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Teenage Dreams: Power and Imagination in David Greig's *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall*

Trish Reid

Abstract: In many contemporary theatre productions for teenage audiences, a power struggle is apparent between young people, who are typically the focus of narrative attention, and the adult world, which they are in the process of entering. This article focuses on two of David Greig's most successful works for young people, *Yellow Moon* (2006) and *The Monster in the Hall* (2010). In particular it explores the concept of aetonormativity as coined by the children's literature critic Maria Nikolajeva in 2010. Nikolajeva's theoretical intervention builds on power-oriented critiques of children's literature, which have been in the ascendancy in the last couple of decades, and is intended to demonstrate that adult normativity controls the way children's literature is patterned. Consequently, it provides a useful starting point for an exploration of the power dynamics that underwrite the material practices of theatre for young audiences (TYA). Acknowledging the usefulness of this concept, I nevertheless suggest that in *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall*, Greig effects a partial redistribution of power between the adult and the audience in the TYA exchange. Greig's subtlety in the use and handling of the concept of power, here as elsewhere, resists over-simplification.

Keywords: Aetonormativity, Imagination, Authority, Might, TYA

Towards the end of David Greig's *Yellow Moon: The Ballad of Leila and Lee* (2006), the teenage runaways who are the play's eponymous heroine and hero make love for the first time. This tender and rather wonderful event is not enacted but narrated, for the most part in the present tense:

Lee takes off his clothes.
He is a prize.
You take off your clothes.
Lee sees your body.
Old cuts like tribal markings.
And he touches you.
You are a prize.
Imagine what that would be like.

That's what it was like.¹

A similar moment occurs in another of Greig's plays for young adults, *The Monster in the Hall* (2010). In the final scene, Duke Macatarsney, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, finds love with Agnetha, a 'hard-rocking Norwegian anarchist' he has met in a multi-player online universe called Otherworld.² In spite of his deteriorating condition – he has temporarily gone blind – Duke is given a happy ending. 'And just at that moment they kissed', the audience is informed, 'which is something it's not necessary for us to see'.³

The question raised in both instances, of what it is 'necessary for us to see', is of course fundamental to theatrical representation and there is a comment implicit at such points in Greig's dramaturgy on the relative merits of showing versus telling. Greig is, after all, an extremely skilled and experienced playwright and his choices cannot be attributed to coyness or wrong-headedness in relation to the significance of scenic enactment to effective theatre. In point of fact, the strategy described above, in which enactment is replaced by narration, is utilized extensively in both plays. In one sense, Greig's use of narration in these plays evidences what a number of critics, including Clare Wallace and Nadine Holdsworth, have identified as an inclination 'towards techniques of storytelling and performance familiar in Epic theatre' that has been apparent in Greig's work since *Europe* (1994).⁴ Viewed from another angle

¹ David Greig, *Yellow Moon: The Ballad of Leila and Lee* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 42. *Yellow Moon* was commissioned by TAG Theatre Company, which produces work for children and young people on behalf of the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow.

² Mark Fisher, 'The Monster in the Hall review', *Guardian*, 5 November 2010, p. 42.

³ David Greig, *The Monster in the Hall*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 101. *The Monster in the Hall* was commissioned by TAG and produced in association with Arts and Theatres Trust Fife at Kirkland High School and Community College in September 2010.

⁴ Clare Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig* (London: Methuen Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 35. Nadine Holdsworth also notes that Greig 'cites Bertolt Brecht as his primary artistic inspiration' and that 'several of his plays exhibit epic structures and features'. Nadine Holdsworth, 'David Greig', in *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009*, ed. by Dan Rebellato (London: Methuen Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 169-89 (p.171).

however, these particular substitutions seem less like evidence of Greig's dialectical world view than a form of teasing, especially in relation to the developing romance between Leila and Lee in *Yellow Moon*. After all, Greig has shown his young audience a sequence of actions that seem to be building inexorably to precisely the moment they are then not allowed to see. At the crucial point, he shifts the grounds of representation from the performance space to the imagination, thus depriving his audience of the immediate sensory content they presumably expect and, since they are teenagers, very probably desire. By way of compensation, Greig exposes them to the dramaturgically productive tension between mimesis and diegesis that is a building block of theatre. In the process, he encourages his young audience members into an awareness of themselves as viewers and as listeners but also, and importantly, as *thinkers* in possession of an imagination. Here, as elsewhere in his work, Greig privileges the 'imagination' as the frontline of cultural or political intervention. In Greig's theatre, as Holdsworth notes, 'the imagination, if invited to, can conjure with the impossible and, in so doing, suggest alternative narratives of power and emancipation'.⁵

