**debbie tucker green and poetic drama**

Although she a playwright who uses poetic devices, it would be a mistake to pretend that debbie tucker green[[1]](#endnote-1) sits squarely within a tradition of British verse drama. Critics have often claimed to detect in her work echoes of Pinter, Churchill, and Kane, writers who have all, in various ways, employed poetic tropes in their work. tucker green has declared her admiration for the work of Caryl Churchill, and there do seem to be affinities between tucker green and Sarah Kane. Lynette Goddard has pointed out that her *stoning mary* seems to be set simultaneously in Britain and Africa, rather as Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) is set both in Leeds and somewhere like Srebrenica.[[2]](#endnote-2). These British writers are certainly part of the context in which debbie tucker green works and they inflect the way in which she has been understood. However, as she has pointed out, for critics to link her work purely to other British playwrights ‘says more about critics' reference points than my work. The influences for me are people like the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett - and music, particularly songwriters such as Jill Scott and Lauryn Hill’.[[3]](#endnote-3) The insistent rhythms that pulse through her work have at least as much affinity with dub, hip-hop and slam poetry as with any specifically British dramaturgical tradition. In the urgent rhythms of her dialogue, I hear a curious and completely original mixture of Harold Pinter and Linton Kwesi Johnson. Compare this famous speech from *Stoning Mary* (2005):

So what happened to the womanist bitches?

... the feminist bitches?

... the professional bitches.

What happened to them?

What about the burn their bra bitches?

The black bitches

the rootsical bitches

the white the brown bitches

the right-on bitches

what about *them?*

What happened to the mainstream bitches?

The rebel bitches

the underground bitches

what about – how bout –

the bitches that support other bitches?[[4]](#endnote-4)

with the iterative, pulsing, relentless tone mesmerically wrought in the last lines of LKJ’s ‘Reality Poem’:

dis is di age af decishan

soh mek wi leggo relijan

dis is di age af decishan

soh mek wi leggo divishan

dis is di age af reality

soh mek wi leggo mitalagy

dis is di age af science and teknalagy

mek wi hol di clarity

mek wi hol di clarity[[5]](#endnote-5)

In both cases, the repetitions and the rhymes bring a certain grandeur out of the language. They slow the pace down, create a balance between understanding the meaning expressed and savouring the word choices, their weight and impact. In both cases, they are not poetry as literature but performance poetry, written to live in the voice, in particular rooms, between people.

One can also see in green’s work affinities with Ntozake Shange’s ‘choreopoem’ *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1974), a series of poems, transformed into a performance piece by dividing the words between a rainbow of seven women telling a story of growing up into mature self-discovery. The text moves effortlessly between registers: confessional, imagistic, storytelling, incantatory. It braids together lyrics and literature, politics and pop culture. There are traces of this play right through green’s work, from the insistent raking up of the buried past in *born bad* to the divided consciousness of the Wife in *stoning mary* right up to the rainbow of truth-seeking voices in *truth and reconciliation* (2011).

These particular inspirations should not prevent us from also placing green’s work in a longer history of debates about the value and significance of poetry in theatre. While it would be mistaken to assimilate her plays into a purely British tradition, it may be illuminating to see where the faultlines are in the theatre culture around theatre poetry, because her work sits on those faultlines and where the ground shifts, her work shifts with it. Britain’s theatre has been poetic as long as it has been theatre. The fifteenth-century medieval morality plays and interludes like *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankind* and *Fulgens and Lucres* from the 1490s are written in loose-limbed vernacular verse with irregular rhyme schemes. Verse continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and while rhyme almost vanished, the iambic pentameter in which most Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic verse is written emerged as a remarkably versatile means of holding a stage, conveying character, drama, situation, and action, while also offering the more usual poetic virtues of precision, imagery, verbal association, and compression.

But by the end of the century, the British stage had largely abandoned verse. One explanation for this is that the popular form of the Restoration period was comedy and there was a solidly-established convention for conveying comedy in prose (in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Athenian Court use poetry, the working-class amateur theatre group speak in prose until they attempt to present the *Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe*, at which point they speak in doggerel verse). There were attempts to revive poetic drama, in the rather untheatrical closet dramas of Byron and Shelley, or in the excitable floridity of Stephen Phillips, whose now-forgotten *Paolo and Francesca* (1902) was a surprise West End hit, but on the whole British playwriting was conducted in prose. Some puzzled over this; why, with the example of Shakespeare to draw on, did playwrights eschew poetry?

T. S. Eliot thought he had the answer. In 1921, reviewing a new collection of poems by the metaphysical poets, he decided to sketch out a new theory of poetic history. In the 1920s, the metaphysical poets were rather unfashionable, the term, as Eliot puts it, ‘a term of abuse, or [....] the label of a quaint and pleasant taste’. The poems were seen by some as violently complex in their thought, juxtaposing disparate elements without regard to elegance or taste. As such, Eliot says, they have tended to be considered as ‘a digression from the main current’. [[6]](#endnote-6) Eliot’s daring rhetorical move is to entirely reverse this historical picture. The metaphysicals were not an aberration, he says; they captured something ‘permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared’.[[7]](#endnote-7) In other words, the metaphysical poets represent true poetry and everything else has been the digression. The great virtue of a poet like John Donne, he explains, is that thought, feeling, and expression were a single unity: ‘Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility’.[[8]](#endnote-8) What happened in the seventeenth century was a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ which alienated thought from word from feeling: ‘the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude’. In Milton’s poetry, he says, ‘the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of other’; that is, he so dazzles with words that we might even forget the paucity of feeling expressed. [[9]](#endnote-9) Though he does not name it, Eliot’s target is the English Civil War, that revolutionary uprooting of monarchy and authority that divides Donne from Milton. It is a sign of Eliot’s peculiar conservatism – and his peculiar optimism – that he thought British society should erase the legacy of English republicanism by writing verse dramas.

