

Andrea Peghinelli

Polly Stenham and Mark Ravenhill: Astonishing Debuts and Court Scandals

20th April 2007, London, exterior, night, outside the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs: a bright and watchful girl with a bleached-blonde urchin haircut and a view that «theatre should be as exciting as a rock music gig,»¹ is smoking a cigarette waiting for the debut night of her first full-length play. She's excited, of course, but her gentle features don't betray any anxiety. After all it's just «50% like Christmas and 50% like an exam.»² She feels she is playing home at the Royal Court. As a matter of fact, she graduated from the Royal Court Young Writers' Programme where she did two writing groups with tutor playwright Leo Butler. She was introduced to the theatre by her beloved late father when she was pretty young. He took her to see Pinter when she was eleven; together, they went to the Bush, to the Arcola and to the Royal Court in search of avant-garde fringe plays – on one of these trips she came upon a Sarah Kane play – but also to the National, from which she still cherishes a memory of a brilliant Glenn Close performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

She had some experience of working in theatres but she was confined to the behind-the-scenes area. Before going to the Court and while studying English at University College in London, she had been a 'skivvy' for the Ambassadors' theatre group and a stagehand at the Ar-

¹ "The Write Stuff: Stenham & Other Courtiers", in *What's On Stage*, April 28, 2008.

² Katharine Hibbert, "Polly Stenham: the new face of theatre", in *The Sunday Times*, May 11, 2008.

cola. At the Young Writers' Programme courses she read plays, wrote minor scenes, took part in workshops and meetings, exchanged views with lots of very different people and, most of all, gained a confidence in her writing skills she didn't have before. Furthermore, she started to develop a play centred on a dysfunctional middle-class family. At the Royal Court she felt strongly connected to the theatre, part of its activities, 'grass-roots' as she would say – which is why she realizes she owes so much to this theatre. At the end of the course they asked her if she wanted to write a play for the Young Writers' Festival. She agreed, and the result of this nineteen-year old girl's burst of creativity is *That Face*. She thought it would just go on for a day in the Young Writers' Festival but, to her amazement, *That Face* was chosen to be staged at the Theatre Upstairs. She only had an idea of how a play worked from seeing so many and her play had just undergone the trial of her flatmates: in the early stages, they had helped her build the structure, acting out the parts in their sitting room – she acknowledged their support and gave thanks to them as 'Team Deathbat', as is stated in the play's text. She then worked hard through the preliminary versions of the text at the Royal Court Programme. Each new draft brought improvements to the play. She kept working on it even in the rehearsal room – where she, the director and the actors read it closely scene by scene – till she got the absolute final text. «It's a weird job, playwriting,» she acknowledged in an interview, «making up people and hoping that other people, the actors, will pretend to be them, and then hoping that an audience will pretend to believe in them, too.»³

Eventually, the night of the premiere came: Polly Stenham was caught by photographers while smoking a cigarette and looking at the billboard advertising *That Face* in an attitude of satisfaction as she was probably thinking: «That's it, that's my play.»

³ "The Write Stuff: Stenham & Other Courtiers", in *What's On Stage*, April 28, 2008.

This short introduction briefly sums up what happened before *That Face* went on the stage. After the opening night it caused a widespread reaction of interest. Among the sell-out audiences it attracted were Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and the National Theatre's artistic director Nicholas Hytner. It was warmly welcomed by the critics and it gained Polly Stenham such important awards as the Evening Standard's Charles Wintour Award, the Critics' Circle Award – both for Most Promising Playwright – and the Theatrical Management Association Award for Best New Play. Furthermore, she was given a UK Film Council grant for a cinema adaptation of *That Face*. It seems that this story has all the ingredients of what Charles Spencer defined, in *The Telegraph*, as «one of the most astonishing dramatic debuts I have seen in more than thirty years of reviewing.»⁴

That Face was written when Polly Stenham was nineteen. At twenty, she saw it staged at the Royal Court, and when, on 1st May 2008, *That Face* opened at the Duke of York's, she also became one of the youngest playwrights to have seen their work transfer to the 'commercial Theatrelend' of the West End. Christopher Hampton still holds that record: he was eighteen when he wrote *When Did You Last See My Mother?* and twenty when it moved, like Stenham's play, from the Royal Court to the West End in 1966. Although he went on to achieve worldwide acclaim, winning an Oscar in 1988 for the screen adaptation of his play *Dangerous Liaisons*, he never had such good reviews again as those he got with his debut play. He too was in the group of playwrights who went to see *That Face* at the Theatre Upstairs, and was very impressed by Stenham's skills. He also warned her of the dangers of having such success at the very start of a career.