Greig's Theatre for Young Audiences

Greig is Scotland's most prolific and widely admired contemporary playwright. Since the early 1990s he has produced more than seventy pieces and, as well as being unusually large, his output has been impressively varied. In addition to full-length plays such as *The Speculator* (1999), *San Diego* (2003), and *Dunsinane* (2010) he has written short plays, radio plays, musicals, plays with songs such as *Midsummer* (2008) and *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011) and a number of

⁵ Holdsworth, 'David Greig', p. 171.

adaptations such as *Bacchae* (2007), *Peter Pan* (2010) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2013). Greig is an extremely erudite writer and his work has had particular appeal for academics. To date, his work with Suspect Culture, the Glasgow-based company he co-founded with Graham Eatough in the early 1990s, together with his extensive output for adult audiences, has been relatively widely discussed.⁶ His work for young people, by contrast, has remained largely ignored and it is the aim of this article to begin the work of addressing this imbalance.⁷

The kind of critical separation described above is not peculiar to discussions of Greig's work, of course. A number of important contemporary British playwrights continue to write for young audiences. Alongside Greig, Tim Crouch springs readily to mind, as do Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill, yet scholars have tended to devote little critical attention to this work. This observation is not intended as a criticism. Clearly, there is a meaningful critical distinction to be made between theatre for young audiences (TYA) and theatre for adults. There would be no such thing as TYA, after all, if adults did not believe that young people were sufficiently different from them to require a special type of performance and, subsequently, to create a special category to describe that type of performance. It is important to make a distinction here between youth theatre, which might conceivably be authored *by* young people, and TYA, where adult professionals are commissioned to make work *for* young audiences. In the latter category, into which both plays under discussion in this article fall, even when the narrative voice is that of a child, we know that the

⁶ For discussions of Greig's work for adults in addition to Wallace and Holdsworth see, for example, Janelle Reinelt, 'David Greig' in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen, 2011), pp. 203-22; Graham Eatough and Dan Rebellato eds., *The Suspect Culture Book* (London: Oberon, 2013); Anja Müller and Clare Wallace eds., *Cosmotopia: Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 2011); Peter Billingham, *At the Sharp End: Uncovering the Work of Five Leading Dramatists* (London: Methuen, 2007).

⁷ The exception to this trend towards critical separation is Clare Wallace's *The Theatre of David Greig*, which contains discussions of both *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall* together with two of Greig's earlier work for young people, *Petra* (1996) and *Dr Korczak's Example* (2001).

author is an adult. Consequently, a significant amount of power remains with the adult in this kind of cultural exchange. My intention in this article is to argue, therefore, that Greig's TYA work is worthy of closer consideration precisely because it examines power relations between young people and the adult world, but also and importantly, because it sheds light on a number of preoccupations and dramaturgical strategies that can be identified as constants in Greig's work. These include his belief in the power of the imagination and his understanding of its potential in shaping 'theatre as an act of resistance'.⁸

In her recent study of the history and historiography of TYA, *Theatre, Youth and Culture* (2012), Manon van de Water notes somewhat regretfully that 'the field has been restricted to a very specific set of conditions wrapped up in a cloud of "appropriate" entertainment'.⁹ In this context TYA has been read prescriptively, in relation to its educational purposefulness. Historically, this emphasis on pedagogy and, indeed, the existence of TYA as a practice, is a product of a relatively modern refiguring of the idea of childhood, in which 'education' occupies a central position. Because it emerged in this broader educational context, the rhetoric around TYA was inevitably shaped by adult conceptions of teenagers. These included the notion that they might be corrupted by exposure to inappropriate content or, conversely, that they might be positively influenced by appropriate material. In addition, implicit in the practice of TYA which, as Paul Harman explains, 'in the UK is unusually constrained by what schools and teachers will accept as useful to their primary educational aims and objectives', is the assumption that teenagers lack the skills to comprehend

⁸ David Greig, 'Rough Theatre' in *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, eds. Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 208-21 (p. 210).

