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## **The Royal Court in the Wake of #MeToo**

Dr Sarah Jane Mullan & Dr Catriona Fallow

Following the public revelations in October 2017 concerning Harvey Weinstein's sexual harassment and assault of a number of women in Hollywood, in the UK it was London's theatrical scene where revelations, accusations, debate, and attendant action concerning sexual impropriety and abuses of power proliferated. One of the most protracted and widely reported cases were the accusations levelled at Max Stafford-Clark, the longest serving Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre (1979-1993). Against the backdrop of the global #MeToo campaign, the Royal Court has been at the forefront of cultivating public and performative responses to both Stafford-Clark's actions and sexual harassment in the theatre industry more broadly. This chapter reads theatrical institutions – their policy, programming and histories – as valuable, material sites where questions of power play out ideologically and artistically. Beginning with a brief overview of the seismic changes across London's theatres post-Weinstein, this chapter analyses *No Grey Area: Your Stories Heard*, the revival of Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, and Anthony Neilson's *The Prudes* as key moments in the Royal Court's public and performative responses between October 2017 and April 2018, led by current Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone.

### **'The Weinstein of British Theatre': London, October-November 2017**

On November 7 2017, Artistic Director of Actors Touring Company (ATC) Ramin Gray, claimed that "the search for who is the Weinstein of British theatre is an honourable search."<sup>1</sup> While Gray himself was also accused of sexual harassment later in November, his comment drew an explicit connection between the ongoing disclosures of Weinstein's sexual misconduct and the emerging revelations of abuses of power within London's theatrical landscape that had begun to emerge a month prior.<sup>2</sup> On October 5 2017 an investigation by the *New York Times* newspaper revealed that film producer Weinstein had been accused of sexually harassing women working in the entertainment industry. In the days following the article's publication, as further women disclosed the harassment that they had been subjected to by the producer, Weinstein made a public apology for causing "a lot of pain" whilst still refuting the allegations.<sup>3</sup> A number of high-profile actors, including Meryl Streep and Judi Dench, expressed condemnation but also surprise at learning the

news of Weinstein's alleged actions, while others in the industry alluded to Weinstein's behaviour as a well-known "open-secret."<sup>4</sup>

In London, on October 17 the Royal Court publicized a day of action in response to the Weinstein revelations, *No Grey Area*, which would take place on October 28 and include a series of industry focused town hall meetings "where the verbal code of conduct already practiced by the Royal Court can be communicated to the wider community."<sup>5</sup> Shortly after this announcement, on October 20, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that former Royal Court Artistic Director Stafford-Clark had been asked to leave his current company, Out of Joint, following allegations of sexual misconduct by co-workers.<sup>6</sup> Stafford-Clark responded to these claims citing a stroke in 2006 as the reason for "displaying disinhibited and compulsive behaviour and his usual (at times provocative) behaviour being magnified."<sup>7</sup> Given that Out of Joint had previously claimed that Stafford-Clark had chosen to leave the company in order to "focus on his international freelance career," the revelation that he had been ousted transposed the issue of status negating accountability, which the #MeToo movement seeks to address, directly onto London's theatrical scene.<sup>8</sup> Precipitated by the allegations against Stafford-Clark, major theatrical institutions and organizations including the Royal National Theatre, The Old Vic, and the Society of London Theatres produced a co-signed statement pronouncing that there is "no room for sexual harassment in our industry."<sup>9</sup> On October 26, actress Tracey Ann Oberman claimed that Stafford-Clark had sexually harassed her in 1992, the penultimate year of his tenure at the Royal Court, resulting in a timeline that made the connections between the former Artistic Director's inappropriate behaviour and the Court more overt.

Concurrently, another of London's significant theatrical institutions was also responding to claims of sexual misconduct by a former Artistic Director. On October 29, Kevin Spacey, who served as the Artistic Director of The Old Vic Theatre in London from 1995-2013, was accused of sexually assaulting actor Antony Rapp. On October 30, Featherstone appeared on the BBC Radio 4 show *Today* to discuss *No Grey Area*, which had taken place the day prior to the publication of Rapp's accusation. Featherstone described the Weinstein revelations as having "opened the floodgates," and acknowledged her awareness of systemic misconduct in the theatrical sphere stating, "many people in the theatre and in the creative industries have been aware of many stories of many people over

a lot of years, and Kevin Spacey would be one.”<sup>10</sup> Featherstone has since revealed in interviews reflecting on the Court’s response to #MeToo that Spacey’s “name had come up a lot at the day of action.”<sup>11</sup>

On October 31, The Old Vic expressed their dismay at the allegations made against Spacey, affirming that “inappropriate behaviour by anyone working at The Old Vic is completely unacceptable” and announcing that the theatre had set up a confidential reporting process.<sup>12</sup> Although the theatre’s press release directly references Spacey, it does not infer that the claims need necessarily relate to sexual misconduct. Such ambiguity offers a striking counterpoint to the Court’s – and Featherstone’s in particular – explicit engagement with the issue of sexual harassment. On November 2, the *Guardian* reported claims made by former Old Vic employees that Spacey’s sexual misconduct at the theatre was well known. On November 16, The Old Vic released the findings of its investigation which included twenty complaints against Spacey specifically, prompting a commitment from the theatre to finding “a new way forward” with appropriate reporting procedures for staff to raise concerns or complaints.<sup>13</sup>

This overview of events, which occurred in a single month, demonstrates how the discursive patterns surrounding the Weinstein revelations are mirrored by a series of theatrical institutions in London; an initial allegation, further allegations, a response from an associated institution or institutions, and subsequent questions about “open secrets” and how much institutions knew. In contrast to the relative absence of film corporations like the Weinstein Company being held to account in mainstream media narratives, both the processes and practices of these theatrical institutions were at the forefront of public discourse surrounding Stafford-Clark and Spacey. The Royal Court and The Old Vic were compelled to demonstrate their accountability for each man, despite neither currently serving as the Artistic Directors of these institutions.

### **On Institutions**

To designate a theatre an “institution” implies that its work and significance are in some way exceptional, often defined in terms of its longevity, contribution to the wider local or global theatre ecology, or in advancing a unique set of perspectives and practices. In the UK, the Royal Court is one such theatre. In his Preface to *The Royal Court Theatre and*

*the Modern Stage*, Philip Roberts is unequivocal in his positioning of the Court, claiming that since its establishment in the 1950s under George Devine, “the Court had become central to theatrical life in Britain and many other countries. For many, it had become an institution.”<sup>14</sup>

Across the humanities, much of the scholarship concerned with the notion and practices of institutions is rooted in Foucaultian understandings of power. In *Foucault and the Critique of Institutions*, John Caputo and Mark Yount characterize institutions as

more readily definable macro-objects, grosser instruments for the finer, more elemental workings of power. Power is the thin, inescapable film that covers all human interactions, whether inside institutions or out. Institutional structures are saturated with sexual relations, economic relations, social relations, etc., and are always established *of* these power relations.<sup>15</sup>

Institutions, therefore, are usefully understood in terms of the multiple actions and interactions that take place within them or as the culmination of what Mark Bevir terms “numerous micro-practices.”<sup>16</sup> It is significant that in Caputo and Yount’s definition, sexual relations are treated as a distinct strand of institutional practice when, as this chapter will demonstrate, they are deeply implicated in both the social and material conditions of a given site. In order to foreground the micro-practices in which questions of gender and sexual relations manifest, this chapter combines a Foucaultian understanding of the multiple, intangible operations and effects of power with a material reading of specific artistic and policy choices undertaken by the Royal Court.

This approach is particularly important in relation to an institution like the Court, whose history and significance are deeply inscribed in the broader narratives and networks of the nation’s theatre ecology. Ever since the much-mythologized opening night of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 heralded a new era of more socially and politically fervent playwriting in Britain, the Royal Court has enjoyed a reputation as the leading venue for new writing both in the UK and internationally. Over its sixty-two-year history the tastes, interventions and innovations of its successive practitioners continue to shape the Court’s identity alongside a constantly changing cultural and political landscape. As Ruth Little describes in *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*,

The Royal Court bears the imprint and echoes to the voices of the artists and managers who have fought for it [...] The Court is a theatre, but it is also an

argument – a shifting structure of contrasting and connecting perspectives in constant evolution.<sup>17</sup>

Little’s rhetoric of “imprinting” and “echoing,” locating figures from the Court’s past within the building itself, are redolent of much of the scholarship on the institution, where biography and individual tastes and politics are imbricated with the fabric of the Court itself. As one of its former Artistic Directors, Stephen Daldry, commented, “[t]his crumbling ramshackle building has the status of a myth. It holds the finger prints of the greatest writers and actors of our age. One said to me that if you squeezed the brick, blood would come out.”<sup>18</sup> Stafford-Clark echoed these sentiments in his Foreword to Robert’s history of the Court, claiming that “[m]any directors, writers and actors feel they have left the best part of themselves at the Court. The youthful idealism and best hopes of several generations are somehow caught up in its walls.”<sup>19</sup>

Stafford-Clark, of course, is one of the individuals whose identity and practices have become indelibly inscribed into the history and creative output of the Court. Serving as Artistic Director between 1979-1993, Stafford-Clark is credited as steering the Royal Court through what Roberts describes as the “cold climate” of the 1980s which, following the election of Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher also in 1979, saw “a furious assault on most forms of art from external forces.”<sup>20</sup> As Dan Rebellato summarizes, across all of his professional work Stafford-Clark “has been a champion of playwrights and playwriting [...] and, indeed, he is particularly associated with championing plays by women.”<sup>21</sup> Bookending Stafford-Clark’s tenure at the Court were two different companies: Joint Stock and, later, Out of Joint. Active between 1974 and 1989, Joint Stock is still widely regarded as one of Britain’s leading Fringe theatre companies to emerge during the 1970s, championing the work of contemporary writers like Caryl Churchill, Howard Brenton, and one of the company’s founders, David Hare, all of whose work would go on to appear on the Court’s stages. Founded in 1993 by Stafford-Clark and adopting some of the collaborative working practices of Joint Stock, Out of Joint is a touring company that is still active and, as will be discussed below, whose recent revival of Andrea Dunbar’s *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* in collaboration with the Court was embroiled in the controversy surrounding the allegations against Stafford-Clark.

Taking up Little’s characterization of the Court as both a material “theatre” and an intangible “argument,” this chapter analyzes the Court as a site entangled within and generative of competing power relations, which are further complicated by its own history and position within London’s theatre ecology. The exploration of both the tangible and material practices and policies of the Court alongside the intangible, mythologized history and ideologies that the site evokes, need urgent attention in the context of #MeToo, and under the directorship of Featherstone. Joining the Court as its first female Artistic Director in 2013, in 2016 Featherstone instated a verbal code of conduct for staff that subsequently served as the industry model following #MeToo and resulted in Featherstone being named “the most influential person in British theatre” in 2018.<sup>22</sup> Pragmatic actions such as these which prioritize the care of individual people stand in stark contrast to the metaphorical, corporeal language used by Daldry and Stafford-Clark to refer to the theatre building *as a body*. This shift indicates, perhaps, an alignment of perceptions of the Court with its actual material practices.

### **The Royal Court: Public Action, Artistic Responses**

The Court was the only major London-based theatrical institution to respond immediately to the Weinstein revelations and, later, Stafford-Clark’s. The first and most visible of these responses was *No Grey Area*, an umbrella term for a series of public events comprised of two parts: four ticketed (but free) Town Hall conversations on policy and procedure and *No Grey Area: Your Stories Heard* which consisted of 126 anonymous accounts of experiences of abuses of power in the theatre industry, sourced via an open call and read aloud on the Court’s Jerwood Downstairs theatre stage. While the Royal Court provided a team to read the accounts, audiences who had come to hear the stories were also invited to participate by taking to the stage if they wished, cultivating a sense of shared responsibility to both bare witness and give voice to abuses of power. While there was no way to distinguish whether readers were members of the public or part of the theatre’s team of volunteers and transcripts of these stories were not made publicly available, following the event the Court published a breakdown of what they term “Patterns and Scenarios” in their Code of Conduct.<sup>23</sup> For example, that 16% of the stories referred to “sustained inappropriate sexual comments over a period of time during a production or in a workplace” and “10% happened in interviews or auditions for jobs” before concluding that

the fact that “51.3% of the stories submitted took place in rehearsals, backstage, in drama schools, or involved sustained verbal abuse suggests significant change needs to happen in institutional culture”.<sup>24</sup>

The staging – comprised of three chairs on which readers waited, a lectern holding the accounts for speakers to read from, and a general lighting wash – served to strip back the theatricality of the space. The exposed brick of the stage’s backwall, which also served as the promotional image for the event, emphasised a sense of rawness, of uncovering, evoking ideas of transparency and unmediated disclosure. However, in light of the Court’s characterization in its own histories – typified by comments like Daldry’s and Stafford-Clark’s presented above – these walls take on a different kind of resonance. They are a palimpsest, inscribed with the actions and interactions of previous productions and practitioners. As we will go on to discuss, reading the Court as a historically stratified site has implications for the framing and reception of productions in the wake of #MeToo such as *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* or *The Prudes* that address issues of sex and power. Like these productions, the stories shared in *No Grey Area* became differently inflected in this mnemonically charged site, where the Court is both directly implicated but more importantly comes to signify any of the unnamed stages, offices or rehearsal rooms in London and beyond where these stories might have taken place. This sense of the Court as the conduit through which these multiple events and locations were indexed was compounded by the form of the intervention, which did not have set intervals, but allowed its audience to come and go throughout resulting in a seemingly endless bombardment of abuses of power. In so doing, the event effectively dramatized the processes of reporting (and rereporting) sexual assault, which requires repeated retellings of traumatic experiences and the emotional labour this involves.

This is not the Royal Court’s first event to respond directly and swiftly to mainstream political moments. On August 17 2011, the theatre held a rehearsed reading of the court room testimonies given by band members of the Russian punk-activist group Pussy Riot, *Pussy Riot: The Final Verdict*, as part of a global day of protest against the band’s arrest.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to *No Grey Area*, despite taking place in the theatre’s café-bar, *The Final Verdict* adhered more obviously to the conventions of performance, with a clearly delineated cast



of professional performers and explicit direction. However, by participating in the day of protest the Court asserted the potential of theatricalizing testimony as an action in itself.

This event foreshadows the framing of *No Grey Area* as an active contribution to global feminist discussions, yet the latter takes on a distinct form which can be attributed to the #MeToo movement being driven by a public sharing of experiences that have not been subject to legal process. There is a tension within the piece between a desire to capture verbatim material for an artistic intervention, and the need to negotiate a larger institutional structure: the legal system. The choice of the word “stories” in the event’s title and promotional material, for example, speaks to the Court’s legal position as the host of this event. A Code of Conduct produced for the day itself noted that, in line with the Royal Court’s “legal responsibilities around placing work in the public domain,” some information was redacted including any names and identifying material.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, “story” resonates with the journalistic discourse surrounding the ongoing accusations, while also locating the content explicitly in the realm of the personal, further underscored by the event’s post-colon title, “*your stories.*” Unlike terms like “testimony” (used only once in promotional material) or “account,” framing the events shared as part of *No Grey Area* as stories allows for leeway concerning disclaimers and discretization. Nevertheless, there remains the problematic association with make-believe or fiction, an association that is arguably heightened on a theatre’s stage, a platform for sharing fictive stories, however shaped by reality they may be.

Though differently inflected by the revelations concerning Stafford-Clark, *No Grey Area* was intended to look beyond the Court’s own immediate position and practices. However, in December 2017, the Court undertook a series of decisions that were explicitly prompted by the actions of their former director. Prior to the revelations concerning Stafford-Clark, a revival of Andrea Dunbar’s *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, produced by the Royal Court, Octogen Theatre Bolton, and Out of Joint was announced in the summer of 2017. This new production of the play, which charts working-class teenage babysitters Rita and Sue’s sexual encounters with their married employer Bob, was edited and co-directed by Stafford-Clark with Kate Wasserberg (now Artistic Director of Out of Joint). Stafford-Clark “discovered” Dunbar via the Court’s Young Writer’s programme and this legacy is imbedded within the history of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, which he commissioned and directed for the

Court in 1982. However, reflections on the creative process illuminate his questionable rehearsal practices during the original production. In *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, Little includes the following anecdote:

Assistant Director Simon Curtis was horrified when ‘Max declared at rehearsal we would all be required to strip naked so the actors could “get used to each other’s bodies” in preparation for the infamous sex scene. Various company members fled but, for me, humiliating myself was a small price to pay for the opportunity to see Joanne Whalley [Rita] without her clothes on’.<sup>27</sup>

The account of this rehearsal exercise in the official history of the Royal Court implicitly characterizes Stafford-Clark’s directing as unorthodox, but does not frame it as problematic. As aforementioned, Stafford-Clark has been revered as a champion of women playwrights and has particularly asserted his role in Dunbar’s career. In an interview in July 2017 regarding the revival, Stafford-Clark highlighted his personal association with the play stating,

When Andrea wrote her first two plays [*The Arbour* in 1977 and *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*], she was a teenager from a rough council estate who’d never been to the theatre. Now, thirty-five years after its premiere, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* takes its place in the Octagon and Royal Court’s seasons in the role of Classic Play. It’s one of the privileges of my career that Andrea’s astute, fresh and funny writing reached my desk.<sup>28</sup>

Stafford-Clark’s participation in the revival further inscribes him into the history of Dunbar’s work and career in the same way that his practices and policies are a part of the Royal Court’s institutional history. When the show began its UK regional tour in September 2017, early reviews credit Stafford-Clark as the sole director or acknowledge his co-director status, but do not name Wasserberg.<sup>29</sup> As well as rendering her labour invisible, this decision further illustrates both the significance afforded to his continuing directorial returns to Dunbar’s play and his position in Britain’s theatrical landscape generally.

During the beginning of the run critics Catherine Love and Natasha Tripney highlighted the production’s “refusal to condemn” and “no judgement” approach to Bob’s sexual relationship with the two fifteen-year olds.<sup>30</sup> However, the critical conversation surrounding the production shifted significantly when Featherstone announced on December 13 that *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* would be removed from the Royal Court’s winter season. In a joint-statement with *Out of Joint*, the theatre pointed to the accusations made

against Stafford-Clark and *No Grey Area* as the rationale behind the programming change, claiming “[o]n our stage we recently heard 150 stories of sexual harassment and abuse and therefore the staging of this work, with its themes of grooming and abuses of power on young women, on that same stage now feels highly conflictual.”<sup>31</sup> This action by the Royal Court was met with both praise and condemnation from voices across the sector on both mainstream and social media platforms. For example, online theatre critic Meghan Vaughan commended the theatre stating “difficult times need difficult decisions and they have stepped up,” while Sarah Compton suggested in *What’s On Stage* that “the decision to cancel feels like a rare Royal Court misstep in the complicated world we find ourselves in.”<sup>32</sup> A recurring contention in the debate was the censorship of a young working-class female playwright, exacerbated by the joint-press release’s implication that the content of the play was too contentious.

Just as *No Grey Area* was inflected by its location on the Court’s stage, in seeking to rationalize their decision, the Court themselves emphasized their own stage’s power to echo different performative events, while those critiquing the choice invoked the history and values of the institution and its former practitioners as a way to hold it to account. Playwright Justin Sherin, for example, suggested that according to the theatre’s founder George Devine, “the play is more important than the actors, director, the designer”, while actor Patrick Kennedy argued that to suggest that the theatre should be a “safe space” is “to fail to look back to the Court’s history.”<sup>33</sup> A source of further controversy was the decision to continue the production’s regional tour until February 2018, despite its removal from the Court’s program. In a national theatre landscape that remains significantly divided – in terms of the distribution of arts funding, audience attendance, and range of performance venues – between leading metropolitan London venues and regional theatres across the UK, this decision exacerbated the sense that what was acceptable for regional audiences, was not the same for their metropolitan counterparts and further served to ostensibly sanctify the Court’s stage.

In response to this fervent backlash, on December 15 – just two days after the initial decision to pull the production was publicised – Featherstone announced that *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* would be reinstated into the theatre’s winter programme:

As Artistic Director of the Royal Court I know that we are nothing without the voices and trust of our writers. This is the guiding principle on which the theatre was founded and on which it continues to be run. I have therefore been rocked to the core by accusations of censorship and the banning of a working-class female voice. For that reason I have invited the current Out of Joint production of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* back to the Royal Court for its run. As a result of this helpful public debate we are now confident that the context with which Andrea Dunbar's play will be viewed will be an invitation for new conversations.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike the previous press release – written on behalf of both the Court and Out of Joint, and not invoking any one individual specifically – this document featured the above quotation from Featherstone herself. Ultimately, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* ran at the Court between January 9-27 2018. Published scripts sold at the theatre contained an additional slip of paper with the addendum “[t]his playtext was printed in August 2017. Max Stafford Clark (credited here as co-director with Kate Wasserberg) left the production three days into the five-week rehearsal period.”<sup>35</sup> As previously highlighted however, the production began its tour with *both* credited as co-directors. The decision to continue to utilize Stafford-Clark's name despite Wasserberg primarily serving as the sole director again speaks to both the credentials that Stafford-Clark's involvement afforded this latest revival, but also an attempt to clearly and decisively distance him from the production following the cancelation and reinstatement of the show at the Court.

Perhaps the most infamous moment in the play is its opening scene, in which Bob has sex with both Rita and Sue as he drives them home from babysitting. Writing about the production for *What's On Stage* in October 2017, Wasserberg underscored the significance of this moment, arguing that “for all its grim awkwardness, that opening car scene is very funny. We'd have failed if audiences weren't laughing uproariously at it, just as we'd fail if they didn't feel uncomfortable two scenes later when Rita tells Bob her age.”<sup>36</sup> In the scene, following a conversation in which Bob casually asks the girls if they have boyfriends, if they are both virgins, and if they know how to put a condom on, he folds down the front seats of his car in preparation for sex. Bare-arsed, Bob climbs on top of Sue, while Rita waits impatiently in the backseat. The sex is punctuated by brief conversations between Bob and Rita – she wants him to turn the radio on – and Sue and Bob – asking her to take her knickers off – which offers some lightness to the scene. As Bob's arse judders and Sue's white ankle socks bob up and down, the theatre's house lights slowly rise. There are some

pockets of laughter, then uncomfortable laughter, followed by silence. After Bob has climaxed, the lights begin to dim, they do not rise again for the rest of the performance. On the night we attended, this directorial choice stood out as one of few moments in the production that felt like it was directly responding to the context of #MeToo. In correspondence with Wasserberg, she confirmed that this lighting state was introduced for the production's Royal Court run,

Having seen the show tour the country and play to so many different audiences, I had a little breathing space over Christmas to think about how to make people self-aware in that moment, to reflect on this thing we were doing by putting these acts on a stage. The wish to do that was born of my time spent with the production on tour and by the debate around the show - it felt as if there was a meta-conversation to be had with an audience who had come to see 'that show', to acknowledge that the terrain had changed since the cancellation and reinstatement of Andrea's play. The houselights raise stayed as part of the lighting design for the following tour venues and will feature in this spring's tour of the show.<sup>37</sup>

As Wasserberg indicates, the immediate context of the cancellation and reinstatement of the production, as well as the “wider terrain” in which it was located, complicated its status; it was now “that show”. It is striking to compare reviews of the show on its regional tour prior to the revelations concerning Stafford-Clark, to critical responses to its London premiere. Reviews of the production in September and October focused on the depiction of life in the 1980s under Thatcher, characterising the play as something of a museum piece, with *Northern Soul* concluding that “it’s very much a play of its time and has little to say to us now” while *What’s On Stage* described it as more of “an exercise in ticking off the theatrical bucket list than a work that is highly pertinent today”.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, reviews of the London premiere unanimously referred to the show’s eventful production history while drawing connections between the play’s content and its contemporary context.<sup>39</sup> This shift underscores how the revival staged a piece of both the Royal Court’s and Stafford-Clark’s own history and its production and reception are irrevocably complicated by the collision of those histories with the seismic social and political changes that the #MeToo movement represents. But, in a venue renowned for staging challenging new works, what impact does this collision between an institution’s history and its contemporary context have on a new play staged in the wake of these public interventions and a controversial revival?

**“Does #MeToo need a liberal male sticking his oar in?”<sup>40</sup>**

*The Prudes* was the first new play to première at Royal Court – in April 2018 – that explicitly addressed sexual politics in the wake of #MeToo. The play’s writer and director Anthony Nielson reflected on his subject matter stating,

I don’t usually engage overtly with political issues, but I am fascinated by, and invested in, the #MeToo movement and the issues surrounding it. Clearly, however, one could argue that the last thing needed right now is a middle-aged man sticking his oar in.<sup>41</sup>

Neilson’s solution is to use his subjectivity as the play’s central conceit, resulting in what he describes as a “(fairly vicious) satire about the Liberal Male response to these events”.<sup>42</sup> *The Prudes* opens with a man and woman perched precariously on two tall stools. The entire theatre is Pepto-Bismol pink; plush pink carpet covers the floor and audience seating, pink silks billow down from the ceiling and pink lace valances the walls, simultaneously cosy and cloying. The environment is domestic without being personal; there are no items to mark the space as belonging to the two people. The couple, Jimmy and Jess, address the audience who are separated from them by a large mattress-like square. We learn that they haven’t had sex in fourteen months. Jimmy is impotent. “Something Happened” Jimmy tells us, “But we agreed not to tell you what it was.”<sup>43</sup> Tonight, the couple are here to have sex so, Jimmy warns, “if anyone feels like they want to leave – now would be – the time”.<sup>44</sup> If they don’t have sex by the end of the play, Jess will leave Jimmy.

As the play unfolds through a series of conversations the pair circle around the issue of this “Something” that has apparently become the primary obstacle in their sex life. Desperate, halfway through the play Jimmy finally breaks. The theatre is plunged into darkness, obscuring Jess from view. Jimmy steps forward, clutching a lantern. Addressing only the audience, he confesses,

Okay: I know me and Jess had an agreement and I know it’s not my story to tell but I’m sorry: I need you to know what this thing is that happened. Because you can’t understand what I’m dealing with otherwise.<sup>45</sup>

Jess, it transpires, has shared an experience of sexual assault from her childhood on a website under a pseudonym. For Jimmy, this means that, “I’ve felt out-of-sorts ever since; like I’ve taken on the trauma in her place.”<sup>46</sup> Neilson’s handling of this revelation stands in

stark contrast to the staging of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, where audiences were forced to contend with the play's opening moments in the shared light of the auditorium. In *The Prudes*, under the cover of darkness, the audience becomes complicit in the revelation of a story that was never supposed to be told. Unlike *No Grey Area*, which was underpinned by a desire to create space for individuals to tell their stories publicly, fostering a sense of personal ownership and collective solidarity, Jimmy's appropriation of Jess's narrative suggests a less straightforward ownership over testimony and trauma.

Neilson's work, for example, explores the potential impact of withholding stories of abuse and the aftermath of their revelation. When Jess discovers Jimmy has broken her trust and revealed her story to the audience, Jimmy insists,

HIM: Come on, Jess: I had a right to tell them -

HER: You had a right to tell them my story?

HIM: Yes! Because it's my story too!

Pause.

Because I care about you, Jess, so it affects me. I've a right to say how it affected me.

HER: But nobody cares, Jimmy! Nobody cares how YOU feel about YOU being told what happened to ME.<sup>47</sup>

As Jess makes clear, the larger issue here is no longer only about the withholding or sharing of an account of abuse, but rather how that experience is variously appropriated or interpolated. In the case of Jess and Jimmy, these issues are compounded by their relationship, which for Jess should be a guarantor of trust, and for Jimmy means an entitlement to feel equally affected by anything the other experiences. Part of Neilson's deconstruction of the 'Liberal Male' response, at his worst Jimmy performs a grotesque inversion of solidarity where, despite his protestations, he is still centrally concerned with himself. The majority of critical responses noted how much Jimmy's hand-wringing and "male-guilt" dominated the play's narrative, underscoring the various ways in which Jess and her experiences are marginalised.<sup>48</sup> Part of this hand-wringing, however, could be understood as a genuine attempt from Jimmy to be attentive to his male privilege. Lines such as "I just don't want to look like the overbearing guy who says everything" simultaneously function as both a sincere attempt to be sensitive or, as one review described, "so woke as to be useless".<sup>49</sup>

While Jimmy's perspective and feelings may dominate the play's dialogue, it is arguably Jess's actions in the play's final moments that add further complexity to *The Prudes*. After several attempts to initiate sex, Jess drugs Jimmy with Viagra. Ultimately the couple do not go on to have sex instead ending the play with an embrace and we are left to weigh Jimmy's myopic treatment of Jess's trauma against Jess's enforced, non-consensual act. Given how unequivocal the Royal Court has been in its handling of the issues surrounding #MeToo it is significant that the first new play in the wake of this movement is centrally concerned with the 'grey area'.

Taking up this collection's provocation of "how not to look away," this chapter has examined the Royal Court's varied yet consistent attention to its histories, policy, and programming in light of #MeToo. Initially in responding to the global call for witnessing and action, *No Grey Area* positioned the Court as a key advocate for change within London's theatrical landscape. In directly addressing its own problematic histories in relation to *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, particularly its ongoing association with Stafford-Clark, the Court invited further conversations about artistic programming, institutional accountability for the behaviour of individuals, and the influence of that behaviour on creative work. The staging of *The Prudes*, which is ultimately ambiguous in its dramatization of sexual politics, underscores that the theatre's ethics and policies don't necessarily have to be in harmony with the content of its plays. Neilson's question concerning the need for a liberal male perspective in *The Prudes*, then, is perhaps less important than the reality that the question points to, which is that the Royal Court, through its self-reflection and industry action, affords a space in which such a perspective can be shared.



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- <sup>3</sup> n.a., "Harvey Weinstein: Film producer says 'I have caused a lot of pain'", *BBC* (5 October 2017), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41520007>, accessed 18 November 2018.
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- <sup>16</sup> Mark Bevir, "Foucault, Power and Institutions", *Political Studies*, XLVII (1999), 352.
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- <sup>19</sup> Max Stafford-Clark, "Foreword" in Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, xi.
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