



Tomlin, L. (2021) Political dramaturgies of affect: Anthony Neilson's *God in Ruins* and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. In: Aragay, M., Delgado-García, C. and Middeke, M. (eds.) *Affects in 21st-Century British Theatre: Exploring Feeling on Page and Stage*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, pp. 85-104. ISBN 9783030584856 (doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-58486-3_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-58486-3_5))

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Deposited on 17 October 2019

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Political Dramaturgies of Affect: Anthony Neilson's *God in Ruins* (2007) and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004)

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The turn to affect, in the broadest sense, is commonly located as a movement that has occurred within the humanities and social sciences. In the context of theatre studies, it is important to note that this might more accurately be termed a *re*-turn, given that, in the words of Erin Hurley, “questions of feeling have always been central to theatre” (2010, 2). This has not, however, always been the case in the European discourse and practice of political theatre with which this chapter will engage.

Bertolt Brecht’s well-known scepticism of theatres that sought to trade in emotional operations (see 2015) is often misinterpreted as an outright rejection of the political currency of emotion. But it is nonetheless the case that his vision of a Marxist political theatre necessitated that emotional responses were sought primarily as a means to a rational end that was arrived at through the cognitive judgement of the spectator. Such is also the case, Sarah Grochala argues, in the tradition of British drama from George Bernard Shaw to David Edgar that is characterised by the thesis play which “yokes together the dialectical discussion of a political issue with a realist dramaturgy” (Grochala 2017, 13). This lineage is distinguished as the dominant historical model of British political theatre through its continuing adherence to a rational, dialectical narrative structure that plays predominantly to a cognitive, analytical reception and analysis.

The turn to affect that characterises Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theories of the postdramatic has offered one of the most sustained challenges to the dramatic, dialectical model, inherited from both Brechtian and Shavian traditions, that has proved particularly durable in the British context. In the wealth of scholarship that has engaged with Lehmann’s seminal publication, *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), the importance of affect to the political currency of Lehmann’s model of the postdramatic was initially somewhat overshadowed by debates concerning the role of text and dramaturgical innovations that challenge dramatic form. However, in his more recent work, Lehmann emphasises that the postdramatic is explicitly “a theatre of affectivity” (2016, 433) that is, moreover, engaged in “an affective interrogation of dramatic theatre” (435), and contends that it is in this affective charge and interrogation of the dramatic model that its political potential is to be found.

Although Lehmann doesn’t explicitly engage with the affect theorists or debates that underpin this volume, the affective charge that Lehmann envisages is not one that enhances narrative or rational argument through the invocation of recognised and calibrated emotional

states, but rather a sensation of intensity that disturbs meaning, shocks the spectator's learned cultural expectations and capacities of interpretation and so remains resistant to rational, or even emotional, cognitive processing. In this, his understanding of the politics of affect would, like those theorists such as Brian Massumi (2002), following Spinoza and Deleuze, rest on its capacity to exist as prepersonal and asocial and so beyond ideological manipulation or critique. In the context of Lehmann's postdramatic, the politics of affect lie in the capacity of certain theatrical strategies to viscerally shock and disorientate the spectator out of her habitual mode of perception through a transgression of accepted aesthetic boundaries and cultural assumptions. Such shock, he has always argued, is only conceivable within a form that ruptures the aesthetic frame of the dramatic theatre to which the spectator is habituated. However, in his more recent work on the postdramatic tragic impulse, Lehmann begins to speculate as to whether the *political* charge of the affect of shock may lie most securely within dramaturgies that rupture the aesthetic boundaries of the theatre event (dramatic or postdramatic) through the intervention of "real actuality" (2013, 99).

This chapter will contest Lehmann's proposal that political potential is limited to dramaturgies that embrace the irruption of "real actuality" by turning to Anthony Neilson's 'theatre of affect' (Reid 2017, 3), which seeks to deliver a shock of the kind that Lehmann advocates, but retains the aesthetic framework of theatre intact. My first example, *God in Ruins*¹ can be seen to operate a reality effect that momentarily suggests a non-aesthetic reality has ruptured the theatrical framework, but is quickly revealed to be a representational dramaturgical device. Nonetheless, I will propose that the momentary affect of shock, at the point when it might have been real, is indistinguishable from visceral sensations that may occur during performances that have, in actuality, been ruptured by a non-aesthetic reality. Moreover, in my own experience as an audience member attending *God in Ruins*, the relief provided by the realisation that the ontological status of the dramaturgy remained securely within the confines of an aesthetically structured event, permitted cognitive self-reflection on my visceral and momentary response of unease. This self-reflection, I argue, far from reducing the political charge of the affective shock, enhanced it through cognitive activity which might not have been arrived at in those instances in which the irruption of the real is sustained and ostensibly authentic.

