Rita, Sue and #Metoo—the Royal Court Theatre, London, and Liberalism

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We live in a time of critical moments. In fact, right now, in the midst of a global pandemic that has seen five million people lose their lives, it can feel as if this single event is the watershed moment from which all else will irrevocably change. The theatre industry around the world lies decimated by the virus, with artists, technicians, and a whole gamut of ancillary staff having lost their jobs and no discernible idea of when things might return to some sense of pre-COVID normality. Coupled with this, another singular event—the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020—had global repercussions, causing statues to be pulled down, and national conversations to be staged in relation to the ongoing legacies of slavery in a world where the lives of black people often do not matter, or at least do not matter as much as those of their white counterparts. So, to speak of crisis or revolution right now is not to negate the events that led up to the #metoo movement and the way in which the movement itself sent shockwaves through the creative industries, but perhaps rather to see it within the prism of a series of revolutions that have taken place within the social and political sphere in the twenty-first century whose ultimate consequences we have yet to see, understand, or experience. Looking back to a time just prior to the pandemic, it is worth noting that as we approached the onset of 2019, something seemed to have happened that had led to an apparent spiraling of social and political touchpoints. The 2017 inauguration of Donald Trump as US president, the 2016 Brexit referendum result in the United Kingdom, the apparently relentless rise of China's economic power alongside the parallel (and at times occluded) power of Russia to influence change converged to such an extent that much of the critical thought at that time focused its energies

on understanding the 'when' and 'how' rather than the 'what' and the 'why.' As a result, there was an almost constant talk of crisis within the arts and humanities academic community as well as out into the broader public discourse. "Theatre of crisis," "Europe in crisis," "Utopia in Crisis," "Rethinking Crisis," "Crisis or Enlightenment?", "Culture in Crisis," "Crises of Democracy," "Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization," and "Systemic Crisis in European Theatre" are just a few of the recent thematic forays into this area from academic conferences emerging largely in the Anglo-American world as researchers attempted to gain an understanding of how we had got to where we were then and how we might move beyond.[1] Indeed, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents yet another crisis to add to the ongoing, relentless crises in which our lived experience may continue to be understood.

Jared Diamond's pre-pandemic and thus presciently entitled *Upheaval—How Nations Cope With Crisis and Change* (2019)—a brilliant survey of points of crisis across the globe—gestures towards a future where both nations and individuals must decide which "parts of their identities" they wish to retain and what can be discarded.[2] The notion of identity, and its associated political affiliations, has not hitherto afforded the luxury of a kind of pick-and-mix approach where certain elements may be excluded for the sake of expediency or otherwise. The crises mentioned above have often formed part of or indeed resulted in an engagement with so-called culture wars—the conflict of values and ideas—whose provenance dates back to the nineteenth-century rift between the German Reich and the Roman Catholic church[3] but which in the twenty-first century have become more internally focused inside the confines of bordered nations and within the broader context of globalization and neoliberalism.[4] The polarization of ideas on a range of issues such as abortion, freedom of speech, trans rights, ecoterrorism, and immigration may seem irreconcilable. However, as a direct result of the clash of ideas, new ways of thinking and framing may evolve. The relationship between values—social, political, or cultural— and crisis is thus not seen as a symbiotic or causal one, but rather a means by which a resolution and a way forward might be found. This theme of resolution coming out of crisis is something I will return to later when surveying the impact and response to the #metoo campaign in London's theatre industry. In this

article, I am especially interested in exploring how the relatively local sphere of this capital city and its foremost producer of new plays—the Royal Court Theatre—interfaced with a specific, pre-pandemic, international crisis: the fallout from the so-called #metoo campaign in late 2017. In doing so, I will address the question of why, at times of apparent crisis, theatre is often first and foremost able to articulate the dilemmas of our times and why London became so central to these issues.[5] London is a leading cultural metropolis, whose creative economy is estimated to provide one in six jobs in the capital and generate over £47 billion.[6] It also continues to occupy a significant place in the world of theatre, television, and film, which is deeply embedded and interconnected financially, culturally, and structurally into other arts and media industry-centered cities around the world including New York (and in particular Broadway) and the Los Angeles film and television studios in Hollywood. London also provides a gateway into mainland Europe where there are deep linkages between cultural organizations and creative industries despite (and, one could say, in opposition to) the inevitable consequences of Brexit.[7]

A Note on #Metoo

The #metoo movement was somewhat accidentally founded by Black civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006 when she used the phrase *me too* to shine a spotlight over the omnipresence of sexual abuse in society.[8] In 2017 it was taken up on the social media platform Twitter by American actress Alyssa Milano, who used the referent #metoo as a way of encouraging women to speak out in solidarity with others who had experienced sexual harassment or assault.[9] The impact of the #metoo hashtag cannot be understated. Milano sent her first tweet on October 15, 2017 and by the end of the day more than 200,000 others had responded. On Facebook, more than 12 million people used the hashtag within the first 24 hours with postings moving beyond the film industry into theatre, music, academia, and politics.[10] In her 2019 book on #metoo, Karen Boyle describes the campaign as an example of "networked feminism"—where repetitions through shared posts constitute a movement in and of itself.[11] The ways in which social media provides platforms upon which such movements can be founded, consolidated, and then developed have often invoked metaphors of

viruses that can spread misinformation and fear as rapidly as they can transmit messages of hope and community.[12] Certainly, these platforms afforded #metoo a conduit through which it was able to garner support and visibility around a set of issues that had rarely been openly discussed in the sectors in which they were operating—namely, the creative, media, film, television, and theatre industries.[13]

