

Philip Ridley and Memory

Andrew Wyllie

Keywords Philip Ridley; Memory; Physicality/Aurality; Nostalgia; Sexuality; British Theatre

Abstract

Philip Ridley's nine plays written for an adult audience all share a concern with the role of memory and of remembering. Attempts to recuperate an authentic past by challenging an accepted, acceptable but inaccurate mythology of the past recur in the plays from The Pitchfork Disney through to Shivered. Failure to preserve the past is critiqued in some of the plays, while struggles to come to terms with the past are celebrated in others. In all the plays, the necessity of struggling to tell a story that serves to reconcile the present person with his or her past is celebrated; and the profound experience of tragic catharsis is often the object of that struggle, whether the outcome is achieved or not. In Vincent River, Mercury Fur and Leaves of Glass, the function of memory is presented in strongly contrasting ways that generate both an account of the necessity for personal and cultural memory to be retained and a critique of comforting untruths. The contrasting approaches to memory are underpinned by differing dramaturgical approaches in which either the vocal or the physical is privileged.

Philip Ridley's plays are united by a concern with memory to an extent that places the function of remembering at the centre of his output. From *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) to *Shivered* (2012), all of his nine plays written for an adult audience deal in various ways with the role of memory in achieving or losing an adult identity. For the most part, there is a reasonably clear division of the plays into two groups, each having a distinct approach to memory, and a distinct approach to the verbal as opposed to physical dramaturgy to underline the recovery or loss of memory. The first group comprises those plays in which commitment on the part of the main characters to a false memory of the past is critiqued – at least by implication. The second group is composed of plays in which a more or less successful struggle to recuperate an authentic account of the past takes place, and these plays celebrate

the beneficial impact of that recuperation. A theme that recurs in both groups is the interplay between both false and true memories of childhood and the reality of present adulthood. Both *The Pitchfork Disney* and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1993) present a critique on Ridley's part of the impact of commitment to a remembered past as a destructive denial of the present or of the possibility of living in the present, and this recrudesces in *Piranha Heights* (2008). A rather different approach to memory occurs in *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (1994), in which at least one of the principal characters achieves a recognition of the stultifying impact of a commitment to a falsely sentimentalized vision of the past. An attempt to achieve a similar recognition lies at the heart of *Leaves of Glass* (2006), though in this case the attempt is defeated as the comforting conformity of the vision held by the other characters triumphs and results in the destruction of insight and of the character struggling to achieve it. In *Mercury Fur* (2005) it is the absence of memory that lies at the heart of the play, which serves as a portrait of the fatal dangers of allowing cultural and personal memory to become obscured. *Tender Napalm* (2011) celebrates the possibilities of remembered myth to provide an antidote to the violence and materialism that otherwise risk nullifying the love between the two characters, while *Shivered* (2012) exposes the problems of relying on either technology or superstition as means of authenticating the past. The play in which memory is perhaps most wholeheartedly celebrated is *Vincent River* (2000), in which uncensored and unsentimentalized remembering provides a cathartic salvation for the characters.

Ken Urban identifies instances in each of Ridley's three major plays of the 1990s in which the characters exhibit a failure adequately to negotiate the past (Urban 2007). He goes on to make a compelling case for these instances to be regarded as representing broader failures in British cultural and political life: he suggests that the British as a nation exhibit an unhealthy obsession with the past. I want to try to trace a move away from this nostalgia sickness that Urban identifies to a more therapeutic engagement with the past that is visible in the plays from 2000 onwards (with the exception of *Mercury Fur*, which occupies a category of its own). In addition, I want to suggest that this shift towards a different kind of engagement with the past coincides with a move that Ridley has made away from being an exponent of in-*yer-face* theatre, and towards a theatrical style that I will provisionally term in-*yer-ears*. This style is one in which the attack dog of social realism, whose impact was memorably lamented by Aleks Sierz (Sierz 2008),¹ undergoes a productive coupling with a theatre capable of evoking fairly profound psychological realities and maybe even an approach to metaphysics. But the real significance of Ridley's in-*yer-ears* theatre is that the voicing of recollection on