⁹ Manon van de Water, *Theatre, Youth and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), p. 11.

complex dramaturgical strategies.¹⁰ For many theatre scholars, this perceived instrumentalism renders live performance for teenagers of little interest outside a narrow ‘educational’ context. In this understanding, TYA as a field of inquiry belongs within education, not art.

While grounded in a broadly accurate understanding of TYA practice, especially in the UK where the educational context has been particularly defining, these established discourses do not sufficiently serve my purpose in this article.¹¹ Firstly, they do not allow me to fully account for the complexity of the dramaturgical strategies employed by Greig in *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall* and secondly, they do not explain the appeal of these plays for adult audiences. For, although they began life as TYA projects *Yellow Moon* and *the Monster in the Hall* were later revived at the Traverse in Edinburgh, and subsequently by the National Theatre of Scotland. It seems clear, therefore, that these particular examples of TYA practice do not belong solely within the field of education, or the field of art, but within both. Having reached something of an impasse, I want to turn away from the established discourses of TYA criticism towards children’s literature scholarship, which, since the publication of Jacqueline Rose’s *The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* in 1984, has focused on questions of power relations between adult authors and young readers.

A New Theoretical Frame: aetonnormativity and its discontents

¹⁰ Paul Harman, ‘International Research in Theatre for Young Audiences’ 2011, p.2. Available at <http://theatrefutures.org.uk/theatre-for-young-audiences-centre/resources-on-theatre-for-young-audiences/international-research-on-tya/> (accessed on 27 October 2014).

¹¹ See Helen Nicholson, *Theatre & Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) for a concise account of the relationship between theatre and education in a UK context.

In what follows, I want to utilize the concept of aetonormativity as elucidated by Maria Nikolajeva in her influential 2010 study *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. Writing partly in response to a perceived need among scholars in her field for a theory specific to children's literature, Nikolajeva argues that such a theory can only be developed by acknowledging the profoundly unequal power relations between adults and children that define the field. Her overarching theme, is power, specifically the unequal power dynamic intrinsic in writing for children, writing that typically originates from adults who are in positions of power vis-à-vis their readers. Adapting the more established concept of heteronormativity – the term used to identify the tendency in Western sex-gender systems to view heterosexual relations as the norm and all other behaviours as deviant – Nikolajeva develops the notion of aetonormativity, which she uses to describe the 'adult normativity that governs the way children's literature has been patterned from its emergence until the present day'.¹² She contends that like 'women's literature, indigenous literature, or gay literature', children's literature tends to concentrate on 'the examination of power positions'.¹³ She argues, moreover, that much, if not all, children's literature is inevitably conservative precisely because of the underpinning power structure that sees authors as adults and children as readers. In Nikolajeva's understanding, power, both as a central theme in children's books and an economic driver in the marketplace, always, or nearly always, privileges adult perspectives. In making this observation Nikolajeva echoes Perry Nodelman's argument in *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2009) where he notes that what children 'end up reading is of less significance than what adult teachers, librarians and

¹² Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

parents will be willing to purchase for them to read'.¹⁴ One major insight gained from this shift in perspective is that children's literature, or by extension TYA, does not merely deploy aetnonormative values: these values are what bring it into being in the first place.

At issue here, of course – especially for anyone wishing to see children's literature as a potential platform for interrogating and challenging the status quo – is the important question of whether the possibility of subversion exists. On the face of it, Nikolajeva's analysis of the structures of power operating in children's literature would seem to imply a negative answer to this question. In her analysis, the child almost always remains disempowered, even in those instances when he or she might *appear* temporarily empowered. This idea of a temporary redistribution of power recalls Mikhail Bakhtin, and his writings on medieval carnival, on which Nikolajeva draws.¹⁵ Bakhtin's notion, that the reversals enacted through carnival – during which the fool was crowned king and kings and bishops were denigrated – were state sanctioned is useful for Nikolajeva, as is the idea that the temporary status of such reversals presupposes the restoration of the pre-existing social hierarchy. If we accept that carnival was at least partly a mechanism employed by the powerful to allow the disempowered to let off steam, then we can follow Nikolajeva in seeing that any temporary feelings of power a child reader might experience are sanctioned by the adult world, and are part of a larger project to inculcate the young reader into the acceptance of adult norms. None of this is particularly helpful to the scholar wishing to argue for the subversive power of certain types of children's literature, of course. However, Nikolajeva does offer a glimmer of hope when she acknowledges that

¹⁴ Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Nikolajeva openly acknowledges her debt to Bahktin. See Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, pp. 15-25.

carnival had a destabilizing potential because it revealed existing hierarchies as reversible and therefore changeable. The possibility, then, of counter-hegemonic discourses operating in children's books is not always precluded and Nikolajeva concedes that while most texts 'confirm adult power [...] some are slightly subversive'.¹⁶

This glimmer of hope has allowed other scholars to develop Nikolajeva's work in new and productive directions. For instance, Clémentine Beauvais has urged critics to finesse the essential concept of 'power' that lies at the heart of Nikolajeva's aetonormative paradigm, pointing out that while children's literature may 'articulate an adult-child relationship marked by power dynamics inside and outside the book [...] these dynamics are of a sophistication that precludes any easy attribution of "empowerment" or "disempowerment" to one or the other party'.¹⁷ Beauvais points out that there are many varieties of 'power' operating in cultural discourse, and that to assign all of these uncritically to the adult in the aetonormative relationship is untenable. Power, as Beauvais notes, 'can mean authority, ability, domination, strength, impact, influence, potential, importance, prominence, superiority, energy, and much more'.¹⁸ She also introduces the concept of 'might', a type of power linked to the French concept of '*la puissance*, an interesting concept that lies at the intersection of the terms *power* and *potential*'.¹⁹ Beauvais identifies 'might' as 'intrinsically linked to the "possession" of a future'.²⁰ Might is therefore assigned primarily to the child in the aetonormative paradigm. 'Children are *mighty* because

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 178. In the opening sentence of chapter 11 of her study, Nikolajeva observes, for instance, that 'Picturebooks have great potential for the subversion of adult power and interrogation of the existing order', p. 169.

¹⁷ Clémentine Beauvais, 'The Problem of "Power": Metacritical Implications of Aetonormativity for Children's Literature Research', *Children's Literature in Education*, 44 (2013), 74–86 (p. 78).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁰ Ibid.

their specific form of “power” is dependent on the existence of a future for them in which to act’.²¹

Beauvais is also interested in ‘legitimate power’ and she singles out ‘authority’ as a type of power that ‘encapsulates a set of sometimes numinous properties of a person or institution which enables it to counsel, influence, or order, from a position which all parties accept as being in some way legitimate’.²² Drawing on Max Weber, she notes that ‘power’ in a broader sense indicates the likelihood of its agent being ‘in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance’.²³ ‘Authority’, on the other hand, is a form of dispersed power exercised by social agents in a variety of particular circumstances. Moreover, authority can, and often does, have an element of legitimacy to it and consequently need not imply coercion. Those in legitimate authority might reasonably expect that commands ‘with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of people’.²⁴ Moreover, as Weber notes, traditional intergenerational authority ‘must definitely be exercised as a joint right in the interest of all members and is thus not freely appropriated by the incumbent’.²⁵ The major difference between power and authority in Weber’s analysis is that power is tied to the personal characteristics of individuals or groups, whereas authority is founded in social positions or roles, and consequently does not necessarily preclude freedom on either side of the relationship. Associating adult power in the TYA relationship with ‘authority’, rather than a more nebulous or general definition of ‘power’, allows us to see that adult power in this context can be both legitimate and also limited by social conventions. In the following account of *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall*, I

²¹ Ibid., p.82.

²² Ibid., ‘The Problem of “Power”’, p. 79.

²³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), p. 53.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 231.

consider the complexity of Greig's dramaturgical strategies with reference to two varieties of power singled out by Beauvais: 'authority', which is exercised by the adult in the aetonormative relationship, and 'might', which is assigned primarily to the child. My aim is to show that although Greig's TYA work is implicated in cultural integration – in transmitting the cultural values of an adult world – any explanation of it that admits *only* this aspect risks overlooking important and contrary impulses in the work.

Authority and Might in *Yellow Moon*

Both *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall* are designed to be performed in school halls, 'in the round with no set, no props, a tiny little bit of costume to indicate who these people are and no lights'.²⁶ In such settings, young spectators are made particularly conscious of their status as spectators and are also always aware of the presence of adults in authority. As its director, Guy Hollands, notes of the earlier play, 'telling the story of *Yellow Moon* in the round is intended to include every audience member and to allow them to share the experience with their peers – all of whom they can see in the room and across the circle'.²⁷ By minimizing stage apparatus the productions allow the sites to speak for themselves within the context of the fictions laid over them: the setting is always a school hall, the audience always school children. This tactic is reminiscent of Brecht's notion of the impoverished set in which material shortcomings productively undercut the imitation by making its status as imitation apparent.²⁸ It might even be tempting to think of *Yellow Moon* and the *Monster in the Hall* as 'site generic', to borrow Fiona Wilkie's phrase, insofar as they

²⁶ *The Monster in the Hall* Teacher's Resource Pack, p. 3. Available at <http://citiz.co.uk/images/fileuploads/MITH_Resource_Pack_v2.pdf> [accessed 20 August 2014].

²⁷ Ibid, p. 4.

²⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 149.

are ‘generated for a series of like sites’ – in this case spaces designed specifically for the gathering of young people under the direct supervision of adults, typically teachers.²⁹

Although the circumstances of young people in Scotland are very different, the confidence with which Greig rejects an illusionist approach to staging calls to mind his account of witnessing a TYA performance in the West Bank in 2001:

The play fed the desire of young people to question and reflect upon their situation, and it offered them a space in which to do it. The simple theatrical conjuring of a different world laid like a ghost image over a visible [...] ‘real’ world somehow offered up the idea that – because the imagination made one thing possible – the imagination could make all things possible.³⁰

It is clear that Greig assigns a significant amount of power to young people in this exchange, especially to the transformative power of their imagination to ‘make all things possible’. In so doing, he allows us to see more clearly what types of power might reasonably be assigned to young people in the TYA exchange. ‘Much of the symbolic potential of children in culture’, as Kimberley Reynolds notes, ‘derives from the fact that children have most of their choices before them: they represent potential’.³¹ *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall* privilege this view of childhood because they assume a high level of imaginative capacity on the part of young audiences and also because they are narratives of *becoming*, in which the future is as yet unknown and the young protagonists are in the process of learning about themselves and although they are in a number of significant ways in conflict with authority, they are nevertheless developing towards it. Greig’s work for young

²⁹ Fiona Wilkie, ‘Mapping the Terrain: A Survey of Site-specific Performance in Britain’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18 (2002), 140–60 (p. 150).

³⁰ Greig, ‘Rough Theatre’, p. 210.

³¹ Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 2.

people thus occupies a curious and contradictory cultural space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and ignored, conventional and radical, didactic and subversive. By the end of both plays Greig's young protagonists have matured and moved a step closer to adult knowledge and experience but their journeys have been neither straightforward nor easy. In the case of *Yellow Moon* the future happiness of the protagonists is by no means certain.

Yellow Moon: The Ballad of Leila and Lee, draws its tragic subject matter, some of its dramaturgy and certainly its narrative momentum from the ballad tradition which its title references. Its protagonist, Lee McAlinden is seventeen years old. He lives in Inverkeithing in Fife with his depressed mother, Jenni, and her boyfriend Billy. His estranged father, Dan, lives somewhere in the Highlands where Lee mistakenly believes him to be some sort of wealthy landowner. One evening, after stealing an engagement ring from Billy, Lee sees 'silent' Leila Suleiman, a girl from school, in the 24-hour superstore. They go for drink in the cemetery where an enraged Billy catches up with them. In the ensuing scuffle Lee fatally stabs Billy. Lee then decides to go in search of his estranged father and asks Leila to go with him. 'This is the part of the story' the narrator of Scene Eight tells us 'where Leila and Lee go on the run to the highlands and nearly die' from hypothermia.³² They catch a train north and stagger about in the wilderness. Luckily, Drunk Frank, the estate keeper, rescues them. Frank tells them Lee's father is dead and offers to put them up in return for their helping him with his work. Leila and Lee work the estate for three months. They learn a lot about keepering and each other and almost forget why they ran away in the first place. Eventually, Lee realizes Frank is his estranged father and confesses to him about the murder of Billy Logan. Incapable of dealing with this level of intimacy, and

³² Greig, *Yellow Moon*, p. 20. Further references to this text are given in the main body of the article.

unable to offer appropriate support and advice, Frank lashes out at Lee who steals a car in order to escape. Unable to bear the loss of his son a second time, Frank shoots himself in his mountainside cave hideaway. Finally, Leila tracks Lee down to the cave where he sits hunched over his father's body. As police helicopters draw closer, Lee cuts out his father's heart and buries it in the cave. Leila and Lee give themselves up.

Yellow Moon utilizes a number of motifs that are repeated elsewhere in Greig's work. The figure of Leila Suleiman, for instance, whose family we are told 'came to Scotland in the 1990s' as 'refugees from some sort of war', evidences Greig's interest in the effects of displacement and the movement of peoples in the aftermath of 1989 and 9/11; likewise, the concept of 'journeying' is a central motif in a number of Greig's plays. All of the characters in *Yellow Moon* are in search of intimacy but the adult-child relationships in the play are marked by the failure of adults to exercise authority appropriately. In fact, the crises that ensue for Leila and Lee could be said to proceed precisely from a failure in the operation of traditional intergenerational authority. Their story, therefore, reinforces the notion that appropriately exercised authority is desirable and a key factor in maintaining stability in intergenerational relationships. In Lee's case, the family unit has disintegrated: his father has abandoned him and his mother is a depressive alcoholic who is unable to sustain a meaningful relationship with her son. When he finally tracks down his father he finds him unable to respond to his needs. Similarly, when we first meet Leila Suleiman she is locked in silence and a cycle of self-harming. For much of the play her story is narrated. 'If we could hear the thoughts inside Leila's head' Greig writes in Scene Two, 'we'd hear this':

This hand doesn't belong to me.
This arm doesn't belong to me.
I'm not here.

If I sit still enough for long enough maybe I'll float up to the ceiling
and then I could look down on my stupid ugly body self sitting there
stupid and ugly. (p. 6)

It is the developing romance between Leila and Lee that forms the emotional core of the play and enables both characters to make genuine connections. Leila's self-loathing is linked to, although not exactly explained by, her obsessive consumption of celebrity magazines. Both her silence and her self-harming signal a profound estrangement from her own body and it is this estrangement – partly articulated through her narration of her own story – that is overcome as the young couple fall in love. Significantly, the first line Leila actually speaks *for* herself *as* herself is 'Take off your clothes' (p. 41). As she follows suit her nakedness – although of course it only exists in the imagination of the audience – is figured as a kind of healing, as an acceptance of her own beauty and a demonstration of her 'might'. The relationship has a similarly positive effect on Lee. Their discovery of each other is the catalyst that allows him to finally surrender to the police, to move towards accepting responsibility for Billy's death, and thus to make progress in his journey toward adulthood, toward the acquisition of 'experience and expertise' which are markers of authority.³³ It is significant that Leila and Lee achieve this without the help of the play's adult characters who do not reappear to reassert the adult norms that TYA practitioners supposedly wish to inculcate in young audiences.

The ending of *Yellow Moon* is not a conventionally happy one. Here, as elsewhere in his work, Greig is interested in 'how characters respond to the world in all its complexity and contradiction' and the resolution is consequently 'simultaneously tinged with a sense of optimism and pessimism'.³⁴ Lee faces an

³³ Beauvais, 'The Problem of "Power"', p. 82.

³⁴ Holdsworth, 'David Greig', p. 170.

uncertain future and almost inevitable incarceration. Billy is dead, after all, and Lee is well beyond the minimum age of criminal responsibility. Elements of opacity also permeate the narrative elsewhere and in turn imbue it with an indeterminacy that renders simple identification on the part of the young spectators difficult. This aspect of the play's affective power is partly related, I would argue, to the ballad tradition on which Greig is drawing and which he uses elsewhere, most successfully perhaps in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011), which David Pattie discusses in this issue (pp. 00-00).

Yellow Moon begins in crisis and quickly proceeds to the murder of Billy Logan. This opening calls to mind the tendency for ballads to begin *in medias res* – at the height of conflict. Greig's emphasis is on action rather than exposition or motivation, a strategy also associated with ballad. In *Yellow Moon* we never fully understand why Leila cuts herself, why Frank abandons his family in the first place, why he takes his own life and, most significantly, why Lee cuts out his father's heart. Such opacity is typical in ballads where ironic juxtapositions leave gaps that must be filled by the listener or spectator. Greig uses it in *Yellow Moon* to encourage young spectators into awareness of the power of their own imaginations to interpret and enhance the performance but also, I think, to ensure his spectators are kept active, to encourage them to question what they are seeing, and consequently to develop their critical skills as theatre-goers. Finally, traditional ballads are typically delivered in the third person and employ extensive use of narration. Especially in the first half of the play, Greig uses this technique to produce a sense of his young characters being acted upon, as powerless in the face of the breakdown of adult authority. It is significant, I think, that the use of narration declines as the play progresses and Leila and Lee begin to feel

connected to their own ‘might’. There is no narration in the play’s final scene, which depicts Leila and Lee taking control of their lives.

The Monster in the Hall: Legitimate Authority to the Rescue

The Monster in the Hall was also commissioned by TAG and although it shares some formal properties with the earlier play, such as the extensive use of narration, it is very different in tone from *Yellow Moon*. It emerged directly from Greig’s interest in the problems faced by young carers; while this might strike one as bleak subject matter, Greig decided, as he explains, ‘to write something funny’ because the young carers said ‘please don’t make it a tragedy’.³⁵ The result is a frenetic comedy with musical interludes. Set in Kirkcaldy in Fife, its heroine is sixteen year-old Duck Macatarsney, who wants to be a novelist and has a highly developed fantasy life, but who is also responsible for looking after her Hells Angel father Duke, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. Duke, who smokes dope for medical reasons, has cared for Duck since the death of his wife in a motorcycle crash. One morning, Duke wakes up blind and Duck learns that Social Services are planning to pay a visit. As the day of the visit dawns, an already stressful situation becomes complicated by the arrival of Lawrence Lofthouse, the ‘most beautiful boy in the school’ and Duck’s partner in a drama project.³⁶ It transpires that Lawrence’s credibility as a heterosexual lothario has been seriously damaged by his interest in fashion and textiles. He has come to ask Duck if she will simulate giving him a blowjob – ‘tonight at half past six, behind the wall near the chippie’ – in order to prove to their peers he is not gay (p. 38). Despite her crush on him, Duck is understandably reluctant. His arrival is closely followed by that of Agnetha Bergholm, a Scandinavian dominatrix, who has become romantically

³⁵ Interview with David Greig, *The Monster in the Hall* Teacher’s Resource Pack, p.8.

³⁶ Greig, *The Monster in the Hall*, p. 30. Further references to the text are given after quotations.

attached to Duke after meeting him in an online fantasy universe. Finally, the social worker, Linda Underhill, arrives and chaos ensues. Fearing that she will be taken into care, despite repeated assurances to the contrary, Duck steals the social worker's moped. An unlikely motorbike chase ensues, which sees Duck survive a crash unharmed. Greig brings the play to a satisfying close 'with a happy ending of pure girl-group dreaminess'.³⁷

Much of the show's impact in performance lies in the frequent and imaginatively handled transitions in which the four-strong cast dons pink sun glasses and sings in the manner of a Phil Spector-inspired girl group, the Duckettes. The play explores the power of the imagination to provide relief from the harsh realities of life, both in Duck's novel, which she writes every morning before school, and in Duke's alternative existence in the online fantasy world. The 'monster in the hall' of the play's title has various meanings. It is the Ducati Monster 796 series once owned by Duck's mother and kept in the hallway as a kind of memorial. Although never represented visually, it is at once an obstruction – Duke in particular keeps bumping into it – and an object of admiration. Lawrence describes it as 'the most beautiful object I have seen in my entire life' (p. 43). It is also quite obviously a 'metaphor for things in our lives we can't face', things like Duke's chronic degenerative condition, his continuing grief at the loss of his wife, and Duck's need to access support.³⁸ Duck, short for Ducati, is named after the bike.

Whereas *Yellow Moon* deals with the tragic results of the failure of adult authority, the situation in *The Monster in the Hall* is more complicated. Duke has not abandoned his child but their traditional roles are put increasingly under pressure by his deteriorating condition, which has a material bearing on his ability to exercise his

³⁷ Fisher, 'The Monster in the Hall Review', p. 42.

³⁸ Interview with Guy Hollands, *The Monster in the Hall* Teacher's Resource Pack, p. 6.

authority appropriately. For Duck this leads to the dissolution of intergenerational boundaries and she is elevated to the status of adult decision-maker, problem-solver and instrumental care-giver at a point in her life when she is developmentally ill-equipped to deal with such responsibility. While Duck's highly developed fantasy life, which she records in the form of a novel, is focused on the future and might be seen as an expression of her 'might' - to return to Beauvais's term - it is conducted entirely in the privacy of her bedroom, which suggests her personal situation has prevented her from pursuing age-appropriate interests and relationships outside the home. Aware of the complexity of emotions experienced by young carers, Greig is careful not to characterize Duck as unwilling and to show that for the most part she experiences 'a sense of specialness and usefulness that counterbalances the negative effects' of her situation.³⁹ Ultimately, *The Monster in the Hall* reaffirms aetnonormative values by demonstrating confidence in adult authority both in the context of the family, which remains a nurturing space, and through the intervention of the social worker Linda Underhill, who restores balance to Duck's life. Guy Hollands, who directed both *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall*, has written of the company's shared desire 'to say that we should have respect for people who commit themselves professionally to caring for others or helping people care for others'.⁴⁰ Underhill is described in the play as someone who every day 'is invited into the lives of people who are teetering on the edge of catastrophe [...] and every day does her best to bring them back' (p, 80). That she often does this by handing out 'leaflets that describe courses' speaks to the light-hearted tone of the piece as a whole, but also to Greig's

³⁹ Patricia K. Kerig, *Implications of Parent-Child Boundary Dissolution for Developmental Psychopathology: "Who Is the Parent and Who Is the Child?"* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p.18.

⁴⁰ Interview with Guy Hollands, *The Monster in the Hall* Teacher's Resource Pack, p. 3.

genuine belief in the power of education to transform people's lives.⁴¹ The leaflet that is handed to Duck at the end of the play is for a two-day residential creative writing course in Dunfermline and Underhill promises to 'organize some care at home' for Duke, so that Duck can attend.⁴² In combination with Duke's budding romance with Agnetha, this provides a fairly conventionally happy ending to the play, although it is worth remembering that Duke's condition is chronic and degenerative. There is no cure for multiple sclerosis and consequently the problem at the centre of the play cannot be resolved.

Conclusion

In *Yellow Moon* and the *Monster in the Hall*, Greig reaffirms his belief in the power of the imagination to effect positive change in the lives of young people, both by giving his central characters rich imaginative lives and by employing dramaturgical strategies that encourage young audience members to exercise their imaginations critically. In this way he brings them into awareness of their own 'might' which seems a particularly worthwhile endeavour at a time when the UK establishment appears particularly hostile to young people. By giving voice to the personal and performing individual memories and experiences, these plays productively problematize dominant narratives about troubled teenagers. While it is possible to identify aetionormative bias at work, especially in *The Monster in the Hall*, which broadly expresses faith in the adult world, it is significant that neither play buys into or promotes easy solutions by providing neatly happy endings. In *Yellow Moon* in particular, Greig comes close to capturing and denouncing aetionormative bias. In this respect, as well as in the ways outlined above, he has contributed to driving TYA

⁴¹ Greig, *The Monster in the Hall*, p.81.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.95.

forwards towards greater aesthetic value, narrative sophistication and moral ambivalence. As Scotland's leading contemporary playwright, Grieg is also able to bring considerable cultural capital to bear in this effort. He is not easily ignored.

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