the Jews and is similarly marred by the idea that the end always justifies the means.

As *Europe* encourages us to reflect on what being European means, *Dr Korczak's Example* stirs our awareness of the indelible scars of Europe's historical past and memory, so as to call attention to the political and cultural responsibilities that the EU must assume if it wants to avert tragic crises and ruptures such as those ripping apart the continent in the last century. As in the early nineties *Europe* prophetically envisaged the internal tensions and divisions that would later underpin the processes leading to Brexit, the historical backdrop of *Dr Korczak's Example*, including Germany's and the Soviet Union's invasion of Poland in 1939, has disturbing resonances with the current rift lacerating the heart of Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, with its unpredictable consequences for the geo-politics not only of the continent but of the whole world, proves the topicality of Greig's implicit message in the play. Indirectly, he reminds us that, as Europeans, we are constantly asked to remember and investigate the horror of our past and recent history, and, through continuous self-questioning, understand what the Union set forth in 1993 can do against drifting towards that heart of darkness again.

The power of Korczak's ethical message lies in his effort to bridge the apparently irreducible gap between opposite parties, supported by his (possibly illusory yet notable) belief that even the inimical Other must first be recognised as a fellow human being and then confronted through dialogue rather than attack. This tendency to cross the border and reach alterity was typical of the real Dr Korczak, whose work as a paediatrician led him to travel throughout Europe and see the boundaries between different cultures as porous and fluid, no matter how distant they are. An example can be found in in Scene 19 when, turning to the Nazi soldier doll, Korczak utters one of the most memorable speeches of the entire play:

Who are you?
 Look at you – hardly more than a boy.
 A boy with a gun.

[...]
 Maybe you're an orphan.
 I'd like to meet you. (Greig 2001, 59)

The desire to "meet" a "you" who, in these circumstances, embodies the most extreme form of otherness shows that the doctor considers ethical responsibility towards our fellow creatures prior to any potential risk deriving from interpersonal clash and incommunicability. By addressing the Nazi soldier directly, he also intends to elicit his accountability to what and who he perceives as different.

Likewise, Korczak confirms his moral stance when, in Scene 13, Adzio challenges him and his ethical principles by saying that "Out there – in the world," there is only one way to survive: "You want something – you take it. You got something – you fight to keep it. You steal. You rob. You cheat" (42). The doctor's riposte is an open question addressed to the audience as well as the rebellious orphan: "You'll be alive. But ... In a world like that. What would be the point?" (42). One can read here another embedded critique of violent methods deployed in the resolution of conflicts. At the end, both Adzio and Stephanie prefer rebellion and escape to their protector's stoic acceptance of an unavoidable destiny. Whether they manage to survive or are captured by the Nazis is not revealed by the actor and actress taking the stage in the final scene. In other words, they omit the historical truth about the crushing of the resistance, the killing of its leaders, and the subsequent waves of new deportations to death camps.

As an example of the doctor's legacy and its border-crossing significance, in his Introduction to the play, Greig reports an experience he had in Palestine, at Al Kasaba Theatre, just after completing the first draft. When the director Raeda Ghazaleh referred to the crucial function theatre can have in times of political conflicts, he mentioned the name of the Jewish doctor without expecting her to know or, for that matter, appreciate him. To his surprise, Ghazaleh showed him a video in which young actors from a children's theatre company marched together through a ruined village to the town hall, on the roof of which they hung a banner with these words painted on it: "The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child." Korczak's travelling tale had reached them, across racial, ethnic, and religious dividing lines, following the same transnational and transcultural paradigm that he had promoted through his pedagogy and that informs Greig's 'lesson/learning play' for children – yet not only for them. As Adrienne Scullion has shown, like other similar plays telling stories of violence and war, it represents history "as offering lessons and examples that might be deployed to shape a modern world-view and to explore contemporary values and expressions of citizenship" (2005, 317).

4. Conclusion

Greig's theatre re-imagines the world's physical as well as conceptual barriers by questioning them from a variety of different angles. In their representations of conflicts and problematic contact zones, *Europe* and *Dr Korczak's Example* leave the audience with many unresolved questions regarding the possibility of unity within diversity and of a successful transnational and transcultural border-crossing. Because of their open dialectic, they offer two versions of Brecht-like 'lesson or learning plays,' in which problems are presented from more than one perspective, while the author avoids taking

sides with any of them – essentially, the question of what being European means in *Europe*, and, in *Dr Korczak's Example*, the dilemma of whether physical and metaphorical borders can be crossed in situations of conflict, discrimination, and oppression.

In both plays, Greig invites the audience to abandon fixed, essentialist, and polarised concepts of selfhood and otherness, to accept difference within borders, and to see the reaching out towards the Other, across cultural, ethnic, racial and gender boundaries, as a challenge heralding new opportunities. Echoing Salman Rushdie's statements that "we become the frontiers we cross" and that "to cross a frontier is to be transformed" (2003, 410-411), Greig suggests that exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization impede the building of a global community like that implied by Appiah's above-mentioned concept of cosmopolitan conversation. The underlying message is not that differences must be eliminated but that they should be respected and reassessed as porous lines that can be bridged and transcended. "The humanist ideal of universalism," in the words of anthropologist Marc Augé, ought not to envisage "a world without frontiers, but one where all frontiers are recognized, respected and permeable; a world, in fact, where respect for differences would start with the equality of all individuals, independent of their origin or gender" (1995, xiv-xv).

Greig's theatre, including the two plays under scrutiny, interprets this urgency to recognize what and who is other, to accept and respect cultural differences while also allowing for points of suture between them. The "job of theatre," he said in an interview, is

about putting yourself in the shoes of other people. [...]. You can't have a democracy unless you are actively questioning and trying to see things from other people's perspectives. (Greig qtd. in Hemming 2019)

Since his work with *Suspect Culture*, Greig has supported and promoted the idea of a socially and politically *engagé* theatre which has at its core an ethical commitment: to stimulate questions about individual and national identity, belonging and rootlessness, (trans)cultural (de)bordering, local and global communities by means of a dialectic meant to trigger debates rather than provide unequivocal answers. A resistance to essentialist thinking is paramount in his plays, as is a complex border aesthetics based on the polysemy rather than fixity of border imagery. Greig regards moving *across* borders as a transformative process, but a similar function may be assumed by different subjects' encountering *on* borders – which occurs to Sava and Fret in a border town, and which Korczak strives to carry out through his attempt to open an imaginary breach in the Ghetto's walls and start a communication between the inside and outside of that hard border.

The different ways in which the characters perceive and experience borders is a *fil rouge* to be linked to how the two plays engage with ideas of Europe and visions of Europeanness. Even if *Europe* may seem to do so more explicitly, both evoke the need to reform the European community through models challenging the economic and administrative constraints dominating it since its inception, models of humanism like those proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in *Nous et les autres* (1989), absorbing and interpreting the legacy of the Enlightenment. Greig's dramas show that theatre, like all artistic forms, can make up for what is too often missing in political discourses

concerning Europe, that is, the rehabilitation of *humanitas* in its etymological meaning, of what constitutes and unites us as human beings despite our differences. Theatre, therefore, can offer a locus of resistance against isolationist and separatist ideas of culture and national identity such as those underpinning Brexit. Perhaps theatre, to return to Greig's words quoted at the beginning of my essay, "cannot change the world, but it can allow us a moment of liberated space in which to change ourselves" (2008, 220).

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