In my second example, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (hereon *Dissocia*), there is no such apparent rupture of the aesthetic frame by "real actuality"; here it is the aesthetic, and I will argue broadly dramatic, frame itself that is sundered into two. Yet, once more, the secure ontological framework of the dramaturgy that contains the rupture within its aesthetic boundaries is precisely what enables the political charge to operate. In this instance, I will

propose that the disorientation produced by the affective shock of rupture acts in tandem with expressionist dramaturgical strategies, through which the spectator is immersed into the representational world of Act One, only to experience, along with the protagonist, the violent irruption of Act Two and the visceral shock that this engenders. Such expressionist dramaturgies may also be defined as affective in their engagement of the audience's sensory involvement and emotional response, but would be dismissed by Lehmann as holding political potential given their alignment with recognised modes of feeling and cognitive engagement that run counter to the autonomy and disorientation of the affective shock he advocates. Here, Neilson's use of affect aligns more closely with theorists such as Sara Ahmed (2004) and Carolyn Pedwell (2014) who resist narrow differentiation between affect and emotion, and reject the dualism of bodily sensation versus cognitive activity. The argument pursued in this chapter is less interested in pitting one understanding, or definition, of affect against another, than in exploring precisely how Neilson's theatre of affect evokes, to political effect, both visceral shock (which may at the point of experience be untethered to emotional or rational processing) and sustained emotional and sensory engagement.

Above all, it is my contention that the fictional, or aesthetic, framework of the dramatic offers the ontological security that is vital for the political processing of any visceral shock to take place, and I thus reject Lehmann's conviction that it is only the shock of an irruption of the real, and the subsequent collapse of the spectator's ontological security and suspension of analytical activity, that can result in a political charge. Such a proposition would support the Deleuzian position that the politics of affect are only secured if the autonomy of affect from emotional, social or political interpretation or analysis is maintained. To the contrary, I argue in this chapter that while visceral shock can heighten awareness, self-consciousness and trigger a more acute propensity for altered perception, the political potential of such affect is only realised through subsequent cognitive processing, be that emotional or rational or both.

I will employ the term "representational theatre" for Neilson's workⁱⁱ, although I will propose, drawing on criteria I have laid out elsewhere (see Tomlin 2013a), that *God in Ruins* is predominantly dramatic, with one significant postdramatic rupture, and *Dissocia* is expressionistic drama. The important factor for this chapter is that both plays remain within the aesthetic boundaries of "art" (Lehmann 2016, 440); everything is, ultimately, designed, rehearsed and then represented on stage, without any irruption of 'the real'. Yet this chapter will not only conclude that representational theatre, even that which is broadly dramatic, is equally capable of achieving politically-charged affect, but that it is precisely *through* its

containment within aesthetic boundaries which permit subsequent self-reflection and emotional calibration, that the affect of shock wields its particular political charge.

Postdramatic Politics of Affect

In his recent work on contemporary tragedy, Lehmann (2013, 2016) establishes the thesis that this chapter seeks to contest. While I will draw on Lehmann's detailed exploration of a political currency that is reliant on affective resonance through shock to the spectator's ontological certainties and cultural assumptions, I will seek to question his alignment of such a currency with a tragic impulse that holds political charge only when instigated by a rupture of the aesthetic frame with a non-aesthetic irruption of the real.

Lehmann proposes that shock to the spectator can be caused by "transgression, rupture, overstepping, immoderation and excess" (2016, 390). Viewing the tragic through the lens of the "Icarian model" (410), he argues that throughout its history, "transgression, the theme of dangerous excess, has proven central, but the connection between the tragic and the theatre always takes shape in a different way" (411). Where classical tragedy offered its audience the vicarious experience of transgression undertaken by the protagonist within the fictional cosmos of the aesthetic frame, the postdramatic tragic impulse, according to Lehmann, follows in the footsteps of avant-garde artists such as Antonin Artaud by exploring how theatre's "manifestation of transgression" (410) might collapse the fourth wall in order to viscerally, rather than vicariously, affect the spectator.

Thus, the affective shock, the impact on the spectator of the postdramatic tragic, can be said to be of a different order to that of the cathartic emotions aroused by classical tragic structures. The emotional charge of catharsis is inarguably felt, but it is also cognitively understood, and recognised and named as—in the Aristotelian configuration—fear or pity. Instead, in Lehmann's argumentation, the affect of shock is rather intended to be viscerally experienced without being emotionally calibrated, precisely to confuse any cathartic emotional or rational processing of the shock that has been received. Thus, the spectator is prevented from emotional mastery of the unfolding events and denied the security afforded by feeling part of a stable interpretative community. Instead, she is left exposed to the disorientation that enables shifts of perception to occur. This, Lehmann argues, is where the political potency of the contemporary tragic lies.

Yet, Lehmann reserves this potential for specific models of theatre practice and, in so doing, continues to limit the contemporary dramaturgies through which a political charge can be deemed possible. Lehmann has always dismissed the proposal that dramatic theatre, as he defines it, holds the potential for political and/or tragic currency in the contemporary moment.

