# Before the Fall:

# Looking Back on the Royal Shakespeare Company’s

# “This Other Eden” Season (2001)

## Abstract

This paper argues for a reassessment of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s “This Other Eden” season, which presented a range of new work in London in early 2001. It places the season in its historical context, in a British political landscape dominated by New Labour and its optimism about remaking the nation, and also in a world that within six months was to experience the turmoil of the September 11th attacks. Using Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* as a starting point, this essay analyses the ‘time-hop’ dramaturgies of two of the season’s plays in particular, Moira Buffini’s *Loveplay* and *Luminosity* by Nick Stafford. The turn of the millennium marked the beginning of the end for Adrian Noble’s tenure as Artistic Director of the RSC, and this paper argues that the placeless quality of the “This Other Eden” season – neither wholly a product of Stratford nor London – was symptomatic of tensions at the time, both within this flagship national organisation and in the nation at large.

## Keywords

Royal Shakespeare Company; dramaturgy; time; history play; postmodern; time slip

## Contributor’s Note

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## Introduction

To look back on a season of plays about England’s past and present, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company under the title “This Other Eden”, is to revisit a period in British politics and society between the first and second New Labour landslides (May 1997 and June 2001, respectively). New Labour had campaigned on slogans such as “New Labour, New Britain”, suggesting a breezy optimism about remaking the nation. One way of reading this season, then, is to interpret it as the product of a brief phase in culture and politics where English identity could be reassessed from the standpoint of a prosperous, multicultural society, one seemingly poised to fulfil John Major’s aspiration, in his first speech as Prime Minister in 1990, of “[building] a country that is at ease with itself” (Turner 5).

Equally significantly, in early 2001 when the season was performed in London, the terrorist atrocities of September 11th, 2001 were still six months away. Hence, we might regard the season as a postcard from a lost age in a more global sense. The “long 1990s” had been understood by many as – in the words of the title of Francis Fukuyama’s popular and influential 1992 book – *The End of History*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Fukuyama saw modern, capitalist “post-historical” countries as existing alongside “the large historical world” which he characterised as “a realm of struggle, war, injustice, and poverty” (Fukuyama 1992, 318). Only developing countries that had not yet adopted the institutions of liberal democracy were still “historical”. That view of “history” taking place elsewhere was challenged by the fall of the World Trade Centre’s twin towers, an event that George F. Will, writing in the *Washington Post* the following day, famously marked as the end of the United States’ “holiday from history” (Will 2001, n.pag.). As I have argued elsewhere, the events of 9/11, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that they precipitated, inspired a new wave of playwriting in the decade that followed, one that sought to place these military interventions in the historical context of British and American imperialism (Poore 2016, 2). Certainly – in support of the notion that British politics and culture was on the cusp of a profound change in 2001 – it is highly suggestive that one of the “This Other Eden” season’s playwrights, Paul Greengrass, went on to co-write and direct *United 93*, the first Hollywood film based directly on the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, recounting the hijacking of United Airlines Flight 93.

However, in this paper I want to argue that a closer understanding of the RSC’s institutional circumstances in 2001 enables a more nuanced view of the ways in which the season, and the company itself, was embedded in the clashes and contradictions of the era. The turn of the millennium marked the beginning of the end for Adrian Noble’s tenure as Artistic Director of the RSC, as I will elaborate on in the last section of the paper. The placeless quality of the “This Other Eden” season – neither wholly a product of Stratford nor London – was symptomatic of tensions at the time, both within this flagship national organisation and in the nation at large.

In order to argue this, I will first present a précis of the four plays in the season for which scripts are extant. Then, focusing on the two texts that explicitly play with historical time, *Loveplay* and *Luminosity*, I will analyse their engagement with history, both through Fukayama’s concept of *thymos* (recognition), and through the critical lens of Sarah Grochala’s reading of the dramaturgy of time and space in the contemporary political play. I will also elaborate on my notion of the “time-hop” play, comparing it with the concept of time slips, as theorised by Jaclyn I. Pryor.

## The Season

The “This Other Eden” season was staged in Spring 2001. It was a collection of plays and devised work, initially developed at The Other Place with a group of the company’s commissioned playwrights, with the RSC’s dramaturg, Simon Reade. Alongside the two full-length plays, *Luminosity* by Nick Stafford and *Loveplay* by Moira Buffini, the season also included performances of Biyi Bandele’s *Brixton Stories* and two shorter pieces: a monologue by David Farr, *Thoughts of Joan of Arc on the English as She Burns on the Stake,* and Greengrass and Reade’s *Epitaph for the Official Secrets Act*.