The impact of the #metoo online campaign and its genesis as an international movement speaks to the long history of feminist struggle and its enduring ability to continue to build consensus and galvanize ideas around a need for change. While some have argued that feminism is a moribund ideology whose principal objectives have now been realized,[14] others have questioned such assumptions, particularly at a moment where debates that were once thought to have been won are reignited with new contestations.[15] The rise of the Far Right in US politics, for example, has seen increasing attacks on abortion clinics just as the debates around the ownership of women's bodies and the apparent desire to legislate away women's rights became more mainstream during the Trump Presidency.[16] It is in this climate that #metoo took hold and gained momentum and in which, more specifically, it chimed with women's long-term experience of working in the creative industries. Such women have felt marginalized and powerless for decades in a climate where speaking out and blowing the whistle would amount to an act of career-destroying proportions. There is, of course, some irony in all of this. The creative industries have long had a history of being associated with liberal ideas and the liberal project in general. Indeed, the history of theatres like the Royal Court in London has been closely aligned to a desire to give voice to marginalized groups through decades of commissioning, programming, and producing new works. The film and television industries, too, carry a legacy of association with liberal ideas. The so-called Second Red Scare in the United States and the campaign led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose name came to codify a post-war decade, saw liberal views made the focus of a staged ideological culture war—one that appears to have resurfaced in the more recent global rise of twenty-first-century populism. Thus, McCarthyism and the McCarthy era symbolized a time when a frantic witch-hunt of filmmakers, writers, and actors with supposed links to communism took place. During this

time, more than 300 artists were denied work as they found themselves on an unofficial blacklist.[17] Fast forward seventy years, and in 2018 the *New York Times* ran an article by American sociologist Neil Gross entitled "Why is Hollywood So Liberal?" where, in addition to factors related to residency and college education, a more nuanced answer is to be found both in the specific empathetic nature of the acting process itself—the emotional demands it makes on the performer—along with the mimetic art of film and performance more generally.[18] Most recently, and back in London, the creation of the idea of a malevolent "woke" liberal elite in the tabloid press led to a campaign to encourage the British Broadcasting Corporation to engage more right-wing comics (due to concerns that its output remains too left of center) and a movement to remove its public funding altogether.[19]

The liberalism upon which the house of the creative industries was constructed in the late twentieth century—its apparent concern with detailing the lives of marginalized groups, its public role, fronted by actors in particular, in taking a political stance on many social issues of the time[20]—helped create an illusion of equity and inclusion in organizations whose practices remained hidden and ignored. #Metoo provided the impetus for the myth of untrammeled liberalism in the film, television, and theatre industries to finally implode. Its message rocked both the creative sector and its pipeline: the drama and music schools, the conservatoires and universities. It all fell apart like the aptly entitled Netflix series *House of Cards* (2013–18), whose Golden Globe-winning principal star Kevin Spacey was forced to step down, losing the company $39 million in the process.[21] Spacey, as explored below, had formerly held the artistic directorship of the Old Vic Theatre in London, thus evincing not only the inherent interconnectedness of London and Los Angeles, of theatre and television, but also how both of these industries engaged in systemic abuse of both women and men who were largely powerless to call attention to practices that had become normalized and yet were hidden from plain view at the same time.

London and #Metoo

London, like many other cities around the world, felt the impact of #metoo in surprising and unpredictable ways. As mentioned above,

London is not only the UK's capital city and home to its government, but also a city that is of enormous cultural significance globally. Through shared histories, a common language, and industries with freely flowing populations between the US and the UK, it was perhaps inevitable that the #metoo campaign would take root in the UK in similar ways to those experienced in the US. Indeed, the city's connection with #metoo is so strong that in February 2018 *GQ* magazine ran an article entitled somewhat rhetorically '#Metoo: Does It Exist Only in a London Bubble?'[22] Stepping into that bubble, a series of events during this period are worthy of comment. In October 2017, the Cabinet Office of the Westminster government launched an investigation into sexual harassment allegations from MP Mark Garnier's secretary where it was alleged that he had ordered her to go out and buy sex toys for him to give to his wife and mistress.[23] Meanwhile, journalists Jane Merrick and Kate Maltby made allegations against the Defense Minister Michael Fallon and Deputy Prime Minister Damian Green (a close ally of then Prime Minister Theresa May).[24] As a result, both left office following a two-month inquiry during which Green was apparently unable to adequately explain the existence of large amounts of pornography on his parliamentary computer. Of course, the #metoo campaign, while now seen as a turning point, did not just arrive out of nowhere; it is important to remember that allegations and investigations were beginning to surface in ever greater numbers prior to 2017. Back in 2012, for example, two bastions of British public service and liberalism—the aforementioned British Broadcasting Corporation and the National Health Service—became the subject of large-scale criticism when it emerged that both organizations had covered up years of abuse against vulnerable young people by the then-recently deceased television star Jimmy Savile.[25] Operation Yewtree, a police investigation into the sexual abuse of children by celebrities, came as a direct result of the Savile allegations, led to seven convictions, and is credited with a rise in the number of reported sex crimes more generally.[26]

By 2017, and very much in the wake of the momentum gained by the #metoo movement, cases such as Savile's were no longer seen as isolated acts of abuse. When Kevin Spacey's behavior on the set of *House of Cards* came to the fore in the US as a result of allegations

initially made by actor Anthony Rapp, the theatre community back in London began to reflect on Spacey's eleven-year tenure as artistic director of the Old Vic Theatre in Waterloo between 2004 and 2015. In November 2017, the *Guardian* ran a piece outlining a range of allegations emanating from former Old Vic staff and actors who accused the theatre of having turned a blind eye to Spacey's inappropriate behavior towards junior members of the team. Mexican actor Roberto Cavazoz was reported as saying that Spacey would invite young male actors to the Old Vic on the pretense of offering them career advice.[27] At the same time, the Royal Court Theatre's artistic director, Vicky Featherstone, discussed the case on the BBC Radio 4 flagship daily news program *Today*, where she conceded that rumors around Spacey's poor behavior had been circulating in London's theatre community for some years. What is interesting to note here is that even in what might be considered the most enlightened sections of the liberal left, the focus of much critique in the popular press and elsewhere in relation to its supposed obsession with political correctness, a culture of harassment had largely gone unacknowledged and been allowed to continue as long as the perpetrators involved were of significant stature, fame, and power.[28]