stage enables memory to be recuperated in a way that is sometimes actually undermined by the physical re-enactment of the events being remembered. The physical action is often so very much in the present of the performance that it overwhelms the past that it seeks to evoke. Dialogue - or perhaps more especially monologue - is capable of evoking the past on stage in a way that eludes physical action. Those of the plays that offer a critique of failure to remember the past accurately tend to invite a more physical dramaturgy than those that offer a positive account of success in achieving memory of an authentic version of the past. (Indeed, there have been productions in which a perverse accentuation of physicality has sabotaged the natural engagement with memory offered by the text.) Thus I shall devote the major part of this article to a consideration of the way in which the presentation of memory as an element of the substance of Ridley's plays has changed in the 2000s. Ridley presents us, the reader/audience, with a style of dialogue which is unsettling, because it is uncannily familiar, and it is familiar because it is half-remembered. The playwright's ability to capture the quirks and nuances of speech patterns that many of us hear every day stirs memory to create a menacing awareness of our own threatened identities and hence identification with the situation on stage. With Ridley's work, this twitching of our memorial functions is often doubled: not only does his capacity to poeticize relatively banal speech patterns bring about a sense of knowing the situation, but also there is sometimes a double refractive effect, whereby his reader/audience is confronted with language that is both the everyday defamiliarized and also a defamiliarized echo of Harold Pinter's linguistic style.ⁱⁱ

The three plays that in my view most starkly deploy memory are *Vincent River*, *Mercury Fur* and *Leaves of Glass*, and I will examine the contrasting ways in which these plays dramatize memory, and the different political and personal outcomes that result. Before doing so, however, I want to consider briefly the role of memory in each of Ridley's other major plays in turn.

In *The Pitchfork Disney* a strange, sensuous encounter takes place between Presley and Haley, a practically housebound agoraphobic brother and sister, and Cosmo, a beautiful, menacing young man from outside. Fear dominates and destroys the lives of the siblings, and it may be that the encounter is one between them and the object of their fear, between private security and public danger, between repressed sexuality and the object of sexual desire. The role played by memory in the play is largely negative, as Presley seeks refuge in his remembered dreams and fantasies from a present sexual temptation and threat. Similarly, the fantasies shared by Presley and his sister Haley of a previous existence in which they were

protected by their parents and by an idealized version of family life serves as an escape-route from their ever having to confront the present. However, it is the role of memory in creating a refusal of sexuality which is central to the play. Haley has a long early speech in which she describes a dream that seems to be loaded with terrifying animalistic sexual imagery: '[D]ogs appeared. Seven of them. Big filthy dogs. With maggots in their fur. Foam on their lips. Eyes like clots of blood. One dog started to sniff me. Its nose was like an ice cube between my legs' (*Plays One*: 10). After this recitation, Haley retreats into drug-induced catatonia, and becomes a source of fascination for the invading Cosmo. Cosmo coats his finger with a narcotic syrup, and introduces it into the mouth of Haley, drawing it back and forth. Presley discovers him thus engaged, and fights him, breaking Cosmo's finger in a moment of excruciating, if slight, violence. The phallic imagery, and the rejection/breaking of the phallus seem inescapable here. What follows is the terrifying arrival of Cosmo's sidekick, the Pitchfork Cavalier. He does no physical harm to Presley or Haley, but Pitchfork's presence petrifies them. He is wearing 'a black leather bondage mask' (*Plays One*: 71), is apparently deformed and facially disfigured (according to Cosmo), and has a disturbing air of the uncanny about him as well as a strong suggestion of sexual fetishism. The play ends with Presley and Haley repeating softly to one another, 'I'm scared.' 'I'm scared.' 'I'm scared.' 'I'm scared.' Presley and Haley are for all time a lost boy and girl, whose dependence upon remembered dreams and recaptured nostalgia prevents them from confronting reality and adulthood or sexual maturity. In this case, their perception of the dangers of the external world is such that their retreat is understandable. However, their memories of the world have simultaneously enhanced the dangers of the present and the attractions of the past, causing them to lock themselves into a cycle of fantasy.