Of the three play texts that were subsequently published,*Luminosity* is perhaps the most schematic, since it covers the history of the Mercer family at three points, exactly a century apart. The plot takes us back and forth between the centuries, as the modern character Debra, the black adopted daughter of Margaret Mercer, discovers more about the family past. All the scenes are set within the walls of a Quaker “physic garden” (a herb garden where plants are grown for medicinal use) in “the English West Midlands” (Stafford 2001, 10). In 1799, a destitute ex-slave and soldier, Saul, his wife Betty, and their children, throw themselves on the mercy of Mr Mercer, a Quaker. They are taken in and become part of the staff. When Mercer dies, he leaves his estate to Saul rather than his white British servant John, who is so overcome with rage and resentment that he kills Saul. Together with the family’s corrupt lawyer, Dalton, John reinvents himself as William Mercer (taking on the name of his benefactor) and sets out to become a respected Quaker. In the world of the play, the untold stories revealed through the dramatic action are more complicated than the documentary record that Debra uncovers. The resolution of the play’s tangled historical lines takes place without words, with a series of ghostly moves and crossings between characters from different periods in the performance space (Stafford 2001, 65-66). The final soundscape is of Robert’s infant school class, a multicultural mix: “Simon, David, Jordan, Saleem and Shanessa, stop fighting!” (Stafford 2001, 71).

Buffini’s *Loveplay*, like *Luminosity*, is grounded in one geographical location, “the same small square of land, which moves through time from the past to the present”, that is, between AD79 and 2001 (Buffini 2001, 10). The play’s embrace of anachronism places its style somewhere between Monty Python and the misremembered schoolboy history of Sellar and Yeatman’s *1066 And All That* (1930), albeit with a more equitable distribution of female roles. The text frequently plays with and subverts the clichés of historical periodicity by, for example, opening the scene set in the Renaissance with characters speaking in cod-Shakespearean verse before breaking off to discuss the awful play that they are rehearsing. In the scene set in 1735, Roxanne, an educated, wealthy woman hires a local labourer to stand naked before her, so that she can explain her theory of time to him, a theory that in fact reflects the play’s dramaturgy:

We perceive time as a series of apparently indivisible moments, but supposing one could divide each moment and move between them? One would find oneself in a plenitude of ages, different worlds of endless possibility, a landscape of time that was nebulous and not definite, so that one was not confined to a particular age or sphere or set of circumstances so that … that one, in a way, could be free? (Buffini 2001, 47).

As with *Luminosity*, the sequence set in modern times – where the patch of land is now a dating agency called Hearts International – shows us that histories of desire, loss and longing transcend language and evade capture by the historical record.

Biyi Bandele’s *Brixton Stories*, the season’s third full-length play, does not match *Loveplay* and *Luminosity* in its treatment of time. A theatrical odyssey – described as “magic realism” by Adrian Noble in the programme note (“This Other Eden” 2001, n.pag.) – it traces the last few hours in the life of Ossie Jones, a Brixton-dwelling immigration lawyer who wakes up after fifteen years in a coma, then shortly afterwards falls asleep and dies. *Brixton Stories* manipulates time distinctively, through storytelling and fable. For example, when Ossie is in the coma, he dreams that he has been arrested and wrongly convicted for murder, and in prison he meets Triple-Johni, who is “serving three life sentences for homicidal crimes he’d committed during a previous lifetime” (Bandele 2001, 20). Triple-Johni tries to speed up his sentences by dying early and being reborn so that he can be taken back into custody as a baby, but ends up chasing the figure of Death, “threatening to strangle him if Death did not take his life” (Bandele 2001, 21). Traumatised by the incident, Death goes into hiding, and no-one in the town can then die. Although it is not conceived as a history play *per se*, *Brixton Stories*, with its mixing of personal memory, its account of Ossie’s last day alive, and its meditations on mortality, forces its audience to confront the past, present and future simultaneously, which theatre scholar Michael Y. Bennett highlights as a characteristic of the modern history play (Bennett 2013, 16).

