

Mark Ravenhill

A Tear in the Fabric: the James Bulger Murder and New Theatre Writing in the 'Nineties

It is not yet ten years since Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* reached the stage of the Royal Court, during its West End exile in 1996; yet the play has already become, with Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, identified as central to the emergence of so-called 'in-yer-face' theatre. While Mark Ravenhill recognized the influence of such writers as Martin Crimp and David Mamet, it was only recently, during a discussion over coffee about a possible screenplay, that he began to consider the effects of both private and public events of 1993 upon his emergence as a writer – the death of a partner, and the infamous murder of a child by other children. In the following article he identifies recurrent concerns in his first three plays which he now sees as a working-out of his responses to a year which was crucial not only to his own personal narrative, but to others for whom the James Bulger murder epitomized all the worst aspects of a society that the Thatcherites claimed no longer to exist. Among Mark Ravenhill's more recent plays have been *Mother Clap's Molly House*, which transferred from the National Theatre to the Aldwych in 2002, and *Totally Over You*, written for the 2003 Shell Connections youth theatre season at the National. This article was first presented as the Marjorie Francis Lecture at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, on 5 May 2004.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO I was sent a book to read by a young film producer. In my relatively short career as a playwright, I haven't exactly been inundated with offers to make a fortune on the multiplex screen. But from time to time an initial offer has been made and it's usually taken this same form: a paperback book slumping onto the doormat with a little note asking me to take a read and see if I want to turn the book into a screenplay.

My reaction has always been the same. If it's a good book, why make it into a film when it's complete and beautiful and meaningful in itself? And if it's a bad book, how will I work up the enthusiasm to adapt it and who is this mad producer going around optioning lousy novels?

So as you can see my bank balance remains pretty much untroubled by money from the movies. And so this latest novel arriving on my desk didn't arouse much excitement. But it was short – more of a novella, at just over a hundred pages. And the cover was sexy. So I

thought: what the hell? So I sewed myself in at Coffee Republic with a double espresso and ten Silk Cut Ultra Low and started to read.

Very quickly I found myself drawn into the book. Set mainly in a school, it tells the story of a teenage boy, and in a series of almost dream-like, imagistic scenes takes him through casual drug-dealing at school, terrible acts of violence against other kids, the death of his dad and making love and sharing heroin with his mother. There's a final redemption through love with a young American student.

Not the greatest story ever told: Oedipus with sex and drugs. But the tone of the book – sharp, ironic, unreliable, with somewhere a whiff of moral disgust at the world the characters inhabited – was very alluring to me. And in its sexual explicitness, but even more so in its profound scepticism about humanity, it made me embarrassed to be reading it in public.

I asked if I could meet the writer. We fixed a date in a tapas bar in Camden. I reread the

novel several times. I was anxious to be meeting a real writer. I've always thought of myself as someone who makes plays – not a writer as such. I never wrote teenage poetry, novels, short stories. I don't even write letters. I don't consider myself to be particularly literary – beyond enjoying reading a good book.

The writer turned up at the Bar Ganza – himself looking nervous, no doubt with his own worries about meeting a dramatist. Pleasantries were exchanged. Then I breathed deep and started to talk about the book.

The central character, I said, was very alluring, attractive.

'Yes,' the novelist said. 'Lots of people said that.' But he didn't agree.

'No?'

'Well, look at what he does – he lets his dad die, he fucks his mum, gets her addicted to smack, he kills other kids.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I wasn't sure whether all of those were actually happening.'

'Well, yes, the guy is a fantasist.'

Ravenhill: 'Yes, I thought a lot of the stuff was teenage bravado and fantasy and he didn't actually do it.'

'I think you're right.'

Ravenhill: 'And I'd like to find the film equivalent of the unreliable narrator so we can do that on screen. I like the hero. The rest of the world around him is so boring. The school, the town he lives in. The expectations of the kids and their parents. But he's full of life.'

'Maybe. But he's evil.'

Ravenhill: 'Evil? Really?'