At the Royal Court, as revelations around both Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey were reverberating, new allegations came forward about its former artistic director and much-celebrated new writing champion Max Stafford-Clark. Questions around the decades-long complicity of the British theatre industry arose as a number of women who had worked with Stafford-Clark came forward with their own stories of his inappropriate conversations and sexual questioning when working under his employ. As a direct result of these allegations and their seriousness, Stafford-Clark stood down as director of Out of Joint—the company he had founded in 1993—"to focus on his international freelance career," in a decision taken with or perhaps *by* the company's board.[29] The reputation and stature of Stafford-Clark within the British theatrical establishment cannot be overstated. Not only is he closely associated with the early development and promotion of significant women playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, Andrea Dunbar, and Sarah Daniels, but he also championed an approach to directing actors by utilizing a rehearsal method, known

as *actioning*, which focused on a desire for actors to be able to articulate and name the precise transitive action of each line of text in a play. In this way, actors were encouraged to rethink the text of a scene in terms not just of what the dialogue says but also what it attempts to do or, rather, what effects and *affects* different actions may bring to the script. As Dan Rebellato has pointed out, there is a deep irony that someone famed for a methodology that sets out to unearth subtext and subtextual layering should meet their downfall amid revelations of their own use of inappropriate language—in a context in which some kind of underlying action (of power, of status) was certainly being proposed as the performative consequence to the words that were being used.[30]

The timing of the Stafford-Clark revelations in the autumn of 2017 was unfortunate for Featherstone and her team at the Court, as she had programmed the director's revival of Andrea Dunbar's play *Rita, Sue, and Bob Too* for January 2018 in a Royal Court, Octagon Theatre Bolton, and Out of Joint co-production. Before addressing the twists and turns that subsequently took place in the Court's management of the production, I want first to explore the precise context of the play, its origin and critical reception, and the complex ways in which it is tied to Stafford-Clark as both the play's original director and the playwright's mentor.

Rita, Sue and Bob Too

Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was first performed in 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Her first play, *The Arbor*, written while she was undertaking her CSEs at school, was produced at the Court in 1980 under Stafford-Clark's direction. He then went on to direct *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* in 1982, also at the Royal Court during his term as artistic director. For its 2017 iteration, Stafford-Clark was listed as co-director with Kate Wasserberg, and he enjoys a degree of credit for its authorship—the play text states that the play is "by Andrea Dunbar" and then on a new line "newly edited by John Hollingworth and Max Stafford-Clark".[31] Looking at Dunbar's play in the twenty-first century, it seems odd that its narrative of two young girls being groomed into having sex by an older married man did not accrue more attention or notoriety at the time of its previous productions or of the

successful British film adaptation (in 1987) for which Dunbar also penned the screenplay. Dunbar had written fearlessly from the intersectional perspective of being both working class and a woman. But the platform for her voice to be heard came through the benevolence and wardship of Stafford-Clark. Indeed, his command of this process appeared never to have been called into doubt by the many women who clearly benefitted from his commitment to find a way to promote their work for new audiences. However, just as much as the theatre and film industries sleepwalked their way through a systemic abuse of women and ignored the inappropriate behaviors of powerful white men, once the contemporary context changed—triggered by #metoo—the possibility of calling out and speaking out became an act that was no longer career-destroying. In hindsight, the signs were certainly there to see. As Catriona Fallow and Sarah Jane Mullan write in their recent account of the impact of #metoo at the Court,[32] the rehearsal process for the original production of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, noted in Emily McLaughlin and Ruth Little's homage to fifty years at the Royal Court, included Stafford-Clark requiring everyone to be naked in order to facilitate less inhibition for the opening sex scene.[33] Such practices have become celebrated by some in recent decades as part of the artistry of unorthodox directing. In cinema, for example, Danish director Lars von Trier has made a career of directing sexually explicit arthouse movies with practices that have allegedly included a requirement for crew (and himself) to film sexually explicit scenes unclothed.[34] It is worth noting here, too, that von Trier and his production company have also accrued accusations of sexual misconduct in more recent years.[35]

Much of the coverage at the time of the play's premiere in October 1982 focused on the corpus of the seven works that made up the Young Writers' Festival at the Royal Court, of which *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was but one. In fact, it is illuminating to note that many correspondents at that time were most excited by the fact that the festival staked out new ground through Stafford-Clark's curation of a set of plays written entirely by women.[36] In terms of Dunbar's offering, most critics found the play to be essentially comic in tone and drew attention to its vivid depiction of sex, particularly in its opening scene in which Bob's naked posterior was in full view for the delectation and enjoyment of Royal

Court audiences. Victoria Radin, writing in the *Observer*, for example, declared that she was "now familiar with every contour of the buttocks of Paul Copley….[which] demonstrate the basic movements of love," while Desmond Christy, in more nuanced mode, warned that the "heavy-buttocked" opening scene and other comic elements had the potential to eclipse "the mundane tragedy of a destroyed marriage, betrayed friendships and bleak futures."[37] Far more prescient was Carole Woddis, writing in the left-wing London weekly *City Limits*, who found the play to offer a "grim view of love, life and sex for women in the North: fumbling through male violence and domination, competitiveness, betrayal and with little enough sign of enlightenment or solidarity."[38] Clearly, critics in the early 1980s were not unaware or insensitive to Dunbar's talent and what Kenneth Hurren, writing in *What's On,* referred to as her "unremitting tang of authenticity."[39] But its appraisal at that time was ultimately defined in terms of the "hilariously raunchy"[40] or what was for *Time Out'*s Ann McFerran "one of the funniest pieces of naughty Northern naturalism."[41] Writing in January 1983, however, and looking back on the preceding year's most noteworthy theatrical successes with a greater sense of distance, the *Financial Times'* arts correspondent Rosalind Carne deemed Dunbar's play worthy of specific note, though this was tempered by disappointment that, despite its significance, it had not managed to garner bigger audiences.[42]