In the case of *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, the dangerous, vain, 30-year-old Cougar is terrified of growing old, and is staging his own 19th birthday party to provide a context for an attempt to seduce the 16-year-old (male) Foxtrot. He is thwarted in his attempted seduction by the combined efforts of 17-year-old Sherbet, Foxtrot's girlfriend, and Captain, an older man who is apparently in love with Cougar.ⁱⁱⁱ Cougar is locked in a determination to see himself as a desirable teenager, which precludes him from engaging with the reality of himself as a 30-year-old, and hence from love either of himself or of the self in the world. That is to say that Cougar's efforts to retain a hold on his inevitably lost boyhood lead him also to fail to lay claim to his adulthood. Cougar's remembered 19-year-old self has supplanted the reality of his actual self, locking him into a fragile fantasy, which is

continually threatened by a recurrent awareness of his real age. The displacement of this fantasy is agonizing for Cougar, and the trauma can only be alleviated by a double shift in memory. Confronted with the reality of the physical presence of Cheetah B, an 80-year-old woman, Cougar is reminded that his physical being is comparatively youthful and – in his own value-system – attractive. That process of being reminded of the benefits of his real age then enables him to recapture the memory of his 19-year-old self and thus to re-enter his fantasy. As with the lead characters of *The Pitchfork Disney*, dependence on memory – whether real or false – prevents Cougar from being able to confront the reality of his life. Memories of the past cause the reality of the present to be lost.

I want now to look at *Ghost from a Perfect Place* and loss of a different sort. Ken Urban sees the ending of *Ghost from a Perfect Place* as redemptive, exemplary of a process in which ‘the recognition of nostalgia can serve as a means of transforming it from a purely retrospective gesture into a prospective one.’ (Urban 2007: 326) On that basis the confrontation between the elderly East End gangster, Travis, and the young woman, Rio, becomes a confrontation between mythology and truth, in which the frailty of Travis’s self-mythologization is exposed; that exposure in turn enables Rio to unlock herself from the past and to begin to live in the present. First Rio performs a ritual in which she evokes the memory of her dead mother Donna, sexually coerced and perhaps raped by Travis, and now beatified as ‘the Saint of All the Damaged Girls Living in the Ruins’ (232). Under pressure – in that he is tied up and being tortured – Travis acknowledges the reality of his life, and both he and Rio are released from at least some of the grip of the past. By acknowledging what has really occurred in the past, they are liberated from the grip of nostalgia, and perhaps enabled to renegotiate or to grapple with the present. Rio’s grandmother Torchie, on the other hand, has arrived at a state such that she cannot afford to let loose her grip on nostalgia. The reality of her life is simply too unbearable to be acknowledged, and thus such redemption as is available in the play is quite limited in its compass. The redemptive nature of the ending of *Ghost from a Perfect Place* is therefore not a complete or only possible one, but does constitute a persuasive reading. Aleks Sierz quotes Matthew Lloyd, the director of the first production of the play, and Jenny Topper, the Artistic Director of the Hampstead Theatre, where the first production took place, regarding the violence in the play as being justified by the redemption available to some of the characters. Indeed, Lloyd is quoted using the terms ‘cathartic’ and ‘tragic’ of the play, which support this redemptive reading (Sierz 2001: 42).