I still come over with a liberal flush when I hear that word. For my mum and dad it's the other four-letter words that get them reaching for the off-button – but for me it's that particular four-letter word that leaves me a little short of air. A carefully laid out set of liberal platitudes start to topple once the 'E-word' enters the conversation. Because I still can't really robustly deny that it never, ever exists but I'd like to think that – what? – seventy-five, ninety, ninety-nine per cent of what we could call evil isn't evil: that it's society and all that jazz.

But still I leave a little window open for the occasional event when, yes, evil might be

the only cause. It's almost certainly a cowardly stance – like hedging your bets about whether there is a God or not. And now here was the novelist dragging me into the whole evil thing.

So – it flashed through my mind in that moment, talking to the writer – I would have to take a major decision in adapting this book. Would I be dramatizing his world view – in which there was absolute evil – in writing this screenplay? Or would I be bringing the story within the orbit of my world view – essentially a social one in which we make and are made by society?

I decided in that moment to pursue the idea of dramatizing his world view. Of course, there's a danger in that: if you don't write from your core, then the work will never be true or felt. But maybe if I was writing inside this zone that for me was taboo, that made me feel totally unstable – a zone of moral absolutes – then maybe something rather exciting or dangerous might be released. Something close to the sensation that I had reading the book for the first time in Coffee Republic.

I decided to push him a little further on this area.

Ravenhill: 'Was there one thing that got you started writing the book?'

'How do you mean?'

Ravenhill: 'Well, normally with me, I can have all sorts of very general and often rather grand ideas about what I'd like to write, or could write or – worst of all – should write. But there's normally one concrete thing – an image, a word, a moment – that actually gets me started.'

'I can't remember.'

Ravenhill: 'It's just I've got a hunch that that key image or word or whatever would be a good way in for me to adapting your book.'

'I really can't remember. It was five years ago that I wrote the book.'

Ravenhill: 'And had you written a novel before?'

'No.'

Ravenhill: 'And have you written one since?'

'No.'

I was determined to find out what had pushed him into writing the book. Particularly as he'd only ever written this one, very intense, very distinctive novel – so short that it must have been impelled by a single need to write.

We talked more generally. I said I was struck by the sequences where the kids in the school are shown films of the Holocaust and by the way images from the Holocaust start to figure in the central character's fantasy world. These ideas resonated with the novelist and we started to talk excitedly. We were getting on famously now and were intellectually clicking, but still I knew I'd need something more concrete – that single image or word – really to engage with his book.

Finally it came. I think maybe he'd known all along. He just wanted to get to know me better. Maybe he felt foolish saying it too soon, that it was too simple a thing to say; but finally he did.

'I suppose there was one thing that started me writing.'

Ravenhill: 'Yes?'

I was nervous in that moment, but also rather titillated. I assumed – maybe hoped – that he was going to tell me something very personal now. Childhood abuse, beating his wife, methadone and rehab. Once before, when I was directing a strange, fable-like play, the writer had told me in the final week of rehearsals that he wrote the play because he'd hit his girlfriend – just once – and the fear of what he'd done had driven him to write this rather oblique work. It was a bit late, but it was useful to try to feed that private moment – without telling the actors – into the production of the play. And now I was expecting something similar.

'I suppose the thing that really started me writing the book was the murder of Jamie Bulger.'

It was the key I wanted. Not that concrete images or details of the murder of Jamie Bulger are in the novel. The narrative is entirely different. But it was an emotional starting point, a way in that was simpler than a debate about the values of the Enlightenment. The murder of Jamie Bulger.

And I could understand very easily why that particular event – beyond the bigger social or political events of the preceding decade, beyond the very personal events of one's own life – might push someone who'd never written a novel before or since to sit down and write. The murder of Jamie Bulger. It instantly made sense to me of the discussion we'd had about evil and about the novel's deep, corrosive sense that the three hundred-odd years of the Enlightenment might be drawing to a bitter close.

I remembered the feelings aroused by the Bulger murder instantly – the deep sense of sorrow, the ugliness, the pointlessness, the bleakness of it all. The feeling came back to me very strongly. But walking home from my meeting, I realized I remembered almost nothing of the facts. Where did the murder take place? Couldn't remember. How was Jamie murdered? Couldn't remember. Was it sexual in any way? Couldn't remember. How long ago was it? I could hazard a guess, – early 'nineties, I thought – but I really couldn't remember.

