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Ella Hickson's The Writer

Commissioned as a programme note for the Almeida Theatre's production of Ella Hickson's *The Writer*, first staged in April 2018. See: <https://almeida.co.uk/whats-on/the-writer/16-apr-2018-26-may-2018>

The Writer is a play which takes desire seriously, which puts in it a queerly precarious place. It's precarious because desire is the engine of change and the very thing which makes change difficult; it's queer because it understands desire can be political and.. well. Queer can mean a lot of different things at once.

Cultural theorist David M. Halperin once offered that we understand queer as whatever is 'at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant'. Allied with an anarchic refusal of the status quo, it's not gay as in happy but - as the banner goes - 'queer as in fuck you'. Critic Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's equally influential proposition is that we might understand queer as referring to the 'open mesh of possibilities' which arise when we pay attention to the lapses and excesses of meaning that surround fixed and categorical definitions of sexuality and gender. In this respect, queer thought becomes a way of attending to the complexity of embodied experience beyond its most normative instances. It's allied to a feminist project that attempts, as Judith Butler puts it, to extend the range of lives which are liveable.

Cutting through both accounts is the question of agency, with queer sometimes mistakenly affirmed as the celebration of simple choice: we are whatever we choose to be, regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Queer thinking, though, is not straightforwardly affirmative: it privileges the ability of individuals to give their own account of themselves and order their lives while also calling attention to the constraints and sanctions that surround us.

The inflection between queer as a noun and queer as a verb adds further nuance. To queer originally meant to enquire or to question and only later takes on its more contemporary meaning of a twisting or distortion: to 'queer the pitch' is to spoil the chances of something's intended outcome. We can also talk about a process of queer reading, as in Alexander Doty's landmark study of mass culture *Making Things Perfectly Queer* which spins mainstream representations to reveal or produce new meaning - whether in identifying an LGBTQ subtext in a presumptively straight narrative or, more forcefully, working to expose the heterosexist assumptions on which a given story turns. In this sense, a practice of queering involves reading from the margin against the centre - a tactic which deploys the fact of being in the position of a minority against the logic of the majority.

Correspondingly, queer theatre manifests a critical relationship to a cultural mainstream, often by foregrounding the significance of minority lives and experiences and by addressing the ways in which different forms of oppression might intersect. Informed by feminist and minority ethnic perspectives, it calls attention to the persistent male/white/straight defaults of our culture (and, moreover, where queerness is dominated by gay male interests). At the

same time, queer performance is as much about form as content: it describes an attempt to rework and reinvent the codes of our culture to allow for alternatives, often by appropriating established conventions. Despite its prominence, drag is only one way that this might happen.

Why offer this kind of frame for play like *The Writer*? It's not simply because its world includes same-sex desire, though we'd do well to remember just how rare it remains to see sex or affection between women depicted on the British stage. It's not because it asks that we understand gender and sexuality as ways of occupying the world – and as possible rather than fixed relationships of power and desire. While queer's deployment as a broad umbrella term for a vast array of differences can flatten and mask the very specificity that it claims to celebrate, *The Writer* is clearly concerned with the difference that gender makes (as well as, albeit more obliquely, race).

You might balk at my assigning queerness to a work on a mainstream stage presented to a middle-class audience but – I'd argue – this play knows exactly who it is talking to, and why. The fact that the idea of overthrowing patriarchy and dismantling capitalism might get a laugh tonight is not beside the point – but asking us to consider why these prospects are unthinkable.

I'm particularly interested in the queer qualities – or, perhaps, queer potential – of this play for the ways in which it grapples with the question of what it might mean to inhabit the world differently when the possibility of resistance and change seems to have been co-opted in advance. It's not simply that rebellion is viewed as a marketable commodity, as in Pepsi's clumsy attempt to capitalise on #blacklivesmatter, fashion media's invention of 'protest chic' or the cynical framing of anger as 'zeitgeisty'. Though the commercial exploitation of protest has its own sordid history, *The Writer* seems more interested in acknowledging the politics of complicity – that is, our attachment to and involvement in the very things we might seek to challenge or refuse.

If nothing else, *The Writer* is fiercely attached to the possibility for change that theatre might represent, even as it is shown to be bound up in reproducing existing patterns of exploitation. This sickly sensation may be the dominant affect of neoliberal times when we are expected to conduct ourselves as free individuals making choices regardless of the circumstances which constrain the possibility of choice, or which produce different consequences if you happen to be – say – a young woman working in professional theatre.

So where does this play lead us? On one level, it may needle at the limits of our erotic and political imaginations. To be clear, I don't think Hickson's script is even slightly interested in policing the kinds of sex we might choose for ourselves but is perhaps asking us to think more carefully about the (theatrical) tropes which stand in for transgression. The point here is that one of the things that queerness might challenge is theatre's investment in its own powers of critique, particularly when so many of its structures remain fixed in place. Theatrical innovation might remain just that: a vision of radicalism that ends with the performance and travels no further.

So far, so paranoid.

From another more reparative viewpoint, we might consider how this play asks us to consider what might be involved in unravelling and re-writing theatre's own logics. Here, the script plays with an awareness of its own status as theatre, breaking from and commenting on the 'properly' dramatic scenes of character and conflict to consider alternatives. If there's a classical tradition – descending from Dionysus, if you like – which centres on conflict, is there an alternative which follows from a place of solidarity rather than opposition? One in which you can take space in the world without feeling that you're taking up space? One where you can be seen without being the subject of a gaze?

I've written and re-written that last paragraph, wondering whether I am being Far Too Clever or, alternatively, Not Quite Clever Enough. *The Writer* is clearly about theatre itself, and theatre as an extension of the public sphere - a space of dispute and conversation concerned with the question of who gets to speak and be heard, and on what terms. But it's not just about capital-T, Theatre, but all the things that theatre, art and writing might stand in for, and give a voice to. It's about desire for change when desire is part of the problem, and when one cannot simply choose to desire differently; it's about a demand for change even when radicalism seems compromised in every direction.