Lastly, we turn to Greengrass and Reade’s *Farewell to the Official Secrets Act.* A script*,* dated March 2001, is available in the RSC’s archive, alongside a rewritten version, dated May 1st, that was adopted for the last two performances of the play’s run. Like *Brixton Stories*, *Farewell* does not take a historical long view, but instead leaps to various points in time between 1991 and 2001, focusing on the David Shayler case, and the demise of MI5 head Stella Rimington’s much-publicised policy of openness (Shayler, a former MI5 operative, was prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act for passing on classified information to the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper in 1997). Perhaps the most that can be said for *Farewell* as a history play is that it represents an early attempt to historicise the 1990s, a decade when MI5 was struggling to find a role for itself in a post-Cold War, pre-War on Terror security environment. Shayler’s discoveries among the Top Secret files also point to a kind of secret history of British politics, as imagined by MI5, where even the most neoliberal of New Labour politicians, such as Peter Mandelson, were suspected of being secret Communist moles (Greengrass and Reade 2001, 28). This conspiracy-theory view of history is also hinted at, and in effect reversed, by a final reference in the script to Shayler’s suspicions that Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed were assassinated by MI5 (Greengrass and Reade 2001, 64). This tendency was borne out by Shayler’s “real” post-2001 history, where he and his partner Annie Machon (who also features in the play) became leading UK-based proponents of the idea that “American elements facilitated 9/11 in order to ‘justify their adventurism in oil-rich countries in the Middle East’“ (O'Neill 2006, n.pag.).[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Core and Periphery

Having outlined the texts, the paper will now highlight two of the key contexts for the plays’ development. This season of work needs to be seen in the context of Noble’s policy of new work being “defined in relation to the core of the RSC, which was classical work”, as Chambers summarises it (97). The “This Other Eden” season ran alongside – and in counterpoint to – the “This England” cycle of Shakespeare history plays on the company’s main stages in Stratford and London. In terms of suggesting a connection to the RSC’s “core” activities, we might note that *Epitaph* self-consciously and jokily quotes Shakespeare’s history plays throughout, and that it features such devices as soliloquy and the character David being visited by “ghosts and apparitions” of figures such as former government ministers Roy Jenkins and Jack Straw (Greengrass and Reade 2001, 59-63). As mentioned previously, *Loveplay* has its *faux*-Shakespearean segment, whilst by contrast Bandeleexplicitly renounces such a connection: “What I didn’t attempt was any kind of conscious reaction to the history plays. I feel that every play we write is a reaction to Shakespeare, he’s done it all!” (“Brixton Stories” 2001, n.pag.).

A further very pertinent contextual factor, however, is the decision to revive Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* (1922), in a production directed by David Fielding, which ran alongside the beginning of the “This Other Eden” season at The Pit. *Back to Methuselah* is not a history play *per se*; it begins with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as if Shaw is explaining the theory of Creative Evolution to an audience of children (which, for Shaw, contemporary humans effectively are). However, its dizzying compression of time (taking us to the “Present Day”, then 2170 AD, then 3000 AD, then 31,920 AD) seems to have been as much of an influence on “This Other Eden” as the Shakespeare history play season. *Back to Methuselah*’s jokey take on history provides a connection with parts of *Loveplay*, while production photos in the RSC archive reveal that the white box of The Pit was similarly stripped back for the this play and others of the season (indeed, the production records show how, behind the scenes, there was a complex division of time *and* space, with actors appearing in productions from the classical repertoire having to miss late or early calls because they were also performing in *Back to Methuselah* [“Back to Methuselah” 2001, n.pag.]).

## The Time-Hop Play

In this section, I want to posit *Loveplay* and *Luminosity* as examples of what I shall call time-hop theatre: works that leap across centuries and millennia in order to present a distinctive view of history. The *time-hop* can be usefully defined as a contrast to the more familiar “time slip” convention. The “time slip” is a well-worn trope in popular culture: a character is propelled back or forth in time, often by means unknown. Jerome De Groot notes that time-slip narratives are “Common in science fiction, children’s novels, and graphic fiction” (De Groot 2015, 129). At its most sophisticated, the central character in time-slip fiction experiences history with the foreknowledge of what the future looks like, and with the ethical dilemmas that such knowledge implies (De Groot 2015, 106).