In an interview for *The Times* he said: «There are confusing things about early success. You can drive yourself mad thinking, "What do I do to top that?" and I probably took ten to twelve years to figure out

⁴ Charles Spencer, 'That Face Review', *The Telegraph*, April 27, 2007.

that the thing is to enjoy the work, rather than worrying about how it fares.»⁵

Polly Stenham seems to keep her feet firmly on the ground and she thinks there has been too much hype about *That Face*: «I think it's a good play but this has been the most ridiculously amazing reaction to something that I never thought would leave my bedroom.»⁶

As a matter of fact, a bedroom is literally at the centre of her play. Actually, it opens in a boarding school dormitory with two girls tormenting a younger girl whose face is concealed under a black beanie-style hat. Izzy and Mia are officiating a cruel initiation ceremony. Izzy, the nasty head of dorm, says she «would like as best as possible to keep this... clean, impersonal, professional,» but something goes wrong. Alice, the victim, collapses under the effects of a heavy dose of Valium. Mia, who filched the Valium from her mother Martha, confesses she drugged Alice because she wanted to tranquillise her, prevent her from panicking, she «wanted the initiation to go smoothly.» Izzy panics over her comatose victim; Mia, on the contrary, is calm and seems detached from what she has unintentionally caused. Later on, when family issues get out of control, this picture will prove to be deceptive as she comes to a full understanding of culpabilities and emotional costs. This scene probably owes as much to what went on in Abu Ghraib, with the visual reference to the photos of hooded inmates being interrogated under torture, as to traditional boarding school bullying. Such events are unfortunately quite frequent in schools (we only need surf *You Tube* for proof), as well as in the army. What fascinates Stenham is how these little worlds of their own can turn into hellish places where the rules that normally apply in society are no longer valid. As it happens at the end of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, you need to confront with someone coming from outside the context to realise that the kind of

⁵ Ben Hoyle, "Playwright Polly Stenham makes her West End debut at just 21", in *The Times*, May 9, 2008.

⁶ "Stenham makes West End debut", in *The Week*, May 9, 2008. (<http://www.theweek.co.uk>)

things you have been carrying on are not normal but horrible acts of violence. Until the situation comes to a head, it might even seem funny: after all, everyone else was doing it and they told you it was fine. As Mia says,

It's different in there: different rules, different power levels... it's messed up. Back in school, at night, when all the teachers are in bed and the power shifts... when age becomes like a rank. And people are bored. [...] It's a different world, with different rules. And some stuff... well, it seems OK. Allowed even.

It is only in the light of the day, when she manages to see a wider picture, that she understands what actually happened.

This first scene serves as a prologue, and the same process of denial or lack of acknowledgement experienced by Mia applies to the rest of the play too. A family is a small world of its own as well, and when it is made up, as in the upper middle-class family of *That Face*, of a neurotic and alcoholic mother, of a son who becomes her emotionally dependent carer, of a neglected daughter, and of a culpable absent father, it is no surprise that its components have only vague and fleeting glimpses of the degree to which they themselves have been emotionally and psychologically damaged.

From the second scene on, according to director Jeremy Herrin's staging idea, the set is dominated by a rumpled double bed which stands centre stage. Herrin chose to perform the play in the round with just a couple of rows of seating so as to implicate the audience in the action. «I actually wrote it to be a promenade production,» Stenham remarked. She imagined that «the performance space was the flat and you had to move around dirty clothes,»⁷ she added. All other scenes are happening in the corners, «so that everything is referring to this

⁷ Jasper Rees, “*That Face*: a middle-class play for today”, in *The Telegraph*, April 28, 2008.

central relationship to this bed,»⁸ as Herrin stated in an interview. Designer Mike Britton clearly took inspiration for the set from Tracy Emin's installation *My Bed*, first exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery in 1998. In the course of the play many objects will store up around the bed: glasses, bottles of wine, cigarette butts, jewels, a bottle of pills, a sketch pad and drawing materials, a book, strips of cut clothes, and other personal belongings; as in Emin's art, then, the bed will be the objective correlative to the filthy and bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown. And with the several references to tranquilliser abuse, to suggest another image from and add a further touch of contemporary art, the audience sitting around the bed might also feel as if they were encircled by Damien Hirst's pill cabinets.

Lying in the bed we discover Martha and her first born son Henry. When Martha gets up she is clearly in a state of confusion, she is suffering from a hangover, probably combined with an abuse of prescription sedatives. She wakes Henry up, her adored teenage son, saying: «You are handsome. Like a Russian soldier.» She then begs him for forgiveness. Apparently, she has broken a pact. «You feel guilty,» says Henry. «Please Hen. I said I was sorry. I mean it. I really mean it. It won't happen again. I promise,» is his mother's answer. She appears to have developed an addiction to alcohol and to drugs (she is also dependent on her son's love), therefore it is not difficult to predict that this is a vow she will never manage to keep. Their dialogue brings out the disturbing intimacy between them. For five years, Henry, now eighteen years old, has supported, covered for and taken care of his mother; he has also abandoned art school in order to try to keep her safe from her abuses.

They are interrupted by the coming of Mia who is evidently not welcomed by Martha:

⁸ "Interview with Jeremy Herrin", 21 March 2007, in *Education Pack of That Face*, Royal Court Theatre Resources, p. 7.

Martha: She always interrupts, you know?

Henry: Jesus Martha, can I let her in?

Martha: She's not staying.

According to the author, Martha has always hated Mia, and her manic depression or bipolar disorder was brought on by post natal depression, after a difficult pregnancy. Although she decided not to reveal this overtly in the play, we can still infer it when, later on, Martha says how perfect she felt when pregnant with Henry.

Mia's irruption sets in motion a series of events that will eventually lead to the final catastrophe. When she asks Henry for the keys to their father's studio flat, he realizes that she must be in trouble. Mia tells him that their father is coming from Hong Kong – where he now lives with his Asian wife – because she risks being expelled from her boarding school for giving Valium pills to a younger girl. They've called him to settle the situation. «How many?», asks Henry,

Mia: Forty mills. [...]

Henry: You know the dosage, it's tons, Mia.

Mia: No. You know the dosage.

Once again, something seeps through the dialogue of the strange mother-son relationship, where the son acts, as Michael Billington puts it, as «a mixture of lover, nurse and playmate.»⁹ If Henry doesn't want his father to come, and is afraid of what he might discover, Mia believes he can sort things out.

In the second half the intensity increases because the author goes deeper into the observation and representation of characters as the relationships unravel alarmingly. Martha's dependence on her son con-

⁹ Michael Billington, 'That Face', in *The Guardian*, May 12, 2008.

stantly threatens to cross a forbidden line as she cajoles him and keeps playing disturbing Oedipal games with him.

When Hugh, the absent father, finally returns he has to sort out «one of the worst family messes since those troubles in Sophoclean Thebes,»¹⁰ as Michael Billington wrote. Above all, he has to face up to his own shortcomings and responsibilities, which, apart from sending money as a substitute for emotional support, amount to having deserted his family. He doesn't seem to be the ideal person for the task.

In the climax scene the family is disintegrating. Hugh threatens to have Martha committed for treatment; Mia, now dissatisfied with her father's behaviour, grows increasingly haunted by fear of what will happen to them all; Henry, who has invested so much in the mission of being his mother's carer, cracks under the prospect of failure. His final monologue of emotional collapse is heart-breaking in its intensity. In a moment of tragic insight, Martha eventually becomes aware of the damage she has inflicted on her son, finds something residually maternal inside herself and tenderly lets him go and accepts she needs to be treated. All hopes rest with Mia who, standing on the stage and looking into the eyes of her distressed brother as he lies on the floor, closes the play by saying to him: «It's ok. I promise. It's ok. We are ok.» When in the spring of 2010 the play was staged in New York, Stenham changed some parts of her text. In particular, she altered Mia's final lines, probably to add more uncertainty about the possible outcome:

Mia: Tell me you never chose. Tell me I imagined it.

Beat.

Tell me you couldn't.

Henry looks up and meets her eyes, yet says nothing.

Then it's OK. You didn't. Then it's OK. We're OK.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

Stenham manages to keep the atmosphere tense by avoiding the simplistic stance of taking sides: none of her characters is ever clearly placed in the right or in the wrong.

Much of the comment on the play focused on the fact that it fulfilled the avowed intent of the Royal Court's artistic director Dominic Cooke to put on more plays that reflected the lives of its predominantly middle-class audience. The play has been greeted by many as a welcome change from the Royal Court obsession with 'kitchen-sink' drama, addressing instead the anxieties a middle-class theatre audience can more readily relate to. At the press conference for the launch of his first season as artistic director, held in February 2007, Cooke announced: «I want to look at what it means to be middle class, what it means to have power, what it means to have wealth.»¹¹ Does he mean by this that he wants to make middle class audiences feel more uncomfortable? Or does the new policy represent a middle class demand that its own sufferings be recognised – is it a statement to the effect that bad things don't only happen to the under-classes who live on state benefits in council blocks, and that the upper classes also face their moments of pain and dysfunction? Is this a new scandal-provoking shock tactic from the Court? Could we say that *épater les prolétaires* is the new slogan of the Court? Perhaps, as I suspect, the topic of class is finally being discussed on the stage from a different standpoint, changing the stance on being middle-class so as not to feel guilty belonging to this social group; after all, the middle-class shapes the way life is perceived by society at large. After Tony Blair's government had absorbed Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric that class envy was pointless, by the end of the Nineties class division in Great Britain had become an embarrassing if not censored subject. It is also a powerful way to reflect

¹¹ Mark Brown, Maev Kennedy, "New director to satirise audience", in *The Guardian*, February 7, 2007.

the lives of those who actually have power on the mirror of the stage and therefore take into consideration the way they influence our society. Power, after all, since Shakespeare is still a topic of interest in drama.

Stenham wants to spur a change with her play: «Certain theatres you go to where everyone's in pearls and you feel you're playing to a certain class, a certain age, and there's a voyeurism in what they're watching – I completely agree. They trot home to Islington and drink white wine after watching people screech at each other and take heroin – that's a trend that needs to be bucked.»¹²

If what we are looking for are strategies that will cause scandal, or simply challenge the mainstream, we need go no further than the title of Mark Ravenhill's controversial debut play *Shopping and Fucking*. As a matter of fact, it generated far more controversy in the press than with the public, especially if we look at young audiences' response. The title ironically points to those novels you can find at airports or newsstands, known in the publishing trade as 'shopping and fucking novels.' And if you think it is too scandalous a title, just think that at first the author was thinking of calling it *Fucking Diana*.

Since under the terms of a Victorian law, the 'f-word' is banned from public display, advertisement was very complicated. If James Christopher was right when in his review of *Shopping and Fucking* he wrote that scandal was what made the Court 'chic,' then we can better understand why in 1996 Stephen Daldry, then artistic director of the Royal Court, mischievously decided to stage the play with that burdensome title. Nonetheless, and maybe because of the stir it created, the play had a remarkable history. It was co-produced by the Royal Court, Max Stafford-Clark's company Out of Joint, and the National Theatre Studio; it was first performed at the Ambassador's Theatre on 26th Sep-

¹² Lynn Barber, "The interview: Polly Stenham", in *The Guardian*, March 22, 2009.

tember 1996 – since the Royal Court was then closed for renovation works – and directed by Max Stafford-Clark. It then went on a regional tour, came back to the West End – this time at the Gielgud Theatre – and afterward went on a worldwide tour with the support of the British Council, and became the international representative and symbol of the new wave of British theatre and of its inherent vitality.

But Ravenhill's astonishing debut did not simply benefit from a cunning advertising idea. The title captures what the play accurately and specifically describes: a generation that is under thirty and has experienced the predominant materialism and sense of moral void that has followed the collapse of ideologies. The play metaphorically represents a visceral critique of consumerism. It suggests that shopping has been elevated to a devotional activity, and that sex, as all interpersonal relationships, has simply become a public transaction. This is what should really be outrageous, not the graphic representation of explicit violence and overt sex which are performed in the play. *Shopping and Fucking* is a visceral critique of consumerism and, significantly, Stephen Daldry stated that it «dared to use the C-word – Capitalism.»¹³

The crowds of metropolitan hip youths who went to see the play did feel that someone was finally addressing them directly and mirroring their problems. This is probably why *Shopping and Fucking* introduced a new and younger audience to the theatre. In terms of structure it is quite an old-fashioned play, as Ravenhill himself stated. But with its characters being a vivid portrayal of «people without work, without any kind of job fulfilment, any kind of political or religious belief, [...] urban dysfunctionals not surviving the city they're living in,»¹⁴ as Stafford-Clark remarked, the audience could easily identify with them.

¹³ Ruth Little, Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007, p. 352.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

Moreover, Ravenhill's theatre aimed to be 'experiential' rather than 'representational' in order to express the mood of this generation.

The post-Thatcher generation had been living under the spell that «there's no such thing as society.» In their struggle to make sense of a vacuum world, the characters in Ravenhill's play don't use a political vocabulary, as the former generation did, «they don't call on the government to sort out their lives,»¹⁵ as Ravenhill glossed. They are not passive victims either, they just try out new schemes. Playwrights from the previous generation, such as David Hare and Howard Brenton for instance, were acting as a group, and they could share collective certainties in their plays as in society. «The Thatcher government effectively privatised anger and protest,» Ian Rickson remarked, «the unions were beaten and a whole series of young people grew up with their anger fractured inside, and it came out in jagged ways.»¹⁶ Thus, *Shopping and Fucking* is an iconic play of the Nineties because it was written by a young man and it objected to what had come before. It makes large use of discourse: we see the characters create stories they then tell each other in order to satisfy their longing for narratives that will make sense of the world. The resulting fragmented collage is reminiscent of post-modern theories about the end of grand narratives. And when Brian, the only middle-aged character, expresses his praise of consumerism and sermonises his young listeners with the 'Money is civilisation' discourse, it really does seem he is just searching for some kind of oral, onanistic satisfaction with the world he has created. On the contrary, Robbie's monologue on the death of grand narratives illustrates, as Billington pointed out, «our dependence on solipsistic private narratives.»¹⁷

¹⁵ Aleks Sier, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London, Faber & Faber, 2001, p. 130.

¹⁶ Ruth Little, Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007, p. 355.

¹⁷ Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945*, London, Faber & Faber, 2007, p. 360

Robbie: I think... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we are all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we each got one.

Billington links this monologue to Jimmy Porter's famous despairing cry in *Look Back in Anger* because he believes that both express «a hunger for the days of coherent beliefs that made sense of people's lives.»¹⁸ The difference probably lies in the fact that in the lapse of time that separates the two, we have created our own stories and myths in order to survive the process that reduced us to living as single separated individuals. This is the structure that consumerism and neo-liberalism have imposed on our society. Anger and protest are then shattered and fractured, as fragmented is the fiction that represents them.

Even though in his recent *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (London, various venues, 2008) Ravehill suggests a bigger picture to look at, it achieves this only through the little fragments of an 'epic cycle of plays' – as it has been defined – which explore the personal and political effect of war on modern life and it remains a collage of fragments.

The characters in *Shopping and Fucking* invent their stories in order to make sense of their world, but also to escape a reality they are not able to face. This fictional world they create works as a substitute for what they are missing. At the end of the play, Lulu, Mark and Robbie, the protagonists of *Shopping and Fucking*, share a cheap microwave meal, a faint symbol of a restored harmony and a pale image of an attempt to restore a community of people. «There's always a moment

¹⁸ Ibidem.

when my characters realise that they have to look after each other. And connect with each other,»¹⁹ Ravenhill remarked. In some way, they all reject the traditional family and at the same time look for an alternative family, for a small world of their own. Perhaps the same could be said of Mia and Henry in *That Face*.

«It's their lack of understanding of the world,» observed Ravenhill about his characters, «and their isolation from each other which is shocking»²⁰ and, I would add, scandalous too.

¹⁹ Aleks Sierz, “Interview with Mark Ravenhill”, in <http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/archive8.html#b> (last visited May 2012).

²⁰ Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London, Faber & Faber, 2001, p. 133.