From my school history lessons I can still write out lists (probably now considered dubious) of the causes of the First World War. Or of the events leading to the Russian Revolution. Or the founding of the Common Market. Lists, dates, names. Of the Bulger murder – of details gone over and over again on the *Today* programme when I woke up, in *The Guardian* as I read my breakfast, on *Newsnight* as I went to bed – of all that I couldn't remember anything very concrete at all.

Is that what our modern media do to all events – turn them into sensations rather than facts or even narratives? No. I can remember, say, the events, the details of the miners' strike, the fall of Thatcher, 9/11, pretty clearly. But the Bulger murder is all feeling, little fact. A great welling-up of emotion – for what exactly? – an emotion that found its ersatz shadow a few years later in the mourning for the death of Diana.

A photo – or was it a moving video image – is stuck in my brain. That was the Bulger case wasn't it? Of two older boys reaching

down to a younger one to lead him away. In my memory they are in a shopping mall maybe somewhere in the North – and Jamie Bulger has blue eyes and floppy blond hair. Or maybe I'm making up the blue eyes and blond hair to make him All Good and them All Bad. But that image is all I have.

The day after my meeting I checked the bare details of the murder of James Bulger. James, nearly three, was led away from Bootle Shopping Centre by two ten-year-old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, in February 1993. Some time later, James was killed by the side of a railway: stoned, beaten, and kicked. There was some evidence of sexual molestation. The two older boys were tried at the end of that year, found guilty, and imprisoned.

It strikes me as I read these bare details that they are tellingly different from the Moors murders, when Myra Hindley and Ian Brady took their victims on a journey from the depressing suburbs of 'sixties Manchester out into the natural world of the moors – as if there were still something atavistic and dark in the natural world. But the journey of James Bulger was from the world of the consumer – if a rather tatty one (no glittering mall, the Bootle Shopping Centre) – back to the arteries of the Industrial Revolution, along a canal, across a roundabout, and finally to the railway. Hindley and Brady taped their victims; Thompson and Venables were watched by security cameras. Hindley and Brady were adults; Thompson and Venables children. Completely different worlds.

Hindley and Brady belong to the world of Joe Orton, where the net curtains conceal primal desires; of early Edward Bond, where never-had-it-so good Pam and Fred in *Saved* have lost their moral compass. They belong with Samuel Beckett's Krapp, cataloguing and hoarding his tapes.

And Thompson and Venables and James Bulger – what is the dramatic landscape that reflects their worlds? The shopping centre, the video camera, the child-killers. Surely these must have been at the centre – if only indirectly – of the drama of the 'nineties?

I go to bed that night and decide not to think about the Jamie Bulger case for a while.

I always have a suspicion about reading too much about murderers, serial killers, psychopaths. Whatever your motives for reading, there's always a part of you that feels like a tourist taking the Jack the Ripper walk around the East End before finishing off your day with a trip to the London Dungeon, and then it's back home in time to catch *America's Worst Car Crashes*.

It's a week after meeting the novelist that I realize something. A penny drops. I made my first attempt at writing a play shortly after the murder of James Bulger. And it was a very direct – too direct – attempt to write about the murder. In the play – a one-act play which I directed for a few performances at the pub theatre, the Man in the Moon – a young girl snatches a child from a shopping centre and murders it. The mother of the murdered child is driven to looping over and over the events of the day to try to work out if she was in any way culpable for the murder of her child. It wasn't a particularly good play – it was a pretty terrible play – but it was a play. The first thing I sat down and wrote and finished and put on. It was in the winter of 1993 that I took my first faltering step as a playwright. It was the time of the trial of Venables and Thompson.

And suddenly I see my own personal narrative very clearly, in a way that I never did before – not even as I was talking to the novelist and he was telling me that it was the James Bulger murder that made him write. How could I have never spotted before that I was someone who had never written a play until the murder of James Bulger? And it was the Bulger murder that prompted me to write? And that I've been writing ever since the murder. This now seems textbook-clear, and yet it had never struck me in nearly ten years.

