'I am a blankness out of which emerges only darkness': Impressions and Aporias of Multiculturalism in *The Events*

In an article reflecting on his experiences of making and watching theatre in Palestine, David Greig argues for a new kind of theatre, a theatre that would be 'rough'. This term can be read in various ways: as 'something done quickly', 'a form whose joins and bolts are visible', as 'something threatening and dangerous', 'emotionally fragile', or 'unfinished'.[1] This article approaches *The Events* (2013) as a significant step towards the constellation of such a 'rough theatre' encompassing all these meanings.[2] The 'roughness' of the play, which was inspired by Anders Breivik's attacks in Oslo and Utøya, Norway, in July 2011, is manifest both in its theatrical form and in the urgency that underpins it as a response to incomprehensible acts of violence. My aim is to explore the multilayered theatrical roughness of *The Events*, arguing that the play marks a significant intervention in representing identity and difference as interdependent terms in a multicultural world.

I follow the playwright's conceptualization of 'rough theatre' as an act intending to resist 'the management of the imagination by power'.[3] In the following pages, I consider how *The Events* manifests such a resistance, particularly through an engagement with 'the unimaginable' that I understand as short-hand for events that

[1] David Greig, 'Rough Theatre' in *Cool Britannia: British Political Drama of the 1990s*, ed. by Rebecca d' Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 208-21 (pp. 213-14).
[2] *The Events* was commissioned by Actors Touring Company (ATC) and *Drammatikkens Hus* (Norway), co-produced with the Young Vic, *Brageteatret* and *Schauspielhaus Wien* (Austria), opened at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, in August 2013 and went on a UK and US tour between 2013 and 2015. The present analysis is based on six different performances: at the Young Vic (October 2013 and July 2014); at the Brighton Dome, artsdepot London and Lincoln Arts Centre (March 2014) and at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton (September 2014). I am quoting from the playtext's first edition, which includes some differences to the performance text and does not include the choir's final song.
[3] Greig, 'Rough Theatre', p. 214.

violate one's sense of normality.[4] Greig's work attempts to imagine and begin to understand or forgive the Other, The Boy, who has committed a violent act, which in itself lacks imagination.[5] The play stages an agonizing attempt to make sense of The Boy, the cause of the 'unimaginable', of that which resides in a realm beyond reason and, in doing so, to maintain faith in humanity after violence. The writing and staging of such an approach to the aftermath of violence, I argue, fuels imagination with a subversive kind of power. The highly imaginative performance strategies employed are the focus of this analysis, which aspires to show how *The Events* points towards new ways of thinking about the politics of identity, community and ethical judgements, particularly after such violent events. Indeed, the theatrically 'rough' performance strategies of director Ramin Gray's production for Actors Touring Company (2013) made the piece seem unfinished: the bare stage, the bank of seats and orange curtain at back, the piano on the right and the stage manager's desk on the left – all stage elements created the impression of a rehearsal room. The choir sat on the seating bank at the rear of the stage, an onstage audience facing the 'real' spectators. This community choir changed every night, as the production played in different places across the country, and these choirs did not meet the production team until ninety minutes before the show's start. At that stage, after a short vocal warm-up, the choir members would be introduced to the actors and presented with a rough outline of the play. Each choir member was issued with a booklet, referred to as the 'Order of Service', which

[4] In 'Rough Theatre', Greig refers to colonialism and exploitation – in Africa and the Middle East – to suggest that Western imaginations are products of structures of power and oppression that allow the perpetuation of a global order. This management of the imagination constructs definitions of Self and Other, while presenting any other alternative as 'unimaginable', 'until one day the unimaginable erupts into the real' (p. 217); the 9/11 terrorist attacks are exemplary of such an eruption.

[5] Greig, 'Rough Theatre', p. 218. The playwright distinguishes violence as an 'unimaginative' act from the 'unimaginable' as that which violates reason and common sense, but also recognises that violence, regrettably but often, becomes a way of resisting the management of imagination through power and causes the 'unimaginable'.

contained all the choir's cues, scores and spoken moments. Choir members carried this 'Order of Service' onstage and referred to it throughout the performance, thus adding to the production's 'rough theatre', amateur-like effect.[6] In this way, ATC's production of *The Events* never appeared complete or concluded, capturing an aesthetic style that resonated with the incomplete and ongoing nature of debates around identity, difference and community.

Following Nicholas Ridout's reading of theatre as fertile ground for considering reason and emotion,[7] I argue that both the narrative and the staging of *The Events* capture urgent ethical concerns. It is in the very practice of a 'rough' theatre-making, which brings together people – actors, non-actors and audience – in a shared space that we can begin to locate the possibilities of ethics in the theatre. Throughout this article, in an attempt to understand the politics of representation in *The Events*, I ask: who appears on this shared space, this bare stage? First, I focus on the use of a racially marked (mixed-race or black) actor to perform The Boy;[8] second, I consider the choice of casting different real-life choirs to perform the play's fictional Choir. What is the significance of this complex blending of fictional and real, of this ostensible lack of overt theatricality, of what is seen onstage and what can be imagined? How does this intersection resonate with Greig's (following Theodor Adorno's) belief in theatre's 'contradiction' and its potential to 'tear' the 'fabric of "reality"', which is, according to him, theatre's political foundation?[9] The theatrical vocabularies of representing that

[6] Author's notes from post-show discussion talks, Brighton Wednesday 19th March 2014 and artsdepot London, 26th March 2014.
[7] Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009). Ridout's observation that contemporary ethics concerns itself with 'the framework within which we conduct relationships with "others" as such' (p. 13) is of particular resonance for this analysis.
[8] Rudi Dharmalingam (2013) and Clifford Samuel (2014). In racial terms, this is a provocative reversal, for Anders Breivik (the perpetrator of the 'original' act of violence to which the play responds) is white and a believer in racial purity and white supremacy.
[9] Greig, 'Rough Theatre', p. 220.

kind of 'unimaginable' are not far from Brechtian aesthetics, as they focus on the materiality of the theatre event.[10] But what is the currency of such an aesthetic today and how might such an aesthetic carry forward a complex engagement with belonging and exclusion in a multicultural society?

By suggesting that this play negotiates the 'unimaginable', I do not wish to remove the work from its original point of departure. Breivik's atrocious acts indeed haunt the piece and Greig and Gray carried out extensive research in Norway for the development of the piece. However, I am not reading the play as a response to the specific events in Norway;[11] I am interested rather in how Greig's text captures and critiques elements of what has been, rather hastily and problematically, described as the 'failure' of multiculturalism.[12] In conversation with Clare Wallace, Greig has admitted that a concern about Europe and European identities underpins *The Events*; in Breivik's attack on Norwegianess and Norwegian social democracy, the playwright sees a 'family tragedy', an attack on a Europe elsewhere lauded 'as welcoming, multicultural, open, tolerant and secular. He [Breivik] was attacking it on behalf of some other Europe'.[13]

[10] For a discussion of the Brechtian influences on Greig's work, see Clare Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig* (London: Methuen, 2013), pp. 31-68. Greig himself has reflected on Brecht's mark on his work in an interview with Nadine Holdsworth (in *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009*, ed. by Dan Rebellato, London: Methuen, 2013, pp. 260-73), placing particular emphasis on Brecht's approach to representation and the role of music in his plays – both elements are of crucial importance in understanding *The Events* as political theatre.

[11] For a discussion of the play's reception in Norway, see Greig's interview with Dominic Cavendish 'I always knew I'd put *The Events* in front of a Norwegian audience', *The Telegraph*, 5 April 2014 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/10742089/David-Greig-I-always-knew-Id-put-The-Events-in-front-of-a-Norwegian-audience.html> [accessed 30 September 2014]. Greig's decision to give his play a non-specific title may also hint at his desire to consider these questions beyond the Norwegian trauma. The title of Greig's play acknowledges the horror but transcends the specific to allude to multiple contemporary tragedies.

[12] German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2012) and British PM David Cameron (2011) were among the first who put forward such arguments, while leaders of Far Right parties like Nigel Farage of the British UKIP have reiterated similar views in the wake of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015. The debate about the failure of 'state multiculturalism' cannot be disassociated from controversies around immigration, religious extremism and the financial crisis that further aggravated xenophobic views against foreign workers and the rise of nationalist, racist, fascist political parties across Europe.

[13] See Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, pp. 159-77 (p. 166).

My reading approaches *The Events* as a tragedy in an age of (failed) multiculturalism in Europe, arguing that the play offers an important intervention to staging otherness in multicultural Europe.