In Nadine Holdsworth's expansive account of English theatre's invocation of the grim realities of life lived in the north of England, the northern inflection of Dunbar's work is highlighted alongside its close association with urban deprivation.[43] The linkages of poverty to the north have a long legacy in the Royal Court's output over decades, and its further extension into themes of sexual promiscuity followed a track in the 1980s that had previously been forged by other young women playwrights, most notably Shelagh Delaney's *Taste of Honey* (1958) written when she was just 19 for Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in Stratford, East London. Re-presenting *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* in 2017, and in the wake of the aforementioned high-profile cases of sexual abuse alongside the impact of the #metoo campaign, additional layers of meaning were afforded whereby the play could be more fully understood. As Holdsworth notes, at this critical moment in time, the

play took on a "heightened significance in a society increasingly alert to the grooming of underage women for sex," despite its oblique refusal to take a stance on such issues.[44] However, producing the play within this new context did certainly offer new directorial opportunities to position the work differently and to reappraise its widely recognized comic elements in ways that might afford a different set of insights. In this new landscape, a context might be developed which offered new opportunities to problematize, for example, the play's other elements such as its potential to flatten and stereotype notions of deprivation within a framing of *northern-ness* for Royal Court southern audiences.

The weeks in which the Spacey and Stafford-Clark allegations began to coalesce around a wider, developing sense that the theatre industry itself had been sleeping at the wheel for some time (or perhaps more directly was in complete denial that it was affected by any of these issues) coincided with the period in which the revival of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was about to open at the Court. Featherstone's appearance on the *Today* program and her admission that "everyone knew" about Spacey appeared to sit uncomfortably with the opening of Dunbar's play, with its themes of sexual manipulation on the one hand, and its promotion as some kind of celebratory anniversary related to Stafford-Clark on the other. At some point, these two events—the allegations around Stafford-Clark's behavior towards current and former women in his employment and the rehearsal of Dunbar's play—appeared to be irreconcilable, and in a relatively swift and unprecedented step, Featherstone announced that the play was being pulled from the program on December 13—just weeks before its opening. The joint statement issued by both companies affirmed the lead that Featherstone had taken in the wider theatre industry and the formation of a thirty-point code of behavior[45] which had been published in early November and had arisen out of the theatre's 'day of action' on October 28.[46] Addressing both the experience of the individuals who participated in its event and the themes of the play, the statement determined that having "heard 150 stories of sexual harassment and abuse . . . the staging of this work, with its themes of grooming and abuses of power on young women, on that same stage, feels highly conflictual."[47]

The statement is unusual in many respects. It does not make clear, for example, why a play that itself deals with the themes of manipulation

and sexual dominance of an older man over two young women—or, as discussed above, one that certainly provides the directorial opportunity to explore these issues—should not resonate rather than conflict with the 150 stories that came out of the theatre's day of action. Presumably, then, those concerns also arose out of the potential for the play to be seen as a testament to the work of Stafford-Clark, and in particular his mentoring and sponsorship of young female playwrights, set against a backdrop of the play's themes and perhaps broader concerns about the rehearsal process that led to its staging. Withdrawing the play from the program, despite buoyant ticket sales, could be construed as a political act of reclamation by the Court's first female artistic director, who clearly had wrestled with her own conscience and silence over previous acts of abuse exerted by other powerful figures in the industry.[48] A further complication, however, was that the play was co-directed by Kate Wasserberg, who had been recruited to the Out of Joint company in July 2017 as co-artistic director and had taken over the stewardship of the play and its tour following StaffordClark's earlier departure. Thus, the joint statement was clearly written with the consent, if not authorship, of both Featherstone and Wasserberg, two women who had come to a decision to cancel a revival of a play that had itself been written by a young working-class woman based on her experiences of living on a council estate in Bradford. It is also worth noting that Dunbar had died of a brain hemorrhage, aged only twenty-nine, in 1990. Had she still been alive during the events of 2017, perhaps different decisions might have been made but, without her presence and agency, the marketing focus on the play was closely tied to the notion of a kind of anniversary outing—where Stafford-Clark was returning to the stage a play he had famously commissioned and directed decades earlier.

Despite the complexities of the case, it seems clear that perhaps more than anything there was a critical need at that time to both take, and to be seen to have taken, swift action. Much of the critique around public statements and corporate endorsements of a commitment to equality in the workplace has been that lofty words have not been matched by tangible actions and in some cases comprise nothing more than corporate virtue-signaling—the equivalent of global oil companies trumpeting a commitment to solar power. Elaine Aston, in her recent book on the impact of feminism on theatre practices, refers to this

phenomenon within the wider sphere of arts organizations publicly declaring their diversity, equality, and inclusion policies where she invokes Sara Ahmed's cautionary moniker of the "non-performative": the deployment of words *as* actions despite the lived experience being somewhat different.[49] The lessons that had been learnt from the #metoo campaign (and indeed those not so dissimilar from other campaigns such as #blacklivesmatter) underscored the idea that making public statements of support was not enough. Particularly, in what are seen as liberal-leaning entities such as arts organizations, public declarations of support were deemed to have simply aided and abetted the continuance of abuse in the background that remained potentially masked and occluded forever. Within this context, Featherstone's action to pull the play can be seen as being an inherently political act that sought to break with the protective shield that had been afforded to the industry's great guru figures such as Stafford-Clark in order to mark a clear departure from the past and provide a definitive signaling that change was not so much imminent as physically present in the day-to-day running of the organization.

Following the announcement that the play was to be pulled, however, there was an immediate outcry from a range of voices among London's theatre community. Many critics felt that the deceased playwright Dunbar, who had no voice left other than that that could be delivered through her works, was being silenced to save the potential embarrassment of a powerful man. Others questioned why a play that itself explicitly explored the grooming of young girls was being censored at such an important time. Indeed, critics of the Court's action, a large number of whom would usually be its principal cheerleaders, were vehement in their anger and disgust. Theatre critic Holly Williams, writing in *The Stage*, offered a more nuanced view than others when she rhetorically asked: "Does it do disservice to Dunbar's play to present it in a context so bound up with Stafford-Clark? This is a reasonable argument. But surely it also does disservice to Dunbar's play to suggest the contextual penumbra of a man's actions must necessarily cloud and obscure a woman's words. While some theatregoers would be thinking about it, I hope most could look beyond it too."[50]

David Barnett, writing in the *Guardian*, was of a similar mind, detailing the development of the play and its ironic entangling with Stafford-Clark within the context of a male-dominated industry where "Abusers in positions of power . . . have been silencing women's voices for decades."[51] Barnett goes on to highlight the paradox that "the theatre where she got her first break is doing the silencing. As when seedy Bob entices Rita and Sue into his car for urgent, loveless sex."[52] Interestingly, the cancellation of the play was almost predicted by the *Telegraph*'s theatre writer, Dominic Cavendish, when he made a direct link between the Spacey affair at the Old Vic and what was then the hotly billed forthcoming production of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* at the Court. Writing on November 9th, when the play was still in rehearsal for its London opening, Cavendish determined that: "One elephant in the room is *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, which has Stafford-Clark's fingerprints on it as co-director. It seems to me that it would be unconscionable for that revival to move to the Royal Court without a major statement of justification, or qualifying intent, from the theatre. My preferred option would be that the Court seizes the moment to open up the conversation. My suggestion is for a substitute season of work responding to the issues raised—with many contributions. The big missing element so far is us."[53]

The "us" Cavendish refers to here is the audience, the paying punters, who have been the unfortunate recipients of the theatrical products of a systemically broken industry. For Cavendish, the damage ran deep. Writing in the wake of the Spacey affair, there is almost a sense of nostalgia when he laments that "we lost whatever innocence we might once have had about West End 'glamour' this week. Silence isn't an option."[54]

The Show Must Go On

Just two days after withdrawing the play from the season, Featherstone completed a volte face, reversing the decision and putting out another press release stating that the production would go ahead after all, and that she had "been rocked to the core by accusations of censorship and the banning of a working-class female voice." The statement continued: "For that reason, I have invited the current Out of Joint production of

Rita, Sue and Bob Too back to the Royal Court for its run. As a result of this helpful public debate we are now confident that the context with which Andrea Dunbar's play will be viewed will be an invitation for new conversations."[55] The revelations around the systemic abuse experienced by the women who came to the Court's day of action, alongside the concerns of individuals like Featherstone who felt some responsibility for having kept silent (in relation to Spacey's actions among others), had clearly been considered to be a turning point; nothing could be allowed to go on as it had before. The notional liberalism of Stafford-Clark—his long-standing career built on developing and celebrating the work of women, many of whom, like Andrea Dunbar, were from working-class backgrounds—had posed a danger that the work could have been seen in terms that railed against the direct experience of many women (and some men) who had felt no other option than remaining silent in the face of their abuse in order to save their careers. Featherstone later acknowledged that it had been a phone call from Caryl Churchill—another writer who had benefitted from Stafford-Clark's support early in her career—that had been pivotal in helping her recognize that the act of cancelling the play had itself created a new prism through which the future production would be seen—something that, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, meant that the play could still go ahead after all.[56]

The pulling and then reinstating of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was not an isolated affair during this period of London's recent theatre history. Indeed, a large number of organizations sought to understand how they had ended up in the situation they were in and grappled with both atoning for past misdemeanors and finding ways in which they might operate more positively in the future.[57] London's Old Vic Theatre, as referenced above, had been strongly implicated in the accusations around sexual abuse in the theatre industry. In November 2017, it published the report of its investigation into sexual abuse, which highlighted an atmosphere in the theatre where staff "found that [Spacey's] stardom and status at the Old Vic may have prevented people, and in particular junior staff or young actors, from feeling that they could speak up or raise a hand for help."[58] Two months later, the Old Vic launched its Guardians scheme—a nonhierarchical support mechanism whereby staff can report abusive behavior through the

stewardship of trained 'guardians.'[59] The introduction of the Guardians scheme was swiftly followed by the Society of London Theatres and UK Theatre's joint report entitled Encouraging Safer and More Supportive Practices in Theatre[60] while at the same time Actor's Equity published its own *Agenda For Change* report[61] which looked at the whole performing arts industry—from drama schools to agents, casting directors and boards—and detailed a coherent way forward that offered protection for groups that had often felt powerless to come forward.

Looking back now, the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018 can be seen as a critical juncture in London theatre where organizations sought to create policy and action in response to the #metoo movement, which had shone a light on an industry that was predicated on multiple forms of systemic abuse in which many felt uncomfortably complicit. Within this context, the events surrounding *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* form part of a wider narrative of an industry that had become complacent about its practices but has ultimately recognized the necessity of urgent change.

Courting Cancel Culture?

The multiple knots that tied up the Royal Court's thinking in relation to Dunbar's play are symptomatic of the current climate in which we live, where the apparently rational basis of liberalism—the truths and principles that the largely college-educated, free-thinking so-called liberal elite hold to be self-evident—is becoming ever more precarious. Since the establishment of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, there has always remained a strong association between its programming and the ideological concerns of the liberal left. In formal terms, its championing of new work by working-class writers during the 1960s and 70s, its nurturing of women playwrights during the 1980s and 1990s, its golden period of internationalism in the first decade of the new millennium, and its more recent and profound engagement with Black and Asian voices, all testify to founder George Devine's vision of a theatre that is "hard hitting . . . uncompromising . . . stimulating, provocative and exciting."[62] But in terms of material content, too, its works have often been concretized within a framing that sets out to both describe and critique the contemporary social and political state of the nation. *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* remains a paradigmatic example of work that is as much provocative (for

example, in its portrayal of the normalization of sexual abuse) as it is politically liberal (in its capturing of the impact of Thatcherism on a working-class council estate).