Although he acknowledges that “[t]here is space for tragedy even organised along the patterns of traditional conflict dramaturgy” (2013, 97), he remains sceptical of its political impact, doubting that “the necessary shock to our cultural habits can be achieved within the limits of a theatre of representation” (97). This is because he holds that the familiar dramatic conventions of the “conflict model” (2016, 390) are too securely retained within audience’s horizons of expectation to permit the kind of transgression of cultural limits that would result in any transformative visceral shock to the spectator. Rather he asserts that it is only the postdramatic form that

though always different and modulated along idiosyncratic lines, deprives normalized [*genormt*] consciousness of its mooring: its concepts pale, the certainty of judgment wavers, the sphere of calm (or calming) reflection is shut out or deferred, and cultural intelligibility is dealt a shock. (2016, 401; translation inserted in the original)

However, because the cultural authority of the very institution of theatre is always well-placed to contain the disruption threatened by attempts to transgress its aesthetic conventions, Lehmann’s thesis in his more recent work begins to pull away from the political potential of a theatre that may well be widely understood as postdramatic, but in which the transgressions, now normalised in a European theatre culture increasingly influenced by such dramaturgies, risk merely entertaining or even titillating, rather than shocking, an audience that is becoming accustomed to the new conventions:

In a time when aesthetic fragmentation has become the norm, almost all interruptions can be integrated into the inherited theatrical framework with almost no consequence at all. An incalculable being, the spectator, ‘succeeds’, time and again, at transforming any rupture at all into a continuum [...]. The spectator readily redramatizes the intended caesura: theatre ‘theatres everything up [*theatert alles ein*]’, as Brecht knew. (Brecht 1957, 30 in Lehmann 2016, 441; translation inserted in the original)

Lehmann thus argues that the transgression required by the tragic impulse may need to move beyond overstepping aesthetic conventions to “*interrupt* art itself, insofar as the latter functions as an inert component of normative culture” (2016, 404; original emphasis):

when tragedy remains within the framework of an artistic institution that transforms everything into entertainment (against which even its radical forms have no protection), it

threatens to deteriorate into the mere pretense of transgression: a matter of museums and *Kulturgut*. Such transformation simply annihilates the tragic claim, which is unthinkable if no shock to cultural intelligibility occurs. (2016, 401)

Therefore, Lehmann argues, the “shock to cultural intelligibility” may now require that the commodifiable art-work of theatre itself and the cultural authority and ontological security that pertains to such an event be punctured by an interruption of reality that cannot be contained within a purely aesthetic framework. Only with such a rupture “is it possible to experience a shaking or destabilising of the basic grounds of our cultural existence, even a blurring of the boundaries of the self, of conceptual understanding as such” (2013, 98-99).

Thus, as Lehmann notes, more recent theatrical practice has moved beyond postdramatic transgressions of dramatic representation to ever more radical attempts to take “the aesthetic mode of perception [...] to its limits – so that praxis, that which is serious and real, breaks through or undermines merely artful appearance” (2016, 442). He refers to such work in various ways, all of which seem to require an extended understanding of the postdramatic as previously defined in his earlier writings. At different points in his work, he refers to “a theatre of situation” (2013, 89), the “curious twilight zone between political activism and aesthetic practice” (2013, 87) or “a theatre – whether one calls it postdramatic, performance or something else – [that] will not maintain a clear distinction between its status as art and as praxis” (2016, 440).

Lehmann’s discussion of the political potential of affective transgression thus traverses a number of models of theatre that might be seen to constitute, to some degree, a spectrum. At one end lies dramatic theatre, which Lehmann doubts is able to achieve “the necessary shock to our cultural habits” (2013, 97); next is the range of forms that constitute the postdramatic that are able to “tax” the framework of the dramatic in various ways (2016, 425). At the far end of the spectrum, and examined in Lehmann’s more recent work, are events such as Laila Soliman’s series of performances, *No Time for Art* (2011-2013), where the aesthetic frame of the theatre event itself is ruptured or indeed entirely scored through, by interruptions of praxis (see Lehmann 2013). One precondition, Lehmann asserts, “of the political in theatre – is the momentous undermining of key certainties: about whether we are spectators or participants; whether we perceive or are confronted with perceptions that function ‘as if’ or for real; whether we dwell in the field of aesthetic make-belief or in real actuality” (2013, 99).

In turning now to the work of dramatist Anthony Neilson, I will seek to contest Lehmann’s proposal that to sustain the political charge of the affect of shock, artists need to

continue chasing ever more radical transgressions of theatre's aesthetic limits through ever more radical irruptions of the real. This is a tactic that fails to recognise that each rupture will, in turn, become anticipated, just as the postdramatic conventions that preceded them, by audiences who have become immune to or are titillated by what might be termed *shock-effects*. In such instances the 'affect' that is delivered is cognitively recognised as a cultural convention within a certain trend of aesthetic practice, and the political charge of its potential to genuinely shock the spectator from their cultural moorings is neutered. On the contrary, I will argue, there is renewable political currency in affects that are built into, and unique to, the dramaturgical design of the unruptured aesthetic framework in which they are employed.

Neilson's *God in Ruins* operates an ostensible rupture in the aesthetic framework of the theatre event, but one that is quickly revealed to be a reality effect, an integral and scripted part of the play. I will argue that, despite the rupture being quickly 'theatred up', as Lehmann would protest, there is nonetheless political currency in the affect of shock that momentarily disturbs and disorientates. Furthermore, I will argue that it is precisely the reincorporation of the rupture back into the aesthetic framework that permits the emotional and rational calibration that theorists such as Lehmann would wish to occlude from a discourse of affective resonance that must, to protect its political charge, remain autonomous from cognitive activity. Far from blunting the political charge of the affective shock as Lehmann might contend, I believe that Neilson's reincorporation of the shock of the seemingly real back into a representational framework conversely permits deeper cognitive self-reflection on a visceral and momentary response of unease than may be the case when the interruption of 'real actuality' is authentic, sustained and unreconciled.

Reality Effects and Affective Ruptures

The reality effect I am concerned with in this analysis occurs around three quarters of the way through *God in Ruins*, Neilson's Christmas play which I attended at Soho Theatre, London. Up until this point, the play had engaged, through expressionist rather than realist strategies, with the narrative journey of TV producer Brian (played by Brian Doherty), a modern-day Scrooge, battling his demons and attempting to make contact with his estranged daughter at Christmas despite the best efforts of his ex-wife to prevent this from happening. The lead-up to the moment of rupture sees Brian coming around from a drug-fuelled stupor to be confronted by, firstly, the ghost of his dead father and secondly, the fictional character of Scrooge.

Although both of these appearances, to borrow from Lehmann, increasingly 'taxed' the representational frame of the play, such subversions were, themselves, contained within

the rationalising narrative device of a drug-induced hallucination or dream-world, thus remaining supported by a coherent and broadly dramatic structural framework as I have argued elsewhere (Tomlin 2013, xv). It was only at the point at which the house lights came up and the characters, Scrooge (Sean Kearns) and Brian, were startled and confused by the sight of an audience watching them, that the narrative coherence of the play-world began to crack and we briefly glimpsed the postdramatic territory that later plays of Neilson's, such as *Narrative* (2018), first performed in 2013, were to more fully explore. Yet even this rupture, particularly given the comedic responses of the characters and the seasonal context of the play, felt less like a postdramatic and political irruption of the real and more like a pleasurable pantomime convention. It was only when there was a flurry of activity at the back of the theatre, where a man appeared to be arguing with the usher to get past her and into the auditorium, that the aesthetic boundaries appeared to be crumbling and an affect of un-ease began to ripple through the audience.

The man, who looked and sounded exactly like a rough sleeper who was potentially violent and probably drunk might be expected to, was brilliantly convincing. Kearns and Doherty dropped their characters and began asking the man to leave. He became aggressive, he was an ex-soldier who had worked in Basra, he was now sleeping on the streets and needed a bit of help. Although my hard-wired scepticism remained alert, there was something about the detailed authenticity of the staged event that made me very alert to my real presence in the auditorium in which these events were now unfolding and somewhat anxious about any potential exposure to come; be that from the consequences of a real intrusion or from a staged event that might suddenly demand more of me than the contract with the play I had implicitly accepted so far.

As Trish Reid argues, throughout his work Neilson has deployed numerous strategies to make spectators alert to the present moment (2017, 125); an intensification of theatre's intrinsic liveness that, for Neilson, fulfils theatre's 'experiential' promise (Neilson 2007, unpaginated foreword). In moments like this, when the ontological register of the play is ruptured—is this real, or not—we are thrown into an increased awareness of our own present space and time and our vulnerability to exposure or a call to action that we might be unprepared for and unwilling to fulfil. Despite the artful dialogue that ensued between the ex-soldier, Ryan, and Kearns and Doherty about the play itself, which increasingly suggested the aesthetic and designed nature of the intervention, Ryan's supplications to the audience continued to unnerve me given the context of the play and the role I had felt safe in playing up until this point. The fraction of any remaining possibility that he might be a 'real' ex-soldier, wounded in battle and now sleeping on the streets and hungry, who might ask me at

any moment to give him a bit of spare change in the spirit of Christmas, made my absence of response, my complete denial of his presence, complicit with the ubiquitous figure of Scrooge or the figure of Brian, who had, in earlier scenes given a tip of five pence to the pizza delivery man. Yet conversely, the fear of responding, of acting, of giving him money, when it was overwhelmingly likely that this was an actor playing a part, was also paralysing; how stupid would such an action make me look? My relief as it gradually became clear that this was, in fact, ‘only theatre’, did nothing to neutralise the political currency of those moments of doubt.

This rupture, at its moment of occurrence, initiated in this spectator what Lehmann describes as “the unsettling that occurs through the *indecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction” (2006, 101; emphasis original). Lehmann notes that the spectators in such a context “find themselves in a double bind, calling for an aesthetic appreciation and at the same time for a reaction of responsibility which would be to some degree ‘real’ [...]. Ethico-political responsibility re-enters into the aesthetic experience” (2013, 100). Where I would, however, question the trajectory of Lehmann’s thinking is in his doubt that such transgressions can be sustained in contexts such as *God in Ruins*, in which the irruption is an illusion, a reality effect that is revealed to be a mere aesthetic strategy and thus neutered of any transgressive political charge. Despite the intervention of Ryan being explicitly ‘theatred up’, it momentarily cut through an enjoyable Christmas fable as a reminder of the liveness of the action; it cut through my security as a spectator of whom nothing was asked to expose me, in that moment of being, to risk; the risk of acting in the wrong way, of not knowing whether action was actually desired of me. I experienced, in Lehmann’s terms, that “passing fever of affect that makes the subject lose composure” (2016, 429), an affect in which I could only retrospectively identify the emotions of embarrassment, anxiety, fear and shame. At the moment of ontological uncertainty, the dominant sensation was a visceral and confused self-consciousness that only subsequently took the shape of an uncomfortable awareness of my own position as a privileged attendant of entertaining artistic performances in the face of someone who was ostensibly having to live on the streets and survive on handouts.

As Lehmann’s thesis proposes, I was indeed dis-located, through the affect of shock, from my habitual mode of perception to an awareness of “heightened, conscious being” (2016, 438). Lehmann further argues that the spectator’s experience of such excess may not promote healing, as Aristotelian catharsis intended, but quite the reverse (438). His analysis of the affect he experienced in Soliman’s *No Time for Art* reflects my own experience at this moment in Neilson’s play: the feeling of “lack in the face of the absence of action. The aesthetic appreciation is broken by a concrete questioning of the self” (2013, 109). The affective value of the shock was due to the very real threat that I was to be called upon to act

in ways that I might not be comfortable with, in ambiguous contexts that might be aesthetic representations of the real governed by rules for my behaviour that were manifestly unclear or might be interruptions of an unwelcome social reality that should compel me to do something. In short, I instinctively felt both compelled and unable to act. Ryan's intrusion, in Lehmann's terms, had instigated a confusion between aesthetic play and actual praxis (2016, 440), an "overstepping of the framework of reception" I had consented to when purchasing a ticket for a Christmas show (2016, 438).

Yet, as it fairly rapidly became clear that this interruption was, in fact, scripted – exposing Ryan, in turn, as a highly skilled actor, not a drunk ex-soldier who was sleeping rough – the 'theatring up' of this reality effect did nothing to blunt the political charge of the affective, if momentary, shock. Conversely, as the affect of unease subsided and the risk of exposure was no longer acute, I was able to cognitively reflect on my instinctive visceral response. Through this reflection I was forced to acknowledge to myself that my concern about how I might look to other audience members was probably way and above more important than the plight of this intruder into the hitherto secure framework of my attendance at a Christmas show. This is how Lehmann's affective charge operated for me in this instance of rupture: a dislocation of security and community by the intrusion of 'the other', a disenfranchised member of the real world offering a stark reminder to the relatively privileged actors and spectators that the 'goodwill to all men' that was a part and parcel of our Christmas tradition might not any more easily translate into charitable or courageous action for those spectators than it did for Brian or Charles Dickens's Scrooge. Yet the political charge of this moment required, counter to Lehmann's proposal, a moment of contemplation permitted by the return of the ontological safety offered by the aesthetic event, in which I could process the affect of shock and cognitively—as well as self-critically—reflect on my own visceral response. Without this restitution of ontological security—that is, had Ryan proved to be 'real'—I would suggest that my response to the affective shock may not have been able to escape the momentarily overwhelming anxiety and potentially narcissistic self-consciousness at how the removal of the aesthetic frame had left me and my sense of public subjecthood exposed to risk. That Ryan was a representation, a reality effect, did not detract from the political impact of the moment when it might—just might—have been real, but conversely permitted it by re-settling the unease that had sent my affective reflexes hurtling towards the necessity for self-protection, thus enabling cognitive and self-critical reflection on the politics of the experience.

If such an analysis, which is necessarily subjective and inconclusive, speculatively suggests that what might be defined as the postdramatic reality effect of *God in Ruins* may

hold equivalent, or even deeper, political potential than the actual intervention of any ‘real actuality’, in the next section I will pursue my interrogation of Lehmann’s thesis still further along the spectrum I sketched out above as I turn to Neilson’s *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. In this case, there is no fissure in the aesthetic framework that would constitute an interruption by a ‘real actuality’ or the illusory effect of such a rupture. Moreover, without digressing into an extensive discussion over the categorisation of *Dissocia*, I would locate the play as broadly dramatic in form, despite the characteristics (its affective charge key amongst them) that have led others, such as Reid (2007), to focus on the many ways in which it evokes Lehmann’s descriptions of postdramatic dramaturgies. Whereas *God in Ruins* does momentarily fracture the enclosed, representational framework of the fictional world, as described above, *Dissocia* maintains its fourth wall throughout and follows a narrative that is consistent and coherent, given the play’s internal logic as an expressionist account of reality. Here, it is the fictional frame of the protagonist itself that is sundered into two. However, I will argue that it is precisely because both the aesthetic and fictional frameworks of *Dissocia* are sustained throughout that the affective and political charge for the spectator can be strengthened and consolidated within the carefully designed, dramatic dramaturgy of Neilson’s expressionistic world.

Affective Expressionism

The Wonderful World of Dissocia is a play of two distinct acts, designed around a critical interval that is integral to the affective and political potential of the piece. In the first act we are taken on a fantastical journey to the land of Dissocia, a narrative that echoes the absurd, comical and sometimes terrifying adventures of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* ([1865] 2017), as well as evoking other classic fantasy tales such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* ([1950] 2009). The protagonist, Lisa, is visited by a watch-mender, Victor, who explains that her recent experiences of ill health are due to her having lost an hour during a transatlantic flight that arrived just as the clocks went back an hour to end British Summer Time. Her missing hour, he informs her, can be retrieved from Dissocia, and once she gets her hour back, balance will be restored to her life. Among the characters Lisa encounters in Dissocia are two nervous (in)security guards, a (scape)Goat who is blamed for everything and Jane from the Council, who submits herself as a victim to as many crimes as possible (including Lisa’s imminent rape by the Goat) in order to reduce the numbers of individuals to have suffered from crime in the council’s statistics. Lisa gradually learns that Dissocia is under attack from the armies of the Black Dog King who is attempting to capture Dissocia’s Queen Sarah who has gone into hiding. As she finally succeeds in tracking down an absurdly

dysfunctional Lost Property office in search of her lost hour, she is firstly informed that to have her hour back would destroy Dissocia and subsequently that she is, in fact, the Queen who must now save them all.

This first Act is fast-paced, colourful, spectacular and exuberant. The dialogue is sharp and insistently witty, even in moments when the humour is at its darkest. There are songs throughout and the action is often spectacular, including an unforgettable sequence in which Jane and Lisa take to the sky in a flying car as bombs rain down around them. Amidst the chaos of Lisa's adventures, there is also the poignantly affective moment where everything darkens, and Lisa curls into a foetal position chanting "I want to go home I want to go home" (Neilson 2007, 45). As the sounds of violence fade and Lisa whimpers in the silence, a trapdoor opens in the stage and a polar bear emerges in a mist of dry ice singing a song that starts and ends with the line "Who'll hold your paw when you die" (45-46), before disappearing back into the ground. Like all quest journeys, there is a clear and coherent narrative strand to follow but, also in common with most quest journeys, it is the moment by moment experience of the highs and lows of the journey that thrills and this is underpinned by the highly affective rewards of this first Act's turbo-charged assault on the spectator's senses.

Following the interval that, for me, consisted in a glass of prosecco with a close friend I saw only rarely and a high level of buzz and excitement in the packed bar of York's Theatre Royal, I returned to the auditorium eager for more of the same. Yet, we were met instead with silence, an impression of whiteness, flickering fluorescent lighting, a window of perspex separating the audience from the stage, a single hospital bed in which Lisa was lying. The subsequent fourteen short scenes, marked by lights going up and lights going down, contain minimal action, sound or dialogue. Scenes one, two and four consist of a nurse entering, waking Lisa, giving her pills, leaving. The sole sound of footsteps approaching and leaving the room accompanies the beginning or end of each of these scenes. There are brief and quickly resolved moments of conflict when Lisa wants to use the phone, have a cigarette or continue dancing and singing with her Walkman on, before it is taken away. The impact on the spectator when Act Two begins is one of shock and disorientation. There is a palpable sense of come-down in the auditorium. The energy is slowly sapped from the audience, through the long silences of repetitive scenes where little happens. Heart rates slow. Shoulders sink. The world of the theatre becomes a place where you no longer want to be: bleak, cold and depressing. We all, it feels to me, have been ripped from the play we were part of, and are left to find our bearings somewhere much less appealing.

Neilson's attraction to manipulating the affective potential of theatre is clearly foregrounded in Reid's sustained analysis of his work. Arguing that critics should pay more

attention to “the forms and textures of Neilson’s work” (2007, 489) rather than a simple focus on the content, Reid confirms Neilson’s commitment to a theatre that is ‘experiential’ and ‘visceral’ in its effect on the audience (2007, 489). She further argues that

Dissocia’s effects are substantially dependent on the deliberate violation of conventional rules regarding sign density. The first half is ostentatiously replete with signs – colour, movement, sound, music, shifts in linguistic register and heightened and mixed performance style – while the second is extraordinarily static and muted [...] the play’s overall effect is substantially dependent on a collision between two extreme types of signifying practice. (2007, 490)

It is, perhaps, no great revelation that well-crafted representational theatre that sustains an unruptured aesthetic framework throughout is perfectly able to deliver affective results, as both Reid and myself, among many others, would argue. However, contrary to Lehmann’s assertion that such affective work, in the absence of any breach in theatre’s aesthetic boundaries, will struggle to shock the spectator’s cultural habits sufficiently to invoke a political charge, I will now argue that the affective dramaturgies of *Dissocia* were designed to do precisely that – and in the case of this spectator at least, were successful in so doing.

There are clues laid out for the spectator throughout Act One that suggest that the world of *Dissocia* is not a fantastical land that really exists in this fictional world, but a mindscape that exists entirely in Lisa’s subjective experience of the world around her through the lens of her dissociative disorder. In addition to the infiltration of sounds from the ‘real’ world, throughout her journey, Lisa is threatened in *Dissocia* by the Black Dog King, a clear reference to depression, and the Dissocians are desperate for the return of Queen Sarah of the House of Tonin, a reference to Serotonin, the so-called ‘happy chemical’ of the human body that is often in short supply for those suffering from depression or anxiety.

In Act Two Lisa lies drugged up with medication in a psychiatric hospital. After the first two scenes where she has barely moved sufficiently to take the pills she is given, she gathers her belongings and tries to escape. At the end of scene five, she plays her Walkman and we can just make out the music from the flying car scene of her adventures in *Dissocia*. In scene six she dances manically with the Walkman on, until she is restrained by the nurse and has her Walkman taken away. In later scenes, Lisa has visitors. Her sister Dot harangues her for her selfish behaviour and the impact this has had on her mother and family: “all because you can’t manage to take a few pills twice a day” (82). In the penultimate scene she is visited by Vince:

Vince: I thought you wanted to get better.

Lisa: I *do* want to get better.

Vince: Well, yes, you say that but then you don't take your *medication* –

Lisa *sighs heavily*.

Vince: Yeah, well, you can fucking sigh, but what can I do? All I can do is nag you to take the fucking pills and then you resent me for nagging you, I just –

Pause.

I don't know if I can do this anymore, I really don't –

[...]

Lisa: ... but you don't understand –

Vince: That's not my fault! It's not my fault that I don't understand! (87)

It is in these final, and brief, exchanges with Lisa that the politics of the piece begin to land. Because for those spectators who have not personally experienced Lisa's journey through depression to mania to neuroleptic sedation, our perspective on her neurological states of mind would more usually be from the outside looking in, through the eyes, perhaps, of the sister or boyfriend who want her to be well and cannot understand why she will not take the medication designed to maintain a state free from psychosis. Yet, as Anna Harpin argues, *Dissocia* explicitly rejects the limitations of realist representations of 'madness' that tend to invite a "diagnostic gaze" (2014, 189):

Realism tends to remainder the contents of 'mad' experience in some ways as outside the dramatic frame and, thereby, implicitly participates in an othering of such states of mind. Madness in such works is, frequently, reduced to identifiable surface behaviours that are framed as 'ill', behaviours that exceed the limits of the internal logic of the play-world. (189)

Realist representations of 'madness' in theatre, Harpin contends, are most often constructed from the perspective of those, both onstage and off, who are deemed normal, looking at those whose behaviour is framed as aberrant and abnormal. Conversely, in *Dissocia*, the audience is invited to experience an expressionistic reality through the perspective of Lisa's neurological lens.

Where Harpin's analysis focuses in detail on the political potential of Neilson's dramaturgy to signal "an acute awareness of the ambiguity that lies at the heart of current

notions of mental illness” (188), I am most interested here in the specific way in which Neilson’s invitation to the audience to experience the world as Lisa does is extended predominantly through eliciting particular affective responses that map onto those of the protagonist. We, too, delight in the flying car, we are shocked by the noise of the falling bombs, we feel deeply saddened as Lisa lies whimpering and we share her delight at the appearance of the polar bear. But most of all we, too, are stunned by the rupture of the adventure that lands us in Act Two: the silence, lack of colour, sterility and absence of any stimulation. We smile to hear the flying car music reprised on the Walkman and are relieved and energised by the scene in which Lisa sings and dances around the ward. As Harpin asserts, “by aligning an audience’s journey with Lisa’s and further making that experience sumptuous with pleasure he [Neilson] asks that one reassess one’s own mode of engagement with the subject of madness and reality ... Neilson harnesses the pleasure of aesthetic experience to ethical effect” (197). The ethical, and I would argue political, effect relies on the combined deployment of the two different conceptions of affect I noted in the introduction: the emotional manipulation of the audience’s affective experience as they travel with Lisa on her journey, and the disorientating shock to the audience’s expectations at the beginning of the second half. Having spoken at length to the political potential of the latter, I would like here to turn now to the political potential of the former.

Here, I would argue that affective alignment with the protagonist’s emotional states does hold political potential in a way that would be dismissed by those theorists who believe, with Lehmann, that for affect to hold political charge it must evade any mode of cognitive processing, emotional as well as rational. I would argue, on the contrary, that emotional cognitive processing is vital here to the politics at play. This is because mental states unlike our own are peculiarly difficult to comprehend through discursive or rational contemplation. To think of moments of extreme sadness or grief is not to arrive at clinical depression. To think of moments of elation is not to arrive at mania. Thus, public discourse too often resorts to ‘common sense’ responses to behaviour not born of common or rational neurological states of mind. Vince speaks on behalf of the Everyman or woman when he declares to Lisa that he simply does not understand why she would stop taking her medication when she knows that this will make her ill. But what we may be unable to understand rationally, we might just be able to access through affective, emotional experience. This is precisely Neilson’s aim, as he outlines in the foreword to *Dissocia*: “Hopefully, when she is asked in the second act why she doesn’t take the medication [...] the audience – having been deprived of the spectacle of the first half and any conclusion to its narrative – will understand on a visceral level why she is drawn to her condition” (2007, unpaginated foreword). Here, as Harpin argues, “Neilson aims

to dissolve the presumed unintelligibility and incommunicability of experiences of mental illness” (198).

Because, if the audience do not understand, they are at least perhaps able to feel something analogous to the impact that lands with the rupture from mania into the lethargy and come-down of neuroleptic medication. This is the political charge, as Reid argues, that arises “through felt experience as opposed to intellectual engagement and judgement” (2017, 82). Through Neilson’s expressionistic dramaturgy, the affective strategies in *Dissocia* operate precisely by containing and immersing the spectator not only inside the play’s fictional framework, but inside the neuro-divergent mind of its protagonist from which the neuro-normative spectator is forced to confront an alien manifestation of their more familiar perspective: that of the family, friends and medical profession who are unable to understand. While the emotional engagement induced by Neilson’s fictional framework may not transgress the “limits of [...] ‘cultural intelligibility’” in an aesthetic sense, as Lehmann’s affective shock would require, (Lehmann 2013, 97) I would argue that Neilson’s use of affect does disrupt the pathologising of mental health disorders by the dominant social codes and legal apparatus that seek to contain the more extreme manifestations of neurodiversity. Neilson achieves this through a dramaturgy that catapults the spectator into the protagonist’s world of mania, only to deliver a shocking rupture after the interval that aesthetically replicates, for the spectator, the affective experience of medication and withdrawal now undergone by the protagonist.

The combined affects of emotional alignment and disorientating shock hold strong political potential, given the affective resonance that long outlives any memories of the detailed text or narrative of the production. Revisiting this piece eleven years after seeing it, before returning to the playtext, what remained with me was a heart-breaking singing polar bear and the palpable gut-wrench when the curtain went up after an interval of buzz and prosecco that hit me with the aesthetic equivalent of a clinical come-down. In my own subsequent engagements and interactions with friends undergoing journeys such as Lisa’s, that sense and the insight it brought with it has never left me, and my perception of those who resist medication has been irrevocably enlightened by the affective residue of the performance. that enabled me to ‘feel’, rather than necessarily understand, states of being that I was not able to rationally comprehend.

Conclusion

While I have drawn above on my own subjective experience of *God in Ruins* and *Dissocia*, my analysis does substantiate the legitimacy of a politics of affect that reaches beyond

Lehmann's insistence that that transgressive shock within unruptured aesthetic frameworks will struggle to escape the "risk of cancelling itself out immediately" (2016, 401). Moreover, I have argued that the political charge of Neilson's affective dramaturgies is achieved, in these two pieces, not only through the employment of affective shock, but also through affective, expressionistic dramaturgies that evoke states of emotional, and so cognitive, engagement. In *God in Ruins*, I have argued that the politics lies in the very restitution of the aesthetic boundaries that permit emotional and rational cognitive processing of the affective shock to take place. In *Dissocia*, I have argued that it the politics work through the combination of affective alignment of the spectator with the emotional states of the protagonist and the affective shock that disorients both protagonist and spectator and rips the latter viscerally from their emotional moorings. The aesthetic frameworks that operated without real rupture in both instances, offer the ontological security in which, I would argue, we are best placed to dare to open ourselves up to the vulnerability of being truly shocked or affected in ways that we had not anticipated. In the re-turn to affect in the discourse of political theatres, Neilson's work demonstrates the value in folding the revitalised interest in the affective charge back into a discourse of intended, and political, effect on the world that lies beyond the time and space of the theatre event in ways that can transcend the momentary disorientation of the individual spectator.

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ⁱ *God in Ruins*, premiered at Soho Theatre, London, and the analysis in this chapter is taken from the authors notes on the performance. There is no published playtext at the time of writing.

ⁱⁱ In translations of Lehmann, the term “representational” is often used as synonymous with dramatic. In previous work, I have argued that all theatre that is designed, rehearsed and performed is representational (see Tomlin 2013b). Thus, the term works well here to subsume the contested binaries of dramatic and postdramatic in opposition to dramaturgies where the representational apparatus is ruptured or scored through by something ‘real’ that cannot be contained within the aesthetic boundaries of theatre.