This fascinates me. The way we often fail to spot even the most obvious links in our own narratives until way after the event. And presumably there are plenty that we miss altogether – stuff that's obvious to anyone else piecing together our story. And now here I was, almost ten years later, spotting a very obvious link: before the murder of James Bulger I was someone who thought

about writing, who liked the idea of writing, who always meant to get round to writing something – but who never actually wrote. And it was feeling the need to write about the murder – not the actual murder event, but the child who takes a child, the mother who loses a child – that finally made me sit down and write. And since I was dissatisfied with that piece, I had to keep on writing – circling around a prey that I couldn't quite identify. A prey that wasn't quite the murder of James Bulger but more like the feeling inside me – and the people around me – that the murder engendered.

I wonder if I was alone? I doubt it. I wonder how many other people there were who started to write with that picture of the boy led away somewhere in their head? This one terrible event somewhere in a shopping centre in Bootle suddenly making it necessary to write? I know there was me. I know there was the novelist. How many others? How many of the young British playwrights of the 'nineties – the so-called in-ye-face playwrights – were driven, consciously or unconsciously, by that moment?

It would be disingenuous not to include here another part of my personal narrative. In June 1993, between the murder of Bulger and the trial of Venables and Thompson, my boyfriend died of a whole host of infections and diseases related to AIDS. A lot of 1993 for me was visits to and from hospitals to hospices, brief spells when he was back in his flat and then some new infection that would send him back into hospital. The dying are shuttled around pretty mercilessly within our health-care system.

1993. I experienced lot of anxiety, a lot of tears, a fair bit of boredom. And then death: but not really one big death – I guess in life but not in the movies there are often lots of little deaths, wave after wave of them creeping up the shore, chipping away at the person you know, until finally the tide goes out and there's nothing there. Just a blank, flat expanse of sand. Desolation.

Maybe this is why I wasn't able to absorb many of the facts about the Bulger murder. The stress and anxiety and denial of following someone through their last few months

of life, the grief of the second half of the year. A lot of the events happening around me were a dream, let alone anything happening in the wider world. Maybe this is why Bulger's murder is more feeling than fact.

And maybe I wasn't alone in this. Maybe many people, most people, didn't absorb the facts but projected into that image of the boy being led away in a Bootle shopping centre lost babies, babies never conceived, the loss of their parents, the loss of their own innocent selves. Maybe any striking image will do: the murder of a child, the death of a princess – anything to draw out the pain of our own personal grief.

I'm sure this had some part to play in the nation's response to the murder. Certainly my own personal grief became intertwined with the story of James Bulger, and fuelled my writing.

But I also think there was a sort of public grief projected onto that case – grief and guilt for the decade that had passed. For the greed and neediness, the divisiveness, for the communities consigned to the underclass. For the anxieties about our homes, our low mortgage rates, our low taxes, that had meant in the previous two general elections a significant proportion of the population had operated on double-think: ticking the Conservative box in the polling booth and emerging only minutes later to tell the exit-pollsters that, yes, they had voted Labour. People who in the secrecy of the booth could only bring themselves to vote for their self-interest, but back in the outside air said – and probably wished, hoped – that they voted for the public good. And so there were not only personal griefs for the murder of James Bulger to draw out, but a national sense of grief as well.

1993. The ERM debacle. The end of the Tories' reputation for fiscal management – yes. That's what consigned the last Major government to its end. But my guess is that the Bulger murder also played its part – that somehow we all saw ourselves in that video image. Saw ourselves as we are in our dreams, as all the figures: both as Thompson and Venables, the killers, and as Bulger, the victim. Saw ourselves and felt: enough is enough, something has to change.

I think something fundamental happened in Britain the day James Bulger died. I'm sure everybody changed in their own way, but I think most of us changed.

I started writing. Maybe I'd just been too lazy before. But I never really felt that I had anything particular to offer to playwriting. Playwrights, I assumed, were supposed to have had plenty of hard, raw, lived experience to pour into their plays. I didn't feel I had that. Happy family life in Haywards Heath. Respectable clutch of O Levels. Sixth form. Respectable clutch of A Levels. Bristol University. Passable degree. I was from the lower-middle class: the tedious Pooterish land most despised – and most ignored – by British theatre writing. I hadn't the brilliant Oxbridge mind and wit of the Footlights folk, nor had I the 'authentic' experiences of the urban youth that every young writers' project in the country seemed to prize to the exclusion of anything else. I concluded glumly that if I was to write about my own background, it would come out as Alan Ayckbourn – and he was already doing that brilliantly, if unfashionably. So no need for me to write.

And anyway – it wasn't cool to be a writer. The figure of the playwright had taken a battering from all sides. Physical theatre, performance work, devised work – these seemed much the cooler options at the start of the 'nineties. To get into LeCoq, to learn some circus skills, were the things to do; DV8, Theatre de Complicite, Forced Entertainment, the people to aspire to be. The idea of sitting down to write a play seemed pretty redundant – and the new writing establishment were the well-meaning but rather faded guardians of the 'isms' of previous decades.

It seems strange looking back now – when new plays from young writers have been 'hip' for the last ten years – that in the early 'nineties playwrights were perceived second only to poets in their worthiness and dullness. But so it was.

A big change. Why?

I can see now that it was the murder of James Bulger – and I would guess the projection of my own grief for Tim into that murder – that pushed me into writing. Somehow

now I felt that the existing plays just weren't right, that they wouldn't *do* any more. Not so much that they weren't good – there were plenty of older writers whose work I admired. But somehow something had shifted, a tear in the fabric had happened, when Venables and Thompson took hold of Bulger's hand. It wasn't that I suddenly felt that I could write better than a previous generation. It was that I wanted, suddenly felt the need, to try to write differently, write within the fracture that happened to me – and I think to the society around me – in 1993.

And I would guess – having learnt that none of my experiences in life are unique – that this must be something that previous generations of writers have experienced. There's a kind of continuum of great plays that you love, that you wish you'd written, that you know you can never write – and then something happens, you hear that tear – and suddenly it seems necessary to write new plays, and find out later how good or bad they are.

Of course, I wasn't alone in starting my playwriting in those years post-1993, with Sarah Kane, Joe Penhall, Patrick Marber, Martin McDonagh – countless others – all emerging very quickly in a few short years. Wary of trends or fashions, I was dubious at the time about giving this phenomenon a label – or even acknowledging that there was a phenomenon. But now I can see that there was an extraordinary burst of energy and inventiveness from these playwrights – all under thirty – although I think it's the diversity of their voices that is more striking than the similarities: that what is impressive is that a series of unique, strong voices all emerged at the same time – not they can be linked as a movement or a school.

And now I'm wondering: how did these writers start writing? Did any of them also feel only they should or could write a play but didn't do it until 1993? Or maybe they were writing, but somehow had that voice in their head that told them this wasn't the real thing, it was phoney – and then something fell into place that year? Or maybe none of them would find the link that I spotted only years later in my own narrative and the

murder of James Bulger. Maybe none of them were prompted as I was. But something shifted: something propelled a group of young people – individually, without meeting, without a manifesto or a house magazine – all to start writing at the same time. And for their plays to have had as big an impact, maybe a bigger impact, than any generation of British playwrights in the last century. Plays that moved from studio theatres to main stages, from the West End to Broadway, that were played in translation throughout the world. It can't just be coincidence. And maybe my experience would link with theirs. Maybe the boy on the video camera pushed something in them. The tear in the fabric.

I don't know, because I'd never met any of these writers when I sat down to write my first play – at much the same time as they did.

I wanted a bit of help in trying to write a play that came close to this new feeling. I started to look around for any produced plays that seemed actually to exist in the same world as the video image of the child taken, the shopping centre, children as killers. I didn't find many. Of the British theatre writing that had gone before, the plays that came closest seemed to me to be Martin Crimp's: *Dealing with Claire* – a young female estate agent disappears during the selling of a house, and nobody seems to care much, focused as they are on the deal; *No One Sees the Video* – market researchers blanched of all morality; *Play with Repeats* – the events of the same day looped over and over again as if on a video. These were close to what I wanted to write. But the tone wasn't what I was after in my own writing – Crimp was chilly, cool. I wanted to find more rage and sorrow.

I looked beyond British playwrights. I read David Mamet, found in *Edmond* the randomness, brutality of the world I wanted to write about. And the Canadian playwright Brad Fraser's *Love and Human Remains* – queer flatmates drifting through low-paid jobs, casual sex, and drugs, amusing each other with urban myths, unaware, denying that in their midst is a serial killer. These plays came close to what I wanted to write.

But probably the closest thing I found was some North American fiction of the late

'eighties and early 'nineties: the bored, drifting, drug-addled neurotics depicted by Jay McInnery, Douglas Coupland, and Dennis Cooper, depicted with irony and a submerged sense of moral disgust – damaged kids, damaging each other, damaging themselves, at sea without any sense of history, of politics, of society. These American writers didn't write about the working class or the underclass, but about middle-class kids whose life had no meaning, with an overwhelming death wish. And the writing was stylish and funny. In this I found something that gave me a starting point for my own writing.

Piecing together the narrative now I see how much my first three plays were influenced by the murder of James Bulger. I could feel something of it at the time I was writing them – knew I was picking and picking away at the same scab, not knowing what it was, and worried that I was repeating myself.

In *Shopping and Fucking* fourteen-year-old Gary finds himself with the twenty-some-things Mark, Robbie, and Lulu, and a game – part storytelling, part sexual, part financial – plays itself out and out until Gary is murdered by anal penetration with a knife.

In *Faust is Dead* the teenager Donnie comes to a motel room and cuts and cuts himself until he dies, while an older teenager Pete and the French philosopher Alain video him. In *Handbag* the young junkie Phil and the low-paid nanny Lorraine snatch a baby from the home of Lorraine's middle-class lesbian employers. Unable to care for the baby, and not really understanding what he is doing, Phil burns the baby with cigarettes until it stops breathing.

Lulu in *Shopping and Fucking* watches a stabbing of a shopkeeper one night – only later to discover a man masturbating to the security-camera video of the attack. In *Handbag* Phil snatches a handbag from a woman in a shopping centre beneath the watching eyes of the cameras, and later Phil and Lorraine have to arrange the kidnapping of the baby beneath the eyes of the cameras that Mauretta and Lorraine have now installed inside their home to keep an eye on their nanny.

Nobody in these plays is fully adult. They are all needy, greedy, wounded, only fleet-

ingly able to connect with the world around them. Consumerism, late capitalism – whatever we call it – has created an environment of the infant ‘me’, where it is difficult to grow into the adult ‘us’.

Gary in *Shopping*, Donny in *Faust*, the baby in *Handbag*: they are the youngest characters in these plays; and each of them is led away by a pair – or in the case of *Shopping* a trio – of these adult-children. And each one of these young characters dies because of that.

Shops, videos, children killed by children. It wasn’t a project I set out to write. But it became one.

There is a father-figure in each of these plays – again not something I spotted until I later came to piece together a narrative. But none of these fathers offer much in the way of positive guidance. Brian in *Shopping and Fucking* offers the lesson ‘get the money first’. Alain in *Faust* offers only the cool games and chic despair of the postmodern philosopher. Cardew, who seeps into the modern world from Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest*, offers a parental devotion to lost boys that is fuelled by a suppressed paedophilia. Patriarchy is present, if not central, in the world of these plays – and it is not helping, often corrupting the adult-children who are the protagonists of the drama.

By the time I had finished writing *Handbag* I sensed that this set of obsessions needed to shift. I didn’t know why at the time. I just knew. This was autumn 1998. Five years after the death of James Bulger. Five years after the death of my boyfriend. A year into a New Labour government – and cracks already showing.

Again with the benefit of hindsight, this maybe explains why my next play, in 1999, *Some Explicit Polaroids*, was the hardest of all to write. Blocked and blocked for months, with the rehearsals and then opening night looming. The other plays had come pretty easily – they were all being drawn somehow from the same source. This one, again, had to come from somewhere. Five years on and I didn’t feel the need to pick any more at the image of the boy on the video screen being led away.

Not that *Polaroids* is a clean break with what went before. Tim, Victor, and Nadia,

the adult-children of *Polaroids*, are the mirror images of Mark, Robbie, and Lulu in *Shopping*. And *Polaroids* has Jonathan, the bad capitalist father, who is the upmarket twin of Brian in *Shopping*. But this cast are joined by two new characters – Nick and Helen – genuinely adult people, who can remember the political commitment of a lost age. And I think most importantly there’s no lost child, no little boy destroyed as Gary and Donny and the baby are. Instead, Tim dies of AIDS. The experience that had been personal to me, and had somehow found itself filtered through the feelings of the Bulger case, now stands simply, without the filter. Tim dies of AIDS. My writing has broken free of a pattern.

And in *Mother Clap’s Molly House* – set in the gay subculture of early eighteenth-century London – the two apprentice boys Martin and Thomas, watched over by the matriarch Mother Clap, are first married and then go through a mock-birth inside the molly house. Martin. Thomas. The baby. I guess the imprint of Venables, Thompson, and Bulger – the video picture – are still there. But it’s a game. The baby’s a doll. And Martin looks after it. And at the end of the play, leaving for the country, Mother Clap decides to leave the baby behind, the game finished.

Very few of us write with a game plan. We become obsessed with something – an image, a moment. We don’t know why. We’re not quite sure where they come from. But all we know is that they won’t go away. And so we have to write – not really sure whether it’s any good, not quite sure what it is we’re saying, but just compelled to write. The experience of writing my plays has felt nothing like the narrative that I’ve just put together. That narrative only came later – started to fall into place after that conversation with the author of *Hero* two years ago. It’s only really come into focus writing this.

Should a writer do this? Go back? Try to make sense? Make conscious what was unconscious? Isn’t this killing the golden goose? Maybe it is. But it’s something I can’t help doing. Going back. Spotting a narrative where there only seemed muddle at the time.

Last year, visiting a Polish theatre academy to talk to a group of students about my

plays, their professor told me that there was one overriding theme in my plays.

'Really?' I said, grateful for an academic elucidation of the muddled mind of the artist.

'Oh yes,' said the Polish professor, 'the great theme of your plays is the metaphysics of evil.'

There we go again. Evil. I shrink when I hear the word. Why? A sort of English primness? That it's just too *nasty* a word to call anyone?

Or maybe just a dramatist's sensibility that 'evil' is too generalized, too abstract an idea to turn into the concrete words and actions of the stage?

I tried to take on the professor: 'Look at the way my plays happen within a specific world of late capitalism. This is not a world of metaphysical absolutes.' But I could do little to change his mind. And – since his students were unfalteringly loyal to their 'master' (their word, not mine) – nor could I convince his students. The metaphysics of evil won the argument that afternoon. The author was unable to convince the reader of his reading of his own work.

Maybe there is evil in the plays. Evil that I didn't set out to dramatize. Evil that I don't see. Maybe there's always a nagging doubt in the back of even the most liberal mind that somewhere beyond poverty, somewhere beyond brutalization, somewhere beyond desensitization, maybe there was something like evil inside Venable and Thompson that was what led them to kill Bulger.

Certainly I've always written against moral relativism. I want audiences to make moral choices: to decide moment by moment – intellectually and emotionally – whether what the characters are doing and the choices they are making are right or wrong. I find this dramatic. It makes good theatre. A constant shift, dialectic, between empathy and judgement, sympathy and criticism, makes for a rich evening. To write against our ironic, easy-going times, where any hierarchy of values has melted away, to stage something that makes an audience say, 'That is wrong' – that is definitely something I've delighted in doing.

And it's certainly something that audiences find difficult – judgement. It's just not something we're supposed to do. They will sidle up to me and say, 'You know I'm not entirely sure – I'm sorry about this but I don't entirely agree – somehow I can't help feeling that maybe he shouldn't have bugged him with the knife.' And I say, 'No – I definitely don't think he should, or anyone should bugged anyone with a knife' – and then they smile and look very relieved. The permission to say, 'This is wrong' – without qualification – takes us a step closer to 'This is right.' And to change.

I'd like to include a couple of pages that come at the end of *The Cut*, something I'm working on at the moment. Stephen, a student and part of a new regime, is visiting his father Paul in prison. Paul was part of the old regime, and responsible for systematic torture.

PAUL No. Just look at me now. And would you say I'm evil?

STEPHEN I . . .

PAUL No. The heart. The gut. The soul. Listen. Listen. Listen to them now. And would you say . . . ?

STEPHEN Yes.

PAUL . . . that I'm evil?

STEPHEN Yes.

PAUL Ah.

STEPHEN Yes. There are systems of evil. There are acts of evil. There are people of evil. I say that there are all of these things. Yes. There is evil. And you are evil. You are it. You are my father and you are evil. That's what I say. Yes. Yes. Yes.

PAUL I see.

STEPHEN That's not a personal . . . please don't take that the wrong . . .

PAUL It's all right.

STEPHEN Please. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

PAUL No. Don't be. I bless you. Come here. Let me hold you.

STEPHEN No.

PAUL Please. Let me hold you so I can bless you for that.

Stephen moves to Paul. Paul holds him.

Bless you for that. Bless you for that. Bless you for that.

Stephen moves away.

You're honest. I'll give you that. We were never honest. Me. Your mother. The whole lot of us. We were never honest but you're . . .

STEPHEN I try.

PAUL So maybe that's better, yes? Maybe that's a bit better than before?

STEPHEN We like to think so.

PAUL Cold but honest. You are the future, my son.

STEPHEN And you . . .

PAUL And I'm . . . yeah, well you're right about me. What you say. I'm . . . yes I am. Totally. In act and, and, and, and . . . soul. Totally.

STEPHEN But if you just . . .

PAUL No.

STEPHEN There is forgiveness. That's what we . . .

PAUL No.

STEPHEN The Ministry has hearings. You'll be heard. I can arrange for you to be heard. If you say what you've just said to me, you acknowledge, you can . . .

PAUL No.

STEPHEN There is a way forward.

PAUL I don't want to . . . no. I want punishment.

STEPHEN There are no –

PAUL I want to be paraded and scourged and feel the blood in my eyes and see the blade before me. I want to know that everyone sees my rottenness and is ready to cut it out.

STEPHEN What? What?

PAUL I am the dirt that needs to be destroyed so you can be purified.

STEPHEN What? Where do you get the . . . ? No. No.

PAUL That's what I want.

STEPHEN That's so . . . old-fashioned.

PAUL Yes. Isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it?

STEPHEN That doesn't happen any more.

PAUL I know. I know. So. I'll sit it out. Lights on at five-thirty six days a week. Sunday indulgence. Sit it out till there's a new lot or this lot fall back on some of the old ways.

STEPHEN That isn't going to happen.

PAUL It always happens. Sooner or later. Sooner or later when the forgiveness is done there'll be scourging again and I'll be here. I'll be ready for it. It's what I deserve. I'm evil. It's what I deserve. The light's going to go. Any moment now that light's going to go blink and then there's going to be total blackness. So you had better piss off. Go on. Go on.

STEPHEN Dad.

PAUL You don't want to get stuck in the darkness. You go. There's a better world out there.

STEPHEN Goodbye.

A couple of weeks ago I bumped into the young producer who three years ago sent me the novel.

'Hi, Mark,' she said. And then straight away: 'I'm clean!'

'Well – that's good.'

'Yes, I'm totally clean, a totally drug-free zone.'

'Well, excellent.'

'It's just something I really felt I had to do, you know?'

'Sure, sure.'

I'd actually never noticed she was on anything in the first place – but, well, it was obviously very important to her.

'I'd still really like to get that film off the ground,' she said.

'Oh good, good,' I said.

'Well – good to see you.'

'Yeah. Good to see you too.'

And she was gone – off into the editing suites of Soho.

The film will probably never get made. But talking to that novelist one morning two years ago over a coffee in Camden made me realize more about my own writing than any single conversation in my life.

So no film. And on to the next play.