The confrontation with a misremembered past, and the replacement of mythology with painful reality places memory at the heart of redemption in the play.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Wyllie 2009a), *Piranha Heights* (2008) deploys a revived Pinteresque hybridized with a style that arguably constitutes a revived in-*yer-face*. At the outset of the play, we see one of the characters, Alan, seeking to protect an internal domestic space from violation – in this case by his brother Terry in the first instance, but then by a series of increasingly violent, bizarre, and intimidating characters. The culmination of these is Garth, Alan’s own teenage son, who is evidently not merely violent but a full-blown psychopath. Even more telling is the transformation of the character Lilly. We first encounter her when she has been offered shelter by Terry, and she performs a bizarrely transparent masquerade as a refugee from the Middle East. Her invented memory of violence in the Middle East arguably enables her to overcome the traumatic impact of the reality of the oppression and violence to which she is subject in contemporary Britain. Together with her boyfriend Medic, she performs a ritual of parenthood involving a plastic doll. At the end of the play, however, she is seen wearing Terry and Alan’s mother’s clothes, apparently ready to play out her maternal fantasy as mother to these two men, her seniors by decades. And thus she replaces one role-play of motherhood with another. In each case the fictive remembering associated with role-play serves to submerge the reality of her life, to prevent the possibility of remembering the real. Alan and Terry, it would seem, are doomed to reprise an adult childhood that deadens their lives with lies. They are simultaneously a less screwed-up version of the boys of *Leaves of Glass*^{iv} and a less robust version of the ‘boys’ of Pinter’s *The Homecoming*. They struggle to reconcile their conflicting memories of their past, particularly as regards their lives with their mother. Failing to achieve reconciliation of memories which always operate to the disadvantage of one brother or the other, they take refuge in a joint fiction that subordinates all remembered truth or fiction to Lilly’s resurrection of the dead mother. I have reflected elsewhere (Wyllie 2009a) on the historical similarities between the late 1950s/early 1960s, the early 1990s, and the later 2000s. Each period has a sense of afterness about it – post-Suez, post-Thatcher, post-Blair. As a matter of fact, Ridley himself reflects on a resonance between *Leaves of Glass* and Tony Blair: ‘[the play has] two brothers arguing about what’s going to be the truth of the family and in the end one of them is completely destroyed by the stronger one who just keeps saying “No, that did not happen”’. But what Ridley goes on to say is ‘that had a resonance post-Blair who was a political leader who had lied consistently but thinks it’s okay because he has convinced himself to believe

it's true' (Sierz interview, *NTQ* 2009, P 115). One response to the world-weariness induced by the collapse of idealism may be a return to the staging of inwardness under threat, a return to the Pinteresque.

Tender Napalm is a two-hander, a young man and woman, and it is at heart a love story, but one which is expressible in verbal images that cannot escape the violence of the world in which this couple live. Apart from pauses and a couple of indications of singing, there are only three stage directions in the entire play. The first of these, near the beginning, briefly indicates that the woman reaches orgasm as a result of the man describing blowing her up with a grenade. The second equally briefly indicates the same but with the roles reversed. The third occurs towards the end of the play, and is quite a lengthy description of the two actors beginning tentatively to dance, then with increasing confidence and intimacy as they kiss while dancing. Visually, then, the play mainly relies on the simple presence of the two bodies on stage. The dialogue presents a sometimes disturbing counterpoint to that simple visual presence, most strikingly with the virtually identical speeches that occur three lines in from the beginning and five lines before the end. The first time, this is delivered by the man to the woman, the second time the other way around: both eroticize the process of pressing a bullet into the other's mouth. Again, the verbal is clearly privileged over the visual in this play – at least so far as any shock value is concerned. Thus I would maintain that *Tender Napalm* represents another instance of Ridley's move towards an in-yer-ears rather than an in-yer-face theatre. That said, the first production of the play was filled with action: the verbal descriptions of past actions were accompanied by mimes on stage in a process that served primarily to distract from the entire process of recollection. This was evidently a directorial decision that no doubt had its own rationale (and presumably received Ridley's blessing). However, the function of remembering the past is (paradoxically?) occluded in a production which insists on physically recreating actions from the past, thus forcing them to occupy an unsympathetic present. A future production might eschew some of the physical action and thus enable its audience to get a better sense of the significance of memory in the play as written on the page.

In *Shivered*, the responsibility for memory is to a large extent placed on the audience as opposed to the characters in the play. This is because of a complex partial reversal of the direction of time, with several of the early scenes set some two years later than some of the later ones. Ridley uses this temporal dislocation to provide shifting and unsettling perspectives on the events and personalities in the play. The audience then has the

responsibility to sift through the comforting or disturbing lies and truths that characters tell each other. The remembering and sifting process then creates an opportunity for the audience to evaluate not only where the truth might lie, but also to question the different kinds of damage or comfort that various versions of events can supply. Again, the truth can be seen as having the potential to be both therapeutic and damaging.

Vincent River, *Mercury Fur* and *Leaves of Glass* are the three plays in which memory is most crucial, but the necessity for remembering and its associated dangers are dramatized in very different ways. These three plays thus exemplify the range and power of Ridley's writing to an even greater extent than the other plays do. In *Vincent River*, the young man Davey recalls the murder of his lover Vincent in a long speech that perhaps goes some way towards achieving a kind of catharsis for Davey, and for Anita, Vincent's mother, and for us, the reader/audience. Davey's speech comes almost at the end of the play, and it is written with such vividness, such a power to evoke the physical reality of the murder being described, that it is shatteringly effective. The impact of this speech is experiential, to such an extent that it fulfils Aleks Sierz's definition of in-*yer-face*. But it is an elegiac recollection of the lost Vincent. That recollection, in which Davey vividly recounts the attack that resulted in Vincent's death, demands to be delivered without the distraction of physical movement on stage, and it is extraordinarily powerful delivered in stillness. Thus, this is a powerful example of the transformation of in-*yer-face* to in-*yer-ears*, perhaps a turning-point in Ridley's work as the aural is privileged over the physical. Davey's narrative is one of recuperation of an authentic past. This recuperative act serves to offer the possibility of redemption for himself and, for Anita, a parallel possibility of a therapeutic mourning. The role of (authentic) memory in this play is thus very different from the ways in which (false) memory is critiqued in the three plays from the 1990s. Indeed, Davey has had to seek Anita out in order to have the opportunity of remembering, while Anita has had to almost compel Davey to enter her flat so as to make possible the necessary act of story-telling. Each of them then struggles to overcome their need to hide behind comfortable but untrue stories. In Davey's case the untruth is that he had merely come upon Vincent's dead body while taking a short cut; Anita meanwhile initially tries to deny that her over-protectiveness had prevented Vincent from developing his talent as an artist. She also discloses the extent to which she had been in denial about Vincent's homosexuality. Because of the presence of each other they are both able to use stories first to conceal and then to disclose the truth. False memories are replaced by authentic ones, and so a potentially healthful truth is achieved. The process is of

course far from straightforward, and even involves a quasi-sexual episode between Davey and Anita. In order to achieve an authentic memory it becomes necessary for Davey to relive an encounter between himself and Vincent, but with Anita playing the role of Vincent. The process of capturing the past is at this point almost derailed by the physicality of the present. As Aleks Sierz says of this episode, ‘Desire always prefers the warm body to the cold memory’ (Sierz 2011, p 179). In this case, the physicality of the warm body sets the entire memorial process at risk. But re-creating sex is a necessary part of recuperating memory in this case. Ultimately, in *Vincent River* the act of remembering – apparently accurately and in detail – is purely redemptive. Davey’s memories of Vincent serve to recuperate Vincent as a gay man living a life which – whatever its limitations – is given a vividness and substance. The act of being remembered gives meaning to Vincent’s life itself, while the process of remembering enables Davey and Anita to come to terms both with the fact of Vincent’s death and arguably with the fact of each other’s existence.^v In both versions of the play the last spoken lines relate to Anita’s mother, and Anita then smashes her mother’s cup, the symbol of remembered values that had condemned her as an unmarried mother in the 1960s and then had condemned Vincent as a gay man in the late 1990s. The smashing of the cup enables the personal memories that Davey and Anita have of Vincent to overcome the cultural memory that condemns him. This is an important symbolic liberation from the deforming impact of a past that would impose respectability on the individual and cast out those who refuse the norm. Anita is enabled to recuperate the memory of the hurt imposed on her by her pariah status, and to connect that hurt to the homophobia that led to Vincent’s murder.

Turning now to *Mercury Fur*, this is a strange account of a dystopic future in which all morality has become subordinate to the gratification provided by psychotropic ‘butterflies’. The impact of these butterflies is to erode memory and morality such that the main characters of the play have no qualms about providing both a venue and a young boy to furnish the fantasy of a wealthy man determined to act out a paedophilic snuff movie. Following the accidental death of the young boy, his role is transferred to one of the conspirators in a grimly farcical manoeuvre. All turns out comparatively well when the customer is shot, and the rest of the characters get caught up in a bombing raid. The audience may experience a mordant humour, even perhaps a kind of grim moral satisfaction, at this outcome. I think that Ridley is here depicting a dystopia that plays upon the fears of those who are pessimistic about humanity in general. With *Mercury Fur*, however, violent fantasies beget violence in a manner whose balance is reminiscent of a moral tale. There is a satirical element to this that

distances the violence from the audience. Ridley's own view of this is that the play operates in an amoral vacuum caused by the destruction of memory, and makes an analogy with the destruction of cultural memory that took place with the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad under the eyes of USA forces but without their intervention. If Iraqi cultural memory can be destroyed, the argument goes, then a vacuum is left behind, an available space for the ideology of consumerism to fill. Only by retaining a sense of history can an individual or a culture exercise moral judgement or even self-preservation. As Ridley puts it, 'Storytelling is our morality'.^{vi} Story-telling, then, is in this case the act of remembering, potentially enabling the self or a culture or an ethical sensibility to survive. Of course, an alternative function of storytelling is precisely to hide from the reality necessary for moral survival. The psychotropic butterflies of *Mercury Fur* perform a similar ground-clearing function to that of the cultural destruction in Iraq in the minds of their users, the destruction of moral awareness enabling the nihilism of self-gratification to rush in to fill the void. Thus, it is the failure to tell stories and hence the failure to capture cultural memory that serves as the central ethical motif of the play.

The subject-matter of the play, in Ridley's account, caused unease or even outrage among both critics and his publishers, while its style has more of an in-yer-face quality than any of Ridley's other plays of the 2000s. In her article 'Intolerable Acts', Anna Harpin reflects on the visual aspects of the play and how it 'harnesse[s] a distinctly theatrical gaze in order to make luminous the ethics of looking'.^{vii} Discussing the original production of the play, Harpin goes on to observe: 'its heightened visual register means that *Mercury Fur* both absorbs and alienates in order to disturb the intellectual traffic between seeing and acting. This is not trauma by proxy, but it is an attempt to make an other's experiences collectively sentient.' Indeed, given the significance of the erasure of moral memory in the play, and the rather Tarantinoesque treatment of violence, *Mercury Fur* does have a distinctly alienating quality. The cover of the 2005 Methuen edition of the play shows a pretty pubescent boy dressed in a gold lamé suit standing in front of a butcher's window display of dismembered animal parts, thus vividly making the parallel with the treatment of the Party Piece boy in the play as exactly a piece of meat. The fact that the suit is too large for its wearer also evokes an image of children's dressing-up. Thus memories of childhood become transformed into distressing fantasies. Following the premature death of the boy who is the intended victim of the snuff movie, the following exchange takes place:

Party Guest: What? What, for fuck's sake?

Spinx: Corpses can be fun!

Party Guest: Corpse-? You mean... Jesus! Fuck!

Spinx: He's still warm!

Party Guest: Warm! I don't want him just *warm*! I want him *moving*! (109)

The play also, in my view, privileges the visual, and by so doing asserts itself as a return to the more in-*yer-face* style of Ridley's 1990s plays. Additionally, unlike *Vincent River*, the past in *Mercury Fur* is present in its absence, and thus cannot be staged so as to provide any kind of redemptive outcome. To take a rather extreme view, *Mercury Fur* may stand as an example of the relative incapacity of legacy in-*yer-face* plays to engage with the realities of the 2000s. Again, the privileging of the visual over the aural in this play has its significance in terms of the position taken by the play as regards memory. *Mercury Fur* has at its heart an awareness of the dangers associated with memory loss, and it uses physicality as an experienced present that helps the audience to share the loss of awareness of the past. Perhaps this shared awareness is heightened by the fact that the play is set in a dystopic future, so that the past that has been erased from the collective memory of the characters might be the present of a given audience.

A rather different facet of Ridley's work is displayed in *Leaves of Glass* (2007), and the destructive capacity of false memory lies at the heart of the play. Brothers Steven (aged 27) and Barry (aged 22) wrestle with the ghosts of past betrayal and Pandaric paedophilia, as it eventually becomes clear that Steven, as a 15-year-old, had prostituted his then 10-year-old brother to a man who may or may not have also sexually preyed on their father as a boy. But the central theme of the play is the damage done to the individual by hypocrisy: in this case, the hypocrisy takes the form of the refusal of this 'respectable' family to confront the truth. The play stands apart from most of Ridley's other work in its refusal of heightened^{viii} or absurdist theatricality. If anything it has thematic and formal echoes of Kevin Elyot's *Mouth to Mouth* (2001). The interplay of past predatory seduction, of psychological damage and of covering up the truth thus puts *Leaves of Glass* more into Elyot's sphere than the Pinteresque, and is some distance from in-*yer-face*. Barry attempts to recover past events – to disinter an authentic account of his past suffering in order that he can get beyond it. Doing this, though, would then force Steven, the older brother, to acknowledge his own past cruelty and the moral abyss that lies below the respectability of family life – and which extends from the past

into the present of the play. Steven cannot allow this to happen, of course, and so he instead seeks to destroy Barry once and for all – startlingly dramatized in the line, ‘You know what I think you need, brov? A drink.’ This to his alcoholic-in-remission brother, which has consistently proved a starkly shocking line in performance. Again, as with *Vincent River*, it is the verbal rather than the visual that achieves the play’s most impactful moment. It is also the defeat of truth that lies at the heart of this play. This lies in the recognition that Barry’s need to unearth the truth of his past will be defeated by the inability of the rest of the family to confront the reality of the past. Instead, they will continue with a performance of family life that is not only fundamentally dishonest, but also serves as a means of perpetuating the damage that they do to themselves and others. Barry’s attempts to bring to the surface a true memory of the past threaten his family with having to come to terms with the truth of both their past and their present reality. This they cannot contemplate, and thus the therapeutic potential of the act of remembering is defeated. In this case, the culturally acceptable but false and oppressive memory triumphs over a true memory with its possibility of liberation. Barry can be seen almost as a Messiah figure, whose discomfiting honesty leads to his moral crucifixion.

Be that as it may, Ridley’s hybrid style of the 2000s ranges across in-yer-face and Pinterian tragi-comedy while displaying a powerful lyric voice that aurally grabs the audience – an in-yer-ears style that he uses to dramatize confrontations and negotiations with a traumatic past. If cultural memory is under threat because of a range of factors from new media to the new right, then Ridley’s hybridity perhaps demonstrates the necessity for us to recuperate the past and to face unpalatable truths about ourselves. Ken Urban’s characterization of Ridley’s 1990s plays as dramatizing a nostalgia sickness is replaced in the plays of the 2000s with a dramatization of the need to recapture the past as therapy for a sick present. However, that dramatization has two distinct facets. Those plays in which the emphasis is on a struggle to recuperate the past tend to place a significant reliance on the voice to recapture the past. Vocal struggles are so central to those of Ridley’s characters who try to regain an authentic version of history that they achieve a status compatible with tragic catharsis. When the dramaturgical emphasis is placed more on the visual, the engagement with the past is made more detached, as the past becomes subsumed within the dramatic present. Stage action serves as a means of conveying regret for a lost connection with the past. The voice celebrates the struggle to recover memory in Ridley’s plays, while the physical accentuates its loss.

References

- Harpin, Anna (2011), 'Intolerable acts', *Performance Research* 16: 1, 102-11.
- Middeke, Martin, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (eds.) (2011), *The Methuen Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, London: Methuen.
- Rebellato, Dan (2011), 'Philip Ridley', in Martin Middeke et al (eds.).
- Ridley, Philip (1997), *The Pitchfork Disney*, in *Plays One*, London: Methuen.
- (1997), *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, in *Plays One*, London: Methuen.
- (1997), *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, in *Plays One*, London: Methuen.
- (2000), *Vincent River*, London: Faber.
- (2002), *The Fastest Clock in the Universe (Revised Version)*, in *Plays One*, London: Faber.
- (2005), *Mercury Fur*, London: Methuen.
- (2007), *Leaves of Glass*, London: Methuen.
- (2008), *Piranha Heights*, London: Methuen.
- (2009), *Vincent River (Revised Version)*, in *Plays Two*, London: Methuen.
- (2010), *Moonfleece*, London: Methuen.
- (2011), *Tender Napalm*, London: Methuen.
- (2012), *Shivered*, London: Methuen.
- (2009), interviewed by Aleks Sierz, 'Putting a new lens on the world: the art of theatrical alchemy', *NTQ*, Vol. 25, Issue 98, 109-117.
- Sierz, Alex (2001), *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. London: Faber.
- (2008), 'Reality sucks: the slump in new British writing', *PAJ* 89 (Vol 30, number 2) 102-7.

——(2011), *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, London: Methuen.

Urban, Ken (2007), ‘Ghosts from an imperfect place: Philip Ridley’s nostalgia’, *Modern Drama*, 50: 3, 325-45.

Wyllie, Andrew (2009a), ‘The politics of violence after In-Yer-Face: Harold Pinter and Philip Ridley’, in Craig N. Owens (ed.), *Pinter Etc.*, Newcastle on Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.

—— (2009b), *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre*, Bristol: Intellect.

Andrew Wyllie is Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of the West of England. He has a number of publications to his name, including *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009) and is currently working on *A Guide to the Essential Criticism of the Plays of Harold Pinter* for Palgrave MacMillan. He is co-editor of *Studies in Theatre and Performance*.

Email: Andrew.Wyllie@uwe.ac.uk

ⁱ Sierz makes the point thus: ‘the hegemony of social realism and naturalism is... a cultural mindset that only works by excluding, by marginalizing, by belittling any theatre that doesn’t obey the right dress code. Like an attack dog, it needs victims’ (2008: 102).

ⁱⁱ For a more substantial discussion of the parallels between Pinter and Ridley, see my ‘The politics of violence after In-Yer-Face: Harold Pinter and Philip Ridley’ and also some short commentary on the plays in *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The extent to which Cougar’s attempt is unsuccessful changes from total in the version of the play printed in the Methuen 1997 edition of *Plays One* to partial in the Faber 2002 edition, one of a number of substantial changes between the two versions.

^{iv} Dan Rebellato notes the ‘perhaps autobiographically inspired... focus on brotherly relationships’ in these plays.

^v The extent to which this last point holds good is subject to which version of the play is considered. In the earlier version, the ending probably involves Davey leaving Anita’s flat, whereas in the later version he probably stays. (This is dependent on quite a small but significant difference in the final stage directions.) Thus there is a potentially important difference in the extent to which Davey and Anita are able to come to terms with one another.

^{vi} Ridley interviewed by Aleks Sierz, ‘Putting a new lens on the world: the art of theatrical alchemy’.

^{vii} Anna Harpin, ‘Intolerable acts’.

^{viii} Although there is some quietly effective deployment of symbolism in the play.