Eliot’s campaign had some considerable effect. His first verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) was written for the Canterbury Festival, performed in the Cathedral, and received much admiration for its sonorous account of the murder of Thomas à Becket, complete with satirically self-justifying knights. But Eliot’s ambitions were not satisfied by a historical drama in a Festival setting. His desire to undo the dissociation of sensibility needed poetry to be placed in the centre of the culture, not the fringes. For that reason, *The Family Reunion* (1939) inserts some of the conventions of classic tragedy into a West End drawing room drama. By his next play, *The Cocktail Party* (1949), he has dispensed with the classical trappings altogether; the verse line is much looser, too. *The Family Reunion*’s language is unmistakeably poetic; here Eliot’s lines are much more colloquial, the metre being no more regular than a preference for three stresses in each verse line.[[10]](#endnote-10) The effect, he hoped, was for poetry to be felt as a profound rhythm deep in the heart of the language, elevating what may seem on the surface to be a drawing room comedy.

Quite the opposite view was taken by Christopher Fry, a contemporary of Eliot, whose *The Lady’s Not for Burning* (1948), *Ring Round the Moon* (1950), and *Venus Observed* (1950) were among the greatest successes of the mid-century West End. Why poetry? he once asked. ‘All would be well with my life of prose,’ he once answered, ‘if there were not moments when action suddenly seems like a flame burning on the surface of a dark sea’.[[11]](#endnote-11) For Fry, poetry is a bright eruption into the mundane, not the deep spiritual drum beat it is for Eliot. His verse is entertaining, self-advertising, prodigiously poetic, spinning out metaphors in a kind of self-conscious verbal performance of words as words. The difference may indeed be as political as it is poetic: a newspaper profile at the height of his fame noted ‘English poetry has been much indebted to the Puritans who, denying the claims of sensuous beauty in their faith, have often indulged them in their writing. There was no rejection of our verbal treasury by Milton and Marvell. Christopher Fry is in their tradition’.[[12]](#endnote-12) In other words, in this twentieth-century poetic reenactment of the English Civil War, Fry and Eliot are on opposite sides.

Poetic drama was not the future. Less than a decade after Fry’s first hit, John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* had reasserted the political virtues of prose in connecting the stage with life outside the theatre and consigned Fry and Eliot to the footnotes. But their opposing positions remain as markers in a continuing debate over theatrical language: should the poetic qualities of language be subservient to realism or should those poetic qualities complicate a realistic view of the world? Poetry can serve to advertise the wit and artifice of a play – as in David Greig’s *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011) – to underscore the mythical qualities of a story – as in Tony Harrison’s *Fram* (2008) – or to capture the delicacy and intensity of an emotional journey – as in Joanna Laurens’s remarkable *Five Gold Rings* (2003). In the work of Harold Pinter there is a kind of temporary truce between the Eliot and Fry positions: Pinter’s language is placed, usually, within more-or-less familiar settings, but his intense scrutiny of language trips the audience up, forces our attention onto the discomfiting dynamics of everyday speech, complicates our easy understanding of the characters and their relations to each other. His poetic devices place us both within and without a recognizable world and his plays are unsettling precisely because of their location on that edge. tucker green’s plays play around that edge too and whether their style derives from Caryl Churchill or Lauryn Hill, they ask similar questions about language, identity, and our ability to reach out to each other.

1. . debbie tucker green always gives her name in print in lower case, which we have also followed. While she has not publicly stated her reasons for doing so, there are notable precedents, particularly in Black feminist writing for doing so. The Black scholar, bell hooks, took the name bell hooks from her grandmother to celebrate female familial legacy but adopts lower case to signal that the work is more important than its author. Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*..., an important influence on tucker green and Black theatre more generally, is printed without initial capitals. Shange says, ‘I like the idea that letters dance, not just that the words dance; of course, the words also dance. I need some visual stimulation, so that reading becomes not just a passive act and more than an intellectual activity’, quoted in Claudia Tate (ed), *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), p. 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms,* op. cit., p. 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Lyn Gardner, 'I Was Messing About', *guardian.co.uk* 30 March 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/mar/30/theatre> (Accessed 2 May 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . debbie tucker green, *Stoning Mary* (London: Nick Hern, 2005), pp. 61-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*. Third edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Ibid., p. 285. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Ibid., p. 287. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Ibid., p. 288. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, Ed. Nevill Coghill (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 285-291. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Christopher Fry, 'Why Verse?' *World Theatre*, Vol 4, No. 4 (Autumn 1955), p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . 'Profile: Christopher Fry', *Observer*, 28 March 1954, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)