Jaclyn I. Pryor has already theorised the phenomenon of the time slip in performance studies. For Pryor, time slips are “moments in performance when linear time is momentarily queered”, when “time was given permission to do those deviant things it is not supposed to ― move backward, lunge forward, loop, jump, stack, stop, pause, linger, elongate, pulsate, slip” (Pryor 2017, 3, 9); here we might think of Roxanne’s “indivisible moments” speech in *Loveplay*, quoted earlier. Pryor takes as a point of departure the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which for Pryor as a queer subject, represented a “flashpoint” that marked the beginning of a “normalizing project” of hegemonic conceptions of space, place and time, among other ideas (Pryor 2017, 18). In common with this paper, Pryor’s analysis is drawn to the moments just before the terrorist attacks – in the book’s case, airport surveillance footage which prompts the “technonostalgia” of knowing what was about to happen – which Pryor configures as “dramatic irony” (Pryor 2017, 27).

However, the focus of Pryor’s book is on site-specific installations, and performance in ensemble, devised and pedagogic contexts. I have chosen to designate *Loveplay* and *Luminosity* as “time-hop” rather than “time slip” plays, in order to highlight the conscious choices of the playwright rather than the unpredictable and momentary intrusion of the uncanny past in devised performance. Early examples of the time-hop tradition in post-war British theatre would include Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud 9* and Howard Brenton’s *The Romans in Britain*, both of which, in different ways, have cast a long cultural shadow,[[3]](#footnote-3) and both of which premiered within 18 months of each other in February 1979 and October 1980, respectively. Modern inheritors of the tradition include Zinnie Harris’s *The Wheel* (Traverse Theatre, 2011) and Ella Hickson’s *Oil* (Almeida, 2016), both of which seem to operate on *Cloud 9* time, in which a hundred years passes in the world but the characters age much less, as if to indicate a slow journey to enlightenment, or indeed, that nothing has changed very much at all.

That this form of temporal distortion and acceleration should find its expression in two celebrated plays at the end of the 1970s – *Cloud 9* and *The Romans in Britain* – seems to fit with Sarah Grochala’s argument that the advent of “disorganised capitalism”[[4]](#footnote-4) since the 1970s has led to a perception of compressed space and time in contemporary society that is characteristic of what she calls, after Zygmunt Bauman, “liquid modernity”; this has led to new modes of theatre that exhibit “liquid dramaturgies” (Grochala 2017, 77).[[5]](#footnote-5) Seen this way, the single location and headlong rush through time of *Loveplay* and *Luminosity* look rather less like the confident – or even smug – millennial celebration of the “end of history” that they might at first appear to be. Instead, they resemble plays about places that are haunted, in Pryor’s sense of the time slip (Pryor 2017, 31), but also places where history is closing in on us, accelerating and collapsing towards us (Grochala 2017, 79).

Grochala’s further discussion of theatrical time as organised on two axes, that of succession and that of simultaneity is also useful here (Grochala 2017, 93), in delineating the treatment of space and time in these time-hop plays. Through their leaps forward (and, in the case of *Luminosity*, backwards) in time, while insisting on the same location throughout,[[6]](#footnote-6) I contend that both plays bend the logic of the play away from succession and towards simultaneity. The presence of ghosts passing across the plots of land (Stafford 2001, 65-66), Saul Mercer rising up from his grave and confronting his murderer (Stafford 2001, 56), and lovers meeting at the beginning and end of *Loveplay* with the incantation, “Here/You/Now/This” (Buffini 2001, 13, 90), all point to the idea that these events are happening simultaneously and recurrently in this place. They are, to quote Buffini’s Roxanne again, “landscapes of time”.

## The End of History

The presentation of history as not “over”, but simultaneous, endlessly looping, even in the midst of liberal-democratic nation states, provides an implicit challenge to Fukuyama’s thesis that “history is being driven in a coherent direction by rational desire and rational recognition” and that “liberal democracy in reality constitutes the best possible solution to the human problem” (Fukuyama 1992, 338).[[7]](#footnote-7) Here I will briefly attempt to explain why these two plays can be read as a riposte to the “end of history” argument, and consequently how they sit uncomfortably within the millennial thinking of New Labour and its supposed New Britain. A central term in *The End of History* is *thymos*, which Fukuyama borrows from Plato and which he translates as “recognition”. However, in his book, Fukuyama emphasises economic recognition, and downplays the equal recognition due to people of different races, sexualities, genders and disabilities, which is of course an ongoing site of struggle in liberal democracies. Fukuyama’s vision of “contemporary America” is a privileged one of “earnest young people trooping off to law and business school”, whom he views as entitled, but nonetheless happy, consumers (Fukuyama 1992, 336). He is dismissive of what he calls “a hyperintensified demand for the recognition of equal rights” (Fukuyama 1992, 338) and twice uses the example of personal attractiveness – and the outlawing of personal advantages accruing to the beautiful – as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the equalities agenda (Fukuyama 1992, 290, 314). He insists, sternly, that “Every effort to give the disadvantaged ‘equal dignity’ will mean the abridgement of the freedom or rights of other people, all the more so when the sources of disadvantage lie deep within the social structure” (Fukuyama 1992, 292-293).

*Loveplay* and *Luminosity* feature historical characters who are not, in Fukuyama’s sense, “recognised” but who are instead classified and demeaned by racist, sexist and heteronormative assumptions. In *Loveplay* – from the women used for men’s sexual pleasure in Roman and Saxon Britain, via the Enlightenment thinking of Roxanne, the gay men in an artist’s studio in 1898, the woman coerced by her boyfriend into taking part in an orgy in 1969, to the two liberated metropolitan lesbians who cannot declare their love for one another in the present day – key parts of characters’ sexual and gender identities go unrecognised; often, the language to explain them does not exist in that time and place. In *Luminosity,* black skin is recognised only as a “taint” (as in the subplot of Victoria, Margaret Mercer’s grandmother, the daughter of a “half-caste” [Stafford 2001, 53]), or as supposed justification for murder for John Gardner, who does not recognise Saul as William Mercer’s legitimate heir. The ruptures in time in both plays – the overlaying of action, the moments where Saul refuses to stay buried, and where different historical generations “feel something” or “feel a tug” but cannot see the past “in close proximity” (Stafford 2001, 66) – acknowledge the difficult, and sometimes impossible, work of historical recognition and recovery.

Where Stafford and Buffini configured time as existing all at once in a single space, Fukuyama, perhaps predictably in writing for a predominantly U.S. readership, imagines the end of history as a frontier on which all the countries of the world are converging at their own pace. He envisages these countries, on the book’s final page, as wagons which may be painted different colours, but which are all drawn in the same direction (Fukuyama 1992, 339). For Fukuyama, national histories travel through linear time, configured as expansive space, towards a single stable point. For the plays in “This Other Eden”, by contrast, time is compressed in a stripped-down space, producing Pryor’s lunging, looping, jumping, stacking formations (Pryor 2017, 9), an unruly history of remains that create ongoing trans-temporal reckonings.

## The White Box

The notion of time and space compression also leads me to a consideration of the significance of The Pit’s white box space, where *Luminosity, Loveplay*, *Brixton Stories* and *Epitaph* were performed (Chambers 2004, 229). As David Wiles has argued, no performance space is neutral, and this applies to the “black box” studio as much as anywhere else (Wiles 2003, 254-255). In his analysis, Wiles places the “black box” alongside the art gallery’s “white cube” as environments where “any object is perceived as an aesthetic, almost sacred artefact” (Wiles 2003, 258). Although production photographs reveal that the Pit’s “white box” set was not a pure cube of white space, but had recesses and a double door in the back wall, the idea of a white box (in a world of black box studios) is nevertheless a powerful statement. It connotes the new, the unfinished and undecorated: “performances without décor”, as the Royal Court used to call its set-free Sunday night productions in the 1950s (Roberts 1999, 58). This connection in turn connotes the risky, the experimental; the idea of theatre as a laboratory. Adrian Noble’s programme note called the season “works-in-progress” (“This Other Eden” 2001, n.pag.). For the Royal Shakespeare Company, the white cube of The Pit also creates associations with Peter Brook’s legendary production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1970-1973), with its “stark, white box set” which, for performance scholar Colin Counsell, “rendered all action up to the audience’s critical eye, making its artifice evident” (Counsell 1996, 162).

Despite the art-gallery placelessness of their staging, both *Loveplay* and *Luminosity* had interesting things to say about national identity. Both suggest that places we think of as “local” were always already global, from the traces of invasion and empire left by the Romans and Saxons in *Loveