Bloody Boots in St Ann's Square: Review of Rona Munro's *Scuttlers*

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Rona Munro, *Scuttlers*
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Scuttlers, a new play by Rona Munro, is set in Ancoats, Manchester in 1885, and is concerned with the rivalry between two street-fighting gangs (the 'scuttlers' of the title): the Prussia Street gang and the Bengal Street Tigers. The theatre programme features a note by historian Dr Andrew Davies of Liverpool University, making clear that the research for this production is indebted to his 2009 book, *The Gangs of Manchester*. Hence, the theatregoer might be forgiven for expecting a stage version of the gangland and policing dramas with period settings that have been popular in recent years, from *Copper* (BBC America, 2012-13) to *Ripper Street* (BBC and Amazon, 2012-15) and *Peaky Blinders* (BBC 2013–), and even dating back as far as Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York* (2002). In fact, the police barely feature in *Scuttlers*. The play is concerned with teenage gang members and the returning soldier Joe, something of an elder statesman at "about twenty" (Munro 2015: 14). The characters are discovering their identities and a sense of belonging through gang rituals and against the backdrop of the oppressive noise and exhausting labour of the cotton mills where they are employed. As such, as I will contend in this review, this production negotiates between past and present in ways which only occasionally produce neo-Victorian effects.

The playwright Rona Munro states in her 'Author's Note' to the published script that the play was "written in response to the street riots of 2011" (Munro 2015: 5). One difficulty with the Royal Exchange production is that the correspondences to the 2011 riots seem to have mostly retreated a

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long way beneath the surface, making the performance difficult to interpret for those who do not know, in advance, which periods and sets of reference points the play is attempting to straddle. A classic neo-Victorian theatrical trope, for example, would be to have two time schemes, one Victorian and one modern, with the actors playing different characters in each, and action alternating between the two periods. By contrast, in the Manchester production of *Scuttlers*, we remain almost entirely immersed in the 1880s, despite the show's advertising.

For example, the poster for the production features actors Tachia Newall (Joe), David Judge (Thomas) and Rona Morison (Theresa) in modern street clothes inflected with elements of Victoriana: a bowler hat, antique belts and a brooch, a check suit jacket, and fingerless gloves. Yet the costume in the production itself was much more conventionally 'period'. I struggled to find specific references to the 2011 riots in the production; admittedly, this may bespeak my own ignorance, and a local audience may have picked up more subtleties. The makeover of the Royal Exchange tried to reinforce the connection with contemporary gang and street culture, a culture dominated by the tropes of American hip-hop. The theatre's clear glass panels had been covered with modern graffiti tags which referenced the chalk markings of the gangs of Victorian Manchester, and, on the outside of the auditorium, there was an exhibition of five murals by graffiti artists, featuring references to Prussia Street and the Bengal Street Tigers. The connections seemed palpable when I was in the theatre building, but upon reflection, I was not convinced that street murals and graffiti tags had any more than a generalised link to the riots and looting that took place in English cities in summer 2011. Graffiti, gang signs and turf wars are, after all, hardly unique to the current generation of so-called 'millennials', and it perhaps projects a false cogency onto the 2011 riots to cast them as performances of identity by rival neighbourhood gangs.[1]

By contrast, the echoes of classic gangster movies in the play came across loud and clear; for example, there was the familiar situation of the gangster boss (Sean) whose leadership is challenged by his lieutenant (Jimmy) but who fails to kill his rival, setting in train events that will lead to both their arrests; there is the kid who appears out of nowhere, Thomas Clayton, determined that everyone will one day know his name; the soldier (Joe) who thought he'd put his gangland past behind him; and the cute gang 'mascot' (Polly), who turns viciously on her confederates. As is perhaps

inevitable with a large-cast production featuring a community ensemble for the crowd scenes, the characters are boldly and simply drawn. We have the queen bee figure, Theresa (a powerful performance from Rona Morison, who three years ago was an equally uncompromising presence as Ellean in Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* [1893] at the Rose Theatre, Kingston); the innocent Margaret, the tomboy, Polly, and the working single mother, Susan. Still, it has to be said that it is an advance to have a range of female characters featured in a gangland drama at all, instead of a single role for the gangster's moll. Youth theatres and school and college drama courses, where female students almost always outnumber males, will find such a text particularly attractive to use.

I suspect that during the writing process, Munro has rather fallen in love with her historical material, and this has complicated the Royal Exchange Theatre's agenda in asserting the show's relevance to contemporary youth. Munro has ended up paying more attention to the 'Victorian', rather than the 'neo-', side of the equation. The end of the 'Author's Note', while nodding towards the likelihood of school and youth theatre productions of the play, asks that the characters' words not be censored, as "these were real lives, they deserve a real voice" (Munro 2015: 5). A statement like this hints at the kinds of ethical knots that writers of verbatim and documentary theatre can tie themselves in. They, too, often tend to assert the reality and truth of something that has been comprehensively edited and shaped with the rhythms of drama in mind. Hence, the play lacks the self-reflexive quality that distinguishes the neo-Victorian, and does not engage with the historical record of the 2011 riots to anything like the same degree as it does with the material in Davies' book.

Munro is evidently fascinated by Manchester's industrial past and the harsh conditions under which the working classes survived and scraped a living. Indeed, *Scuttlers* can be read as a companion piece to Munro's earlier collaboration with the Royal Exchange Theatre, a fast-paced adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), staged in 2006. That production's tag-line, "A decent life may kill us all", could just as well apply to the disaffected teenage mill hands of *Scuttlers*, determined to avoid the fate of their parents. Munro writes in the 'Foreword' of the published play text of *Mary Barton* that she wanted to give the industrial working classes of the 1840s "their voice on stage", to make them no longer "[i]nvisible to history" (Munro 2006: v). Indeed, reading across the two

plays, one might discern in Munro's Mary Barton, in her studied coldness towards Jem Wilson – an affected coldness, born of a reluctance to raise a family in conditions of poverty and squalor – premonitions of the teenage girls of the Bengal Street Tigers, and their desperate, furious rejection of the roles they feel themselves being forced into by cultural and financial obligations. Theresa, who had been left to raise four sickly younger sisters on her own, insists on calling the shots and arguing street-fighting tactics with the "king of the street", Sean (Munro 2015: 35); Polly (an unsettling, intense performance from Chloe Harris) claims the social privileges of a prepubescent boy until, at the play's climax, she is brutally forced into a dishevelled parody of feminine dress; and Susan, perhaps the most Mary Barton-esque of all, resists marriage to an unreliable man and embraces her work at the Ancoats Dispensary. (Like Mary, she comes to regret her self-protective hardheartedness, but unlike Mary, Susan's regrets come too late to save her lover's life.) In this respect, the play does work in terms of a neo-Victorian agenda of recovering working class voices and women's voices that continue to resonate in the present.

The play's references to the Ancoats Dispensary were another way in which the Royal Exchange production of *Scuttlers* sought to bring local history into the contemporary moment. The Dispensary, built in 1872 to provide medical assistance to industrial workers and their families, features in the theatre programme for *Scuttlers* since, having closed in 1989, the Dispensary had become derelict. A plan to turn the building into a community and creative hub was seeking matching funding at the time of the play's run, funding which now happily, according to the website, has been achieved (Anon 2015: n.p.). Again, if we take initiatives like this into account, the production can be seen as working to a neo-Victorian agenda, even if it does not embrace neo-Victorianism at the level of costume and narrative structure.

Scuttlers should also be understood in the context of a successful immersive theatre production by theatre company ANU in 2014, called *Angel Meadow*, which was "[i]nspired by the 19th century experience of Irish migrants escaping poverty for a better life in industrial Manchester" (Anon 2014: n.p.). In that production, audience members moved "through a building layered with the various lives of people who passed through its doors; lodgers in a night asylum, working men in a pub, dead bodies laid out for an inquest and scuttling gangs fighting for their territory" (Anon 2014:

n.p.). The fact that *Angel Meadow*'s promenade performances took place in a building in Ancoats itself, rather than the elegant, prosperous surroundings of St Ann's Square, where the Royal Exchange Theatre is situated – and hence the impossibility of *Scuttlers* being site-specific in the same way – helps explain why director Wils Wilson and designer Fly Davis opted for a stripped-down stage design for *Scuttlers* with a handful of simple but powerful effects, such as the huge ascending loom, being looped with threads of cotton by the cast at the start of the show, or the synchronised stamping of clogs, or the rainfall in the aftermath of the play's climactic act of violence. Bringing Manchester's poor and dispossessed onto the floor of this Victorian cotton exchange building is seen as a necessary act by Munro: "Some [of the characters in *Mary Barton*] would probably not have made it past the door, but they're all centre stage now" (Munro 2006: vi).

The fact that *Scuttlers*'s final moments take place in a theatre, rather than on the streets of Ancoats, makes for a productive dissonance that I would also characterise as neo-Victorian, since it forces the audience to think about staging and theatrical representation – to see the 'machinery' of a theatre production as its non-naturalistic effects are brought to the fore – precisely at the point of the play's most direct emotional appeal. Polly, who has turned police informer and laid a trap for the killer Thomas to walk into, repeatedly calls him a "nobody" until he incriminates himself: "I'm Thomas Clayton and you'll all remember what I did" (Munro 2015: 82). She is later shown trying to protect Joe's blood on the pavement as people walk past, oblivious to what has taken place earlier. With the action onstage split between the prison cell, containing Thomas, Sean and Jimmy, and the street, the focus keeps switching back to Polly's repeated injunction, "Don't walk there. A man died there. That's a man's blood" (Munro 2015: 85). In a production choice which is not referenced in the published playscript, rather than the noises of restarted mills growing louder and faster (as the script states), Denis Jones's affecting, melancholic twenty-first-century music is accompanied by a gradual replacement of the Victorian passers-by by figures in modern dress, heads bent over their phones, negotiating the rain-sodden streets of Manchester today. The sequence, asserting the persistence of a 'there' that is not really 'here', in a sense should not have worked, and indeed some were bemused by it. David Chadderton in his *British Theatre Guide* review confessed, "I didn't really understand the significance of the rain or the switch to modern dress at the end, as impressive as they are", and

he regarded the music as "anachronistic" (Chadderton 2015: n.p.). Hence, it seemed as if this bridging between the 1880s and the 2010s was not a consistent enough motif.

However, I was in agreement with Natalie Anglesey of the *Manchester Evening News*, and *Exeunt Magazine* reviewer John Murphy, who both saw this as one of the play's "moments of real potency" (Murphy 2015: n.p.). I found the closing moments profoundly moving, perhaps because it made our modern condition plaintively explicit: that, however hard we might try to dull our senses with technology as we navigate the streets, all our cities are palimpsests, built on violence and suffering, the human traces of which have long been erased. This point could be broadened to take account of the Royal Exchange building itself, raised and extended by the cotton trade, which is, in turn, part of the history of the slave trade. Taking this long view, it could be said that Polly's warning extends to all of us: we all have some blood on our boots.

In this production, then, Polly is effectively turned into a ghost, haunting this circle of ground, by the final sequence's accelerated journey back to the future. The implication is that we, who have experienced the play, are now able to hear this "real voice" (Munro 2015: 5) from the past in a way that those who have not, cannot. In Munro's *Mary Barton* adaptation, the ghost of Mary's younger brother Tom, whose funeral is being attended in the play's first scene, is seen at various points, playing with his wooden horse. He appears not only to his father John, but to Carson, the mill owner, too. To these characters, in the 1840s and 1880s, grief and loss are very palpable, it seems, but we remain insulated from such raw proximity to death, unable to perceive the ghosts in our midst. Despite the implicit humanism of this beautiful ending, then, there is a contrary sense in which our knowledge of these historical ghosts, these blood stains, suggests that we in the audience are now primed with a superior sensibility. And indeed, on leaving the theatre and joining the crowds on the street, it is very hard not to look at fellow-pedestrians differently, as prosperous, oblivious products of a (comparatively) affluent society. Perhaps, after all, we do not need explicit references to the 2011 riots to feel the connection between past and present in a new way. We are armed now, we theatrical witnesses, with neo-Victorian double-vision, an imaginary historical perspicacity that is quickening and alienating in equal measure.

Notes

1. See, for example, Helen Clifton and Eric Allison's dissection of the Manchester and Salford riots in *The Guardian* (Clifton and Allison, 2011: n.p.).

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