Greig's work questions cultural pluralism and practices of conviviality particularly through the choir, both as the real-life choirs that joined the performers in different nights and as a dramatic character. The choir confess that they want to sing 'pop songs and hymns', interestingly navigating the secular/religious division that often stalls debates around multiculturalism and practicing a different form of conviviality beyond grievances that lead to violence. In *After Empire,* Paul Gilroy considers contemporary British identity, placing particular emphasis on the need to move beyond post-imperial melancholy and to develop practices – particularly in urban centres – that celebrate difference and conviviality; practices like Claire's choir in *The Events*. Gilroy's book opens with the provocative statement that 'multiculturalism was abandoned at birth';[14] aforementioned political positions on the failure of multiculturalism, as well as proliferating incidents of violence and hate speech, attest to the ongoing validity of Gilroy's claim, over a decade after the publication of his book. Gilroy counters hostile attitudes to diversity as a 'dangerous feature of society', for it allegedly causes 'weakness, chaos and confusion', with the need to revisit imperial and colonial histories, as they may offer ways of understanding that the 'alien alterity', the 'strange threatening groups', which are often excluded in European cities, are 'the very ones that were […] firmly fixed under the sign of race'.[15] Gilroy's argument echoes not only in The Boy's condemnation of society for its 'softness' – a sign of weakness – but also in his skewed but provocative perspective on cultural

[14] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge 2004), p. 1.
[15] Gilroy, *After Empire,* p. 1, p. 158.

difference, articulated in his opening speech which I shall discuss below.[16] Against this background of tribal animosity and political failure, I will argue that through both its content and form, *The Events* offers insight into how performance might take a stance on the multiculturalism conundrum; how performance can memorialise victims of violence, offering hope without dismissing the responsibilities that, as citizens, we all share. In short, this article will argue that *The Events* is as much a piece about the aftermath of violence and the possibilities of forgiveness in a multicultural world as it is about theatre and the limits of representation.

The 'unimaginable': Aporias of multiculturalism

The play tells the story of Claire,[17] a lesbian pastor who runs a community choir in an unnamed town or village somewhere in Scotland. She is a survivor of a mass shooting at a choir meeting in which most of the members were killed. Claire survived because the killer, The Boy, was left with one bullet and chose to kill someone else. In the course of the play, we follow Claire's struggle to understand both the atrocity and The Boy who committed it. Doubtful about God and spirituality, desiring revenge, remembering the final moments before the attack, and desperately seeking a way to forgive, Claire is in a 'rough' state, emotionally and mentally fragile. The play concludes with a poignant yet gentle confrontation between the victim and the perpetrator – a moment of rough theatre that crystallizes the work's engagement with the ethical judgements which we are called on to perform in the face of incomprehensible violence.

Proposing a kind of 'unimaginable' that is radically different to violence and terror, *The Events* uses the aftermath of violence as a space in which to explore what it

[16] Greig, *The Events*, p. 17, pp. 11-12.
[17] Played by Neve McIntosh (2013) followed by Amanda Drew and Derbhle Crotty (2014).

may be like to be the Other; in so doing, it introduces empathy and critical reflection to moments that, in reality, are beyond reason or emotion. Here, it may be useful to draw a parallel with Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), an example that Greig mentions as a kind of theatre that may provide 'a way of cracking open the carapace of the imagined world and allowing us to glimpse, underneath, all the possibilities of its reality'.[18] Like Kane's poignant imagining of 'the eruption of the unimaginable into their [i.e. British] lives', *The Events* also works by building upon the question 'what if?'[19] What if such an event happened here, to people we know? What if we tried to understand the Other and their reasons to resort to violence and what if, in attempting to do that, we confronted the impossibility of this attempt? If 'theatre reminds us constantly of the contingency, the changeability of things',[20] then it may offer us glimpses into that which we cannot see in real life: possibilities of encountering the Other in an interdependent, multicultural world.

The play's other character is The Boy, whose non-specific name potentially alludes to Norwegians' reluctance to use the perpetrator's name, instead calling Breivik 'him' or 'the boy'.[21] The actor who performs The Boy also plays every other character with whom Claire interacts: her lover, Catriona; a priest; a man who saves her life when she considers suicide; a therapist and a number of people who had met The Boy and who are interviewed by Claire. The multiple roles adopted by 'The Boy' was not a directorial choice designed to portray Claire's obsession with him; the published script lists only four characters – Claire, the Boy, A Choir and Repetiteur[22] – yet it is evident

[18] Greig, 'Rough Theatre', p. 218.
[19] Greig, 'Rough Theatre', p. 219.
[20] Ibid.
[21] David Greig in conversation with David Edgar and April de Angelis, 'How Playwrights Work', *Is The Playwright Dead? Series*, University of Oxford, 4 February 2015 <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/how-playwrights-work> [accessed 6 April 15]
[22] This may be referring to either the pianist Magnus Gillijam or each choir's leader.

that other characters speak, through lines that are attributed to The Boy. Greig rejects any portrayal of the character as clearly-outlined figure; instead, borrowing Elinor Fuchs's terms, The Boy emerges as 'impression' or 'inscription'; that is to say, character that is not understood through psychology.[23]

This elusive, in-flux mode of representation captures the 'unimaginable' in this work and can be read as a theatrical articulation of aporia, a philosophical term that often implies a paradox and suspension of judgement because of lack of grounds to support a viewpoint. However, Greig's aporetic engagement with The Boy as an instance of the 'unimaginable' seems to echo Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of aporia as a constitutive element for deconstruction, a framework to confront a situation where the same conditions constitute its possibility and impossibility. Aporia, for Derrida, does not signify 'oscillation between two contradictory sayings' but any contradiction 'applies to one and the same entity'.[24] If deconstruction implies a 'certain aporetic experience of the impossible',[25] then what is the impossibility that the play's deconstructive approach to The Boy hints at? Apart from deconstructing a simplistic and hate-inducing demonization of the Other - the image of the (often dark-skinned) 'rough Boy', wearing a hoodie, has often been demonized in the UK, particularly after the 2011 riots - it seems to me that this deconstruction of The Boy equally points at an interrogation of forgiveness. In order to forgive The Boy, he must be placed as a figure

[23] Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 74. Interestingly, in a couple of moments in the text (p.26, p.38), Claire considers and dismisses a psychology-driven analysis of the Boy's actions: 'there has to be another way to explain it'.

[24] Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 32. Although it is problematic to privilege a particular term as central in Derrida's philosophy, for this would contradict the whole project of deconstruction, an aporetic thinking underpins the philosopher's writings on justice, the gift, hospitality and forgiveness.

[25] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying-awaiting*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 15. Derrida here returns to a conceptualization of deconstruction, aporia and the impossible first cited in the 1980s in *Psyché: Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

onstage, described and imagined in our own terms – but once this occurs, forgiveness becomes what forgiveness should not be. Derrida writes:

> forgiveness is not, it *should* not be, normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality.[26]

What is to be forgiven is the unforgiveable, forgiveness is aporia, an impossible gesture that should nevertheless be strived for; its stage representation, then, can only be fragmented and deferred. The Boy, a character that works as impression, as trace, momentarily gives such aporia a body – only to disappear again. In another example, towards the play's end, Claire considers suicide and a man (Gary) saves her life; Gary, who holds her hand and prevents her from falling, is performed by the same actor who plays The Boy, the cause of her suicidal desire. The scene is exemplary of Greig's appreciation of what he terms the theatre's 'particle physics', the fusion of 'the concrete' and 'the intangible'. The playwright explains:

> What I feel now and enjoy is the concrete: the actor moves from there to there, something happens in your emotion […] my job is to manipulate the concrete. So you can say she enters wearing a red dress, you can't say she symbolises death. You can't do anything with that, but you can make her wear a red dress. […] As long as it's about the red dress, it's got all the energy of theatre.[27]

Similarly, in this moment, as the two actors stand holding hands, it does not matter whether this symbolises the desire for reconciliation, the impossibility of forgiveness or a feeling of humanity; what matters is that the two actors – the one performing the

[26] Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness,* trans. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 32. Emphasis in the original.
[27] Greig, 'Writing and the Rule of Opposites', p. 173. This argument explains the 'untheatrical' space where the play is set: 'a room, the sort of place in which a choir might rehearse', read the stage directions.

tragic hero and the one performing her nemesis – hold hands as he saves her life and that moment is underlined by 'the energy of theatre'.

'Imagine a Boy': Character as impression

A young actor stands onstage, wearing a grey T-shirt, jeans, red trainers. He looks at the audience. 'Imagine a boy', he says, 'an aboriginal boy' (p. 11). The start of *The Events* transports us back in time, in a moment before Empire or, indeed, multiculturalism. The actor performs The Boy who imagines that other, innocent boy a moment before boats from the West arrive and unleash certain 'condition[s] of personhood' - convicts, lawyers - that were hitherto unknown to that pure 'tribe' (p. 11). 'What would you tell him?' the actor playing The Boy asks. He answers his own question: 'You would say - "Kill them – kill them all"' (p. 12).

Later, in a puzzling and moving moment, The Boy asks the choir members to line up and help him answer Claire's question 'what *are* you?'

> **The Boy:** I am a Europe-wide malaise
> I am a point on the continuum of contemporary masculinity
> I am an expression of failure in eroded working-class communities
> I am unique
> I am typical […]
> I am a void into which you are drawn. (p. 53)

The 'I am' part of the sentence is spoken by the actor performing The Boy while the choir members take turns in offering versions, 'impressions' of The Boy's identity. The Boy is deprived of a voice while the Choir mediates, through the microphone, public attitudes. A similar effect is produced when Claire interviews various people who knew The Boy; his father, a classmate, a journalist and a politician offer their 'expert' view in ways that reveal the limitations of these accounts. In both cases, in the choir

members' or 'expert' people's utterances, as various identities are 'cited', it is not only versions of The Boy's purported identity that are produced by the utterance but also versions of the people who speak – or, rather, the public attitudes they stand in for. Such public attitudes, as Greig has noted, may be divided into two groups: the conservative, racist views expressed in the *Daily Mail* tabloid newspaper, "which goes 'string them up that's all what [sic] they deserve'" and the liberal one, which suggests that 'we need to understand the causes'.[28] In that moment, as when Claire fantasizes about killing the Boy at birth or when she is collecting mushrooms to poison him, the tensions within multicultural societies are captured in ambiguous ways. In a provocative moment, Claire, as if possessed, lip-synchs The Boy's favourite song, *Bonkers* by Dizzee Rascal, a song that the choir also sings in a hymn-like rendition. The song's lyrics 'Everybody says I got to get a grip/But I let sanity give me the slip' seem to be making a comment not only on The Boy's sanity – alluding to debates around Breivik's madness during his trial – but on Claire's and everyone else's sense of reason.

In this moment, the identities of The Boy and of those who speak about him are fragmented and interdependent; The Boy does not exist unless he is spoken about, he is 'a blankness out of which emerges only darkness and a question' (p. 53). The Boy, the blank, marginalized Other, appears only in relation to the community, which is shaped in relation to that Other. Theatrically, this blankness is an absence whose presence depends on a trace, the actor's body. If, as theatre semiotics has shown, the language of theatre is a system of interdependent terms where the value of the dramatic character is not fixed but works in relation to and can be exchanged with specific concepts, then The Boy is a sign containing no fixed value. In other words, such an

[28] 'Interview: David Greig on his new show, *The Events*' *wow247* 3 August 2013 <http://www.wow247.co.uk/blog/2013/08/03/david-greig-on-the-events/> [accessed 30 September 2014]

approach to character complicates the spectator's understanding of presence; the threatening Other, The Boy, becomes a sign that is 'cited' whenever appropriate for the community's (choir's and real audience's) understanding of itself.[29] This uncoupling of the actor's body from a stable signification or 'character', through a theatre language that is not settling in a particular version of reality or identity (the lover, for example, bears the mark of the murderer, sharing the same actor's body) complicates the ways that audiences can relate to and, ultimately, make judgements about *The Events*.

This work presents the world in ways that exceed our imagination and calls for empathy for and understanding of a character that is unlike us; as such, *The Events* actively invites audiences to consider who appears before them, to relate with them and ultimately to make judgements, to engage with ethics. Just as The Boy reveals something of himself when he imagines an (absent) Boy of a different time and place, so audience members who are called to imagine The Boy might realize or understand something about themselves. The actor appears onstage and, as Joe Kelleher writes in *Theatre & Politics* (2009), this appearance constitutes an act of politics – both in terms of what the actor does and in what the spectator understands through the actor's doing. Kelleher writes:

> The political potential of a theatrical performance, its ability to engage the sort of thinking through of relations of power […] is likely to depend upon the complex and unpredictable relationship between the liveness of the theatrical event and everything that event is understood to stand for or represent.[30]

[29] It is worth noting Liz Tomlin's argument that in much theatre produced since the 1990s 'character' is not only 'dead' in the modernist sense identified by Fuchs but that it 'haunts' theatre: 'characters' today are 'free-floating […] apparitions […] concomitant with the contemporary understanding of identity as made up of multiple and provisional selves who create the world that they inhabit.' [*Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the real in performance practice and theory, 1990-2010* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013), p.81]. Although quite different from examples that Tomlin explores, *The Events* rejects and complicates notions of authentic identities, making an important contribution to debates on stage representations of the Other.

[30] Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 28-29. In the book's first section, Kelleher approaches politics as uneven relations of power, played out and encountered with in

In *The Events*, the work's political potential lies in the performance's structure, its dramaturgy that emerges through the relation between the actor's appearance, the onstage meeting between the two actors and the choir *and* that which audience members understand the actor to stand in for at any moment. *The Events* does not attempt to produce an authentic or accurate account of the aftermath of a mass shooting; instead, in performance, it presents audiences and actors with a 'task' of negotiating the 'unimaginable', which is The Boy. Politics, here:

> concerns the 'fidelity' with which [the actor] engages with the task of the performance and concerns also the 'judgements' we make – as spectators, as collaborators in the event – upon the thoughts and feelings that this event has provoked in us.[31]

The actor's fidelity to an aporetic, open understanding of Self and Other, the truthfulness that will make a claim on the audience's attention emerges from the way he stands in for a character that is only an impression, a sign, a 'weak, inadequate bogeyman' as Greig has described the perpetrators of mass killings.[32] The politics of *The Events* evolve around the appearance of the 'bogeyman', in making space for him and, in doing so, deconstructing a logocentric mode of fixed representations of victim and perpetrator. By rendering The Boy a blank canvas, Greig and ATC not only shatter realistic illusions of 'becoming character' but also challenge ideological positions that

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different 'scenes' (in the real world and the theatre). He is particularly concerned with the 'dramaturgy' of such an encounter and how a scene, in the theatre and real life, may be 'put together in a particular way', 'put together to "work" on us in particular ways' (p. 8). An understanding of politics may emerge by 'thinking through' such dramaturgy and its effects.

[31] Ibid.

[32] 'Author David Greig and director Ramin Gray discuss a new play which deals with the aftermath of an atrocity', *Herald Scotland*, 16 July 2013 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts-ents/stage/author-david-greig-and-director-ramin-gray-discuss-a-new-play-which-deals-with-the-aftermath-of-an-atrocity.2161> [accessed 30 September 2014]

reproduce specific, often racially or ethnically-driven understandings of Self and Other, thus stalling possibilities of multicultural cohabitation.

By constantly deferring who or where The Boy is, and raising questions about identification in the theatre, this use of character as impression both underlines and undermines the stickiness of terms like victim and perpetrator. We encounter various characters through the same actor's body and in that way an idea of 'pure' presence (of 'evil' in society) is constantly postponed. Justice - another form of Derridean aporia - is similarly deferred because the murderer is never entirely present to be judged. This call for justice nevertheless remains and is performatively evoked every time the stage is 'wiped clean' (for example, when the spilt tea is mopped up; when the chairs are taken away), hinting at the promise of a new start.

By writing character as an impression that emerges through a play of differences in a system of interdependent signs, Greig plays with the contradictions of representation and demarcations of individual and collective identities. In doing so, he makes an important intervention into how 'aliens', 'strangers', Others are encountered and recognized in multiculturalism. In *Strange Encounters,* her important book on cultural constructions, ontological arguments and the political purchase of the term 'stranger', cultural theorist Sara Ahmed argues that the stranger is that which has always already been perceived as such; in the very action of failing to recognize him/her, the stranger's figure appears.[33] In *The Events,* The Boy is such a stranger because his actions are 'beyond' our understanding, but Greig's reluctance to produce a 'fleshed out' figure resists what Ahmed calls 'stranger fetishism'.[34] This fetishism is either expressed through 'stranger danger' rhetoric (a recurrent trope for a specific part

[33] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.
[34] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters,* p. 5.

of the media) or disguised in arguments, widespread in multiculturalism, which welcome the stranger. In both these cases, imagining the stranger as a figure containing meaning is problematic, for it locates the Other in a particular, limited frame of recognition, which obscures and neglects processes and structures of identity formation. For Ahmed, what needs to be prioritized and understood is the *encounter* with the Other, that which can 'surprise' and 'shift the boundaries of the familiar, of what we assume we know'.[35] *The Events* stages such an encounter, pregnant with possibilities of 'conflict and surprise',[36] in such an encounter with the 'unimaginable', 'a tear in the fabric of reality' may appear.

'Everyone's welcome here': The choir, communities and identification

'[T]he dance of the citizen out there in the public sphere is of far greater human value than the individual's private reflection upon an art-object' writes David Wiles, echoing Rousseau, referring to citizens' involvement in ancient Athenian drama.[37] The embodied experience of community through the shared doing of an action – dancing, or in the case of *The Events*, singing – adds to the theatre event's affective quality, which consequently enhances its political potential. In the very aesthetics of *The Events*, where every night different amateur choirs join the actors to perform in front of their families, friends and members of their community, a space opens up, a space which allows spectating communities to participate in the work. If intersubjectivity lies at the core of what Jill Dolan has termed 'utopian performatives', '"doings" crafted from the present moment of interaction between performers and spectators in a specifically

[35] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 7.
[36] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 6.
[37] David Wiles, *Theatre and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 31-2.

situated material, historical performance',[38] *The Events* adds a further layer to that stage-auditorium transaction by bringing in 'real people', who perform *and* watch onstage. In this way, the play's engagement with trauma and violence engages audiences in nuanced ways, raising questions about the role of community.

The Events could be described as a gift, an invitation to communities to join in and heal through performance. At the same time, communities make a gift to ATC by volunteering to participate in the work – by volunteering, moreover, to open the show with a song of their choice specifically selected to mark their distinctive identity as a group. One of the production's most striking and defining elements is the sheer number of choir members assembled onstage.[39] From their first appearance, via their occasionally awkward movement, to their various reactions as the story unfolds before their eyes, the choir is instrumental in producing a sense of intimacy - whilst simultaneously, like an ancient Greek chorus, witnessing and commenting on the drama. The 'what if' scenario that theatre often stages appears more palpable in performance because the choir's familiar presence blurs the fiction/reality boundaries. One of the most evocative moments of this blurring and its potential is the improvisation of a 'shamanic ritual', a moment of comic relief for all involved. Claire's obsession with The Boy compels her to host a ritual for everyone to reconnect with their souls. That moment exposes the piece's 'roughness', offering a celebration of the different people who, in most parts embodied and passionate, participate. It exposes the work's 'bolts and joins' in a moment of vulnerability on the performers' part, as things can go wrong. At the scene's end, the choir 'exits'; that is, its members stop 'performing themselves' and return to their benches to carry on 'performing' their scripted parts –

[38] Jill Dolan, 'Introduction to special issue on Utopian Performatives', *Modern Drama*, 47.2 (2004), 165-76 (p. 165).
[39] Choir sizes would differ but ATC's call was for groups of 17 to 30 singers.

the lines and stage directions inscribed within the text. To heighten that transition, a choir member uses a microphone and reads from the script the reasons why the choir 'has left'.

Apart from making the piece feel sufficiently unpolished, the amateur performers' presence raised a key question: Who do we identify with in the theatre and how? While the actors worked as floating signifiers, the amateurs, like other chorus members fulfilling their citizens' duty, restored a sense of authenticity. The appearance of real people allows for a question to emerge: What possibilities of healing do *we* actually have to offer each other, if an 'event' ever happens here? *The Events* is not a piece that romanticizes community; on the contrary, it contests what constitutes a shared 'we' *particularly* through the device of the choir, which, as Greig admits, 'is a group that can include or exclude you'.[40]

In five of the six performances I attended, the choir was all white. Racial composition varied between performances but the all-white choirs I encountered framed my experience as an audience member, made me acutely aware of the racial mark that the male actor bore, and prompted questions about how difference appears and how communities and individuals are demonized and excluded on racial grounds. But the different choirs also celebrated age, gender and ability, thus allowing for a complex understanding of multiculturalism – beyond the important racial question – to emerge. Bringing real people onstage – embodying communities – allowed various identity groups to appear, inviting audiences to consider who and what they may

[40] 'Author David Greig and director Ramin Gray discuss new play', *Herald Scotland*, 16 July 2013 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts-ents/stage/author-david-greig-and-director-ramin-gray-discuss-a-new-play-which-deals-with-the-aftermath-of-an-atrocity.2161> [accessed 15 November 2014]. Indeed, despite the illusion of spontaneity, the choir had rehearsed their songs for six to eight weeks, using material supplied by ATC, including a full score and accompanist music, backing tracks and recordings. In this way, the choir brought to the performance a particular set of skills, separate to those of the actors.

identify with, who they may ally themselves with in public and to what extent temporary communities, produced in spaces like the theatre, allow for new forms or feelings of identification. The presence of the amateur performers combined with the fragmented, elusive identities of The Boy and Claire invited audiences to consider identity not as discursively or ideologically produced but as an experience of interdependence. Similarly, the community that the play seems to be advocating is not to be found via a return to an essentialist 'we'; frequent references to 'tribes' in the play clearly attack such ideologies, whilst the parable of the bonobos and chimps (p. 52) recognizes the human/animal affinities. A temporary community of people, however, who share a space to perform their passion for something alongside others can transform into new ways of being and doing beyond that temporary meeting.[41] Such figures of community, intangible as pieces of music, gesture to an unfinished, impossible - yet always-to-strive-for - version of multicultural cohabitation.

'We are here/ we are all in here': Singing aporia

I would like to finish this article by considering the piece's final moment. The auditorium lights are raised. Claire approaches the audience and repeats the first lines which she addressed to the Boy at the performance's beginning:

> CLAIRE: Come in.
> Don't be shy.
> Everyone's welcome here.

[41] It is worth mentioning here 'Super Mondays', a mass choir rehearsal conducted once a week during the UK and US runs, which brought together all the community choirs that would take part in the production that week. In the words of pianist Magnus Gilljam, in a blog for ATC celebrating his 150th show, such gatherings were underpinned by 'the joy of singing together'. See Gilljam, 'The joy of singing together', *Actors Theatre Company*, 13 March 2015 <http://www.atctheatre.com/blog/the-joy-of-singing-together)> [Accessed 18 September 2015]. For accounts of choir members who took part in the production, see 'Do it! Do it! Do it!', *Actors Theatre Company*, 27 September 2013 <http://www.atctheatre.com/blog/do-it-do-it-do-it> and 'Ja Takk', *Actors Theatre Company*, 28 October 2013 http://www.atctheatre.com/blog/ja-takk [accessed 18 September 2015].

> We're all one big crazy tribe here.
> Why don't you sit with us and if you feel like singing – sing
> And if you don't feel like singing
> Well that's OK too.
> Nobody feels like singing all the time. (p. 68)

The choir sings a song with the chorus line 'we are here, we are all in here'. The affective quality of the moment is undeniable as the 'real' choir members approach the audience and an intersubjective moment of connection, of togetherness, is shaped. But in this very moment of hope, a contradiction lurks: as I become acutely aware of my presence and of the presence of others around me, as I feel an emotion comparable to catharsis bubbling up, as some kind of order seems to be restored, I look for The Boy: he is absent again, standing at the back, nobody is noticing him. The Boy seems to be forgotten as we move on. Is this a sign of healing, a promise for the future? Or is it, troublingly, a perpetuation of the conditions that produce the violence? This is an aporetic, ambivalent ending, where multiculturalism emerges as a 'mode of proximity which produces the figure of "the stranger"'.[42] Indeed, in that last moment, as actors and non-actors, 'strangers' and members of community share the same scene, what appears is community and exclusion as interdependent terms.

The actors step back to make space for the choir, who walk forward and encounter the audience. An embodied experience of encountering the familiar or the strange cannot be 'unseen' or 'unfelt', as audiences find themselves in the 'double bind' of identity and difference, of belonging and exclusion; that seems to me to be the moment of transcendence which 'rough theatre' brings about. Like in the perpetrator/victim final confrontation scene, when Claire performs her (lack of) forgiveness by denying The Boy the poisoned cup of tea, the play's ending stages

[42] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 13.

aporia, a moment of not knowing where to go next. Exemplary of his 'rough theatre', David Greig's *The Events* feels 'unfinished' as the actors allow the 'real' people, their scripts now discarded, to sing the last notes in a moment that celebrates the simple act of singing together, the amateur performers' imperfect yet emotionally poignant labour. In doing so, the piece stages a desire for this labour to crystallize and be shared elsewhere, with other people, beyond the theatre, in other practices.