Clearly, within liberalism, and its more corrosive twin neoliberalism, there has always remained a constant tension between its assertion of individual rights on the one hand and those of the common good on the other.[63] Contemporary manifestations of the latter find living presences in institutions such as the National Health Service—celebrated and sacrosanct in the UK for its free-at-the-point-of-delivery principles but often vilified in the US and invoked as a cautionary reminder of 'socialized medicine,' sitting at the bottom of a lowest common denominator, infringing the rights of individuals to take personal responsibility for the provision of their healthcare.[64]

In recent years, liberalism has come under attack on a number of new fronts—for its adherence to so-called politically correct behaviors, its promotion of multiculturalism, and its assertion of the rights of trans people. The rise of identity politics—what Sonia Kruks refers to as "the demand for respect for oneself as different" and not "for inclusion within the fold of 'universal humankind' on the basis of shared human attributes"[65]—has served to underscore tensions within liberalism itself which in turn has made it more open to attack from those sitting outside its orbit. Moreover, far from offering a radical opposition to the contemporary populist forces made manifest in the termination of the UK's membership of the European Union (Brexit) or the rise to political power of populist leaders (for example, Donald Trump in the USA or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil), critics such as political scientist Mark Lilla have laid the responsibility for the ascendance of these forces on cultural studies' liberals who have encouraged fetishized ideas of individual attachment and self-absorption. Thus Lilla asserts "Democratic politics is about persuasion, not self-expression . . . [where] I'm here, I'm queer will never provoke more than a pat on the head or a roll of the eyes."[66] This in turn relates to the rise of a topic that has seen both universities and the creative industries struggle to hold a fixed line: the twin-headed culture war that has been forged between upholding the right of freedom of speech and the need to safeguard specific, often-marginalized groups from unwarranted harm. Contemporaneous examples include the cancellation of invitations to

speak from the celebrated right-wing Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson,[67] the withdrawing of the pancake brand Aunt Jemima in the US due to its racist subtext,[68] and the termination of British columnist Julie Burchill's publishing deal following her alleged Islamophobic comments on social media to fellow journalist Ash Sarkar.[69] The term *cancel culture*, which refers to the actions of organizations deciding to cancel events, speakers, or campaigns as a result of the taking of some kind of ideological umbrage, was one that was levelled at the Royal Court when it decided to cancel the run of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* and placed it center stage in an accidental culture war of its own making.[70]

The *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* episode at the Royal Court in many ways epitomized the paradoxes and dilemmas of the whole of the creative industries—not just in London but worldwide. Despite being seen as a great bastion of British liberalism, defined by its genesis in 1956 and the ensuing decades thereafter, the Royal Court struggled to comprehend its own agency in the presentation of cultural works. That this struggle was such an open one, performed in the public eye with an unprecedented transparentness, is to be applauded rather than criticized. It is within this public sphere that liberalism itself needed and still needs to be reappraised and reimagined in ways that offer up greater radical innovations and interventions. Featherstone's tenure at that theatre, having traversed this particular crisis, has marked an important beginning of a much longer journey.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, "Theatre of Crisis. Aesthetic Responses to a Cross-Sectional Condition," Conference Report, The German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English, accessed January 7, 2022, http://contemporarydrama.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CDE-ConferenceReport-Graz-2019.pdf; "Europe in Crisis: High Profile Lecture Series Launched," King's College London, accessed January 7, 2022, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/politicaleconomy/ newsevents/newsrecords/europe-in-crisis-high-profile-lecture-series-launched; "Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis," ArtRabbit, accessed January 7, 2022, https://www.artrabbit.com/events/bauhaus-utopiain-crisis-camberwell-college-of-arts-london-2019; "Rethinking Crisis," TORCH | The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, accessed January 7, 2022, https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/ rethinking-crisis; "Global Humanities Institute 2019: Crises of Democracy through the Prism of Cultural Trauma," Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, accessed January 7, 2022,

https://chcinetwork.org/programs/ghi-2019-democracy; "Conference: Systemic Crisis in European Theatre," Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, accessed January 7, 2022, https://www.cssd. ac.uk/events/conference-systemic-crisis-european-theatre; and "Necropolitics, Biopower and the Crisis of Globalisation," Bickbeck Univeresity of London, accessed January 7, 2022, http://www. bbk.ac.uk/events/remote_event_view?id=851.

[2] Jared M. Diamond, *Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change* (London: Penguin, 2019), 6.

[3] Roger Chapman and James Ciment, eds., *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), xxvii.

[4] Claire Kramsch and Hua Zhu, "Translating Culture in Global Times: An Introduction," *Applied Linguistics* 41, no. 1 (2019): 5.

[5] In fact, the Royal Court Theatre has an interesting relationship with crisis and what may be called crisis-related phenomena, having established a position in British theatre which has largely centered around an articulation of a range of political issues and their impact on society through the medium of social realism.

[6] Erica Belcher, Nicolas Bosetti, and Richard Brown, "A Recovery Plan for the West End," Centre for London, September 3, 2020, https://www.centreforlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ Centre-for-London_West-End_Sep-2020-digital.pdf.

[7] The Royal Court Theatre, for example, has previously collaborated and co-produced work with the Schaubuhne, Berlin; the Arcola Theatre has collaborated with the Talimhane Theatre, Istanbul, among others in Turkey; while the Barbican in the City of London devotes whole seasons to work that emanates from a range of co-productions across the European continent.

[8] Rituparna Bhattacharyya, "#Metoo Movement: An Awareness Campaign," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 3, no. 4 (2018): 1–12.

[9] It is important to note here that from the very outset #metoo was a calling that integrated intersectional demands and visibilities in ways that are far more complex than simply viewing it as a further addendum to the history of feminism.

[10] Georgina Lawton, "#Metoo Is Here to Stay," *Guardian*, October 17, 2017, https://www.
theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/28/metoo-hashtag-sexual-harassment-violence-challengecampaign-women-men.

[11] Karen Boyle, *#Metoo, Weinstein and Feminism* (London: Palgrave, 2019), 3–4.

[12] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017).

[13] It is also, of course, worth noting that a parallel path has been thrashed by the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly over the last two years.

[14] See, for example, Emily Hill, "The End of Feminism," *Spectator*, October 24, 2015, https:// www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-end-of-feminism, and Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles; London: Sage, 2008).

[15] See, for example, Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall, "Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity, Climate Denial and Covid-19," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 4 (October 2020): 432–50.

[16] The violent attacks on the United State Capitol on January 6, 2021 following an unprecedented period of weeks during which the incumbent Leader of the Free World refused to accept the result of the 2020 election and the legitimacy of the incoming Biden administration

similarly evince a crisis (to take us back to my opening point) which places hitherto broadly accepted values and practices into jeopardy.

[17] A full account of the events leading up to and including the show trials of the Committee of Unamerican Activities is given by Thomas Doherty's excellent book *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[18] Neil Gross, "Why is Hollywood so Liberal?" *The New York Times*, January 27, 2018, https:// www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/opinion/sunday/hollywood-liberal.html.

[19] Roisin O'Connor, "Comedians React After Report BBC Is Planning to Cut Down on 'Left-wing' Comedy," *Independent*, September 1, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/ tv/news/bbc-left-wing-comedy-shows-tim-davie-reactions-conservatives-a9698521.html.

[20] These include, for example, the Civil Rights movement in the USA, the Vietnam War, HIV/AIDS policies, the Miners' strike in the UK, and the Brexit referendum.

[21] "Netflix Takes $39 Million Charge After Kevin Spacey Scandal," *Reuters*, January 22, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netflix-results-spacey-idUSKBN1FC072.

[22] Chris Stokel-Walker, "Does #MeToo Exist in the Real World?" *GQ*, February 12, 2018, https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/london-metoo.

[23] Stephen Castle, "Sexual Harassment Claims Surface in U.K. Parliament," *The New York* Times, October 30, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/world/europe/sexual-harassmentbritish-parliament.html.

[24] Nicola Bartlett and Dan Bloom, "Here's Everything We Know So Far About the Westminster Sexual Misconduct Scandal," *Daily Mirror*, November 1, 2017, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/ politics/heres-everything-know-far-westminster-11449323.

[25] Savile, who was knighted and a strong supporter of Margaret Thatcher, was given free rein to access vulnerable patients in the hospitals he supported as well as young guests on his shows because his charitable acts, such as making large donations to hospital wings, coupled with his celebrity status, had made him seemingly untouchable.

[26] For a contemporary view on the inquiry, see Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin "The Celebrity Icon Mask: The Multi-Institutional Masking of Sir Jimmy Savile," *Cultural Sociology* (2021), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1749975520985385.

[27] Mark Brown and Matthew Weaver, "Kevin Spacey: Old Vic Accused of Ignoring Sexual Misconduct Allegations," *Guardian*, November 2, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/ nov/01/old-vic-accused-of-ignoring-sexual-misconduct-by-kevin-spacey.

[28] Jack Newsinger, "A Cultural Shock Doctrine? Austerity, the Neoliberal State and the Creative Industries Discourse," *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 2 (2015): 307.

[29] Alexandra Topping, "Theatre Director Max Stafford-Clark Was Ousted Over Inappropriate Behaviour," *Guardian*, October 20, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/20/theatredirector-max-stafford-clark-was-ousted-over-inappropriate-behaviour.

[30] Dan Rebellato, "Max Stafford-Clark," February 15, 2017, http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2017/10/21/max-stafford-clark.

[31] Andrea Dunbar, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

[32] Catriona Fallow and Sarah Jane Mullan, "The Royal Court in the Wake of #Metoo," in Judith D. Rudakoff, ed., *Performing #Metoo: How Not to Look Away* (Bristol: Intellect, 2021), 123–40.

[33] Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (London: Oberon, 2007), 235.

[34] Simon Hattenstone, "A Joke or the Most Brilliant Film-maker in Europe?", *Guardian*, January 22, 1999, https://www.theguardian.com/film/1999/jan/22/features2.

[35] Yohana Desta, "Lars von Trier's Production Company Faces Sexual-Harassment Allegations," *Vanity Fair*, November 13, 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/11/lars-von-trierproduction-company-zentropa-allegations.

[36] Martin Walker, "Pulling the Strings," *Guardian*, October 2, 1982, 11.

[37] Cf. Victoria Radin, "Bone From Africa," *Observer*, October 20, 1982, 30; and Desmond Christy, "Young Writers'," *Guardian*, October 27, 1982, 9.

[38] Carole Woddis, *City Limits* (review), October 20, 1982, 49.

[39] Kenneth Hurren, "Rita, Sue and Bob Too," *What's On In London*, 1982, 31.

[40] Benedict Nightingale, "Young Writers' Festival," *The New Statesman*, October 23, 1982, 23. [41] Ann McFerran, "Bone and Arrows/Rita, Sue and Bob Too," *Time Out*, October 22, 1982, 34. [42] Rosalind Carne, "Theatre in 1982—Treasure and Dross," *Financial Times*, January 6, 1983, 7.

[43] Nadine Holdsworth, *English Theatre and Social Abjection: Divided Nation* (London: Palgrave, 2020), 42.

[44] Holdsworth, *English Theatre and Social Abjection*, 45.

[45] "Code of Behaviour: Preventing Sexual Harassment and Abuses of Power an Offering—A Provocation, a Hope for Culture Change," The Royal Court Theatre, November 3, 2017, https:// royalcourttheatre.com/code-of-behaviour/.

[46] "Rules of Engagement For the Day," The Royal Court Theatre, accessed January 7, 2022, https://royalcourttheatre.com/rules-engagement-day/.

[47] Royal Court Theatre and Out of Joint, "A Joint Statement from the Royal Court Theatre and Out of Joint," December 13, 2017, https://d19lfjg8hluhfw.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/13105040/Joint-statement-from-the-Royal-Court-Theatre-and-Out-of-Jointon-Rita-Sue-and-Bob-Too1.pdf.

[48] It is interesting to note that much more recently (May 2021) celebrated British actor and director Noel Clarke had the final episode of a TV drama in which he starred (*Viewpoint*) pulled from the television network when accusations about his abuse of women in the industry came to light. Even more recently, the Old Vic cancelled its plans to produce Terry Gilliam's production of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into The Woods* due to staff protests at Gilliam's comments about #metoo, Black Lives Matter, and trans rights. Given both of these cases, it could be argued that Featherstone's original inclination to close down the show was not necessarily wrong-footed.

[49] Elaine Aston, *Restaging Feminisms* (London: Palgrave, 2020), 17.

[50] Holly Williams, "By Cancelling Andrea Dunbar's Play the Royal Court Has Silenced an Urgent Female Voice," *The Stage*, December 15, 2017, https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/hollywilliams-by-cancelling-andrea-dunbars-play-the-royal-court-has-silenced-an-urgent-female-voice.

[51] David Barnett, "Why the Royal Court Cancelling Rita, Sue and Bob Too Is a Grim Joke," *Guardian*, December 14, 2017,

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/14/royalcourt-rita-sue-bob-too-andrea-dunbar-theatre-max-stafford-clark.

[52] Barnett, "Why the Royal Court Cancelling Rita, Sue and Bob Too Is a Grim Joke."

[53] Dominic Cavendish, "The Kevin Spacey Allegations Have Left the Old Vic in Crisis—We Need to Know Who Knew What," *Daily Telegraph*, November 9, 2017, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/ theatre/actors/spacey-allegations-have-left-old-vic-crisis-need-know-knew/.

[54] Cavendish, "The Kevin Spacey Allegations Have Left the Old Vic in Crisis."

[55] Vicky Featherstone, quoted in Press Association, "Royal Court Reverses Decision to Cancel Rita, Sue and Bob Too," *Guardian*, December 15, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/ dec/15/royal-court-reverses-decision-to-cancel-rita-sue-and-bob-too.

[56] Matthew Hemley, "Vicky Featherstone: 'Caryl Churchill Persuaded Me to Reinstate Rita, Sue and Bob Too'," *The Stage*, January 12, 2018, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/vicky-featherstonecaryl-churchill-persuaded-me-to-reinstate-rita-sue-and-bob-too.

[57] In fact, over a hundred theatres signed up to joint statement as a result of the Royal Court's work—see "Joint Statement on the Theatre Industry," National Theatre, October 23, 2017, https:// www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/blog/joint-statement-theatre-industry.

[58] The Old Vic Theatre, *Press at the Old Vic* (press release), November 16, 2017. https://cdn. oldvictheatre.com/uploads/2017/11/THE-OLD-VIC-PRESS-STATEMENT-FINAL-16.11.17.pdf.

[59] The Old Vic Theatre, *Guardians Network: Practical Guide*, accessed January 7, 2022, https:// cdn.oldvictheatre.com/uploads/2018/10/Practical-Guide-2018.pdf.

[60] UK Theatre and Society of London Theatre, *Encouraging Safer and More Supportive Working Practices in Theatre*, August 2018, https://uktheatre.org/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?alId=1250174.

[61] Equity, *Agenda for Change Report*, accessed January 7, 2022, https://www.equity.org.uk/ media/1263/agenda-for-change.pdf.

[62] Harriet Devine, *Looking Back: Playwrights at the Royal Court, 1956-2006*, (London: Faber, 2006), 3.

[63] John A. Hall's *Liberalism: Politics, Ideology, and the Market* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), deftly illustrates that there is a specific and contingent relationship between economic (capitalist) growth and liberalism. Moreover, popular critiques of liberalism from post-colonial studies have unearthed and articulated its murky relationship with slavery and its ability to frame its ideas around homogeneous notions of culture and society. In this sense, neoliberalism can be understood as a more iniquitous adaptation of liberal values and ideas within the evolving capitalist realm.

[64] Ewen Speed and Russell Mannion, "Populism and Health Policy: Three International Case Studies of Right-Wing Populist Policy Frames," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42, no. 8 (2020), https:// onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-9566.13173.

[65] Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85.

[66] Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (London: Harper, 2017), 117.

[67] Barton Swaim, "The Man They Couldn't Cancel," Wall Street Journal, April 30, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-man-they-couldnt-cancel-11619806528.

[68] Jaclyn Diaz, "Aunt Jemima No More: Pancake Brand Renamed Pearl Milling Company," *NPR,* February 10, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966166648/aunt-jemima-no-morepancake-brand-renamed-pearl-milling-company.

[69] Lanre Bakare, "Julie Burchill's Publisher Cancels Book Contract Over Islam Tweets," *Guardian,* December 15, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/dec/15/julie-burchillpublisher-cancels-book-contract-islam-tweet-little-brown.

[70] See, for example, Jonny Best's piece on artistic freedom: Jonny Best, "Artistic Freedom Is at Death's Door," UnHerd, October 28, 2020, https://unherd.com/2020/10/why-artistic-freedomis-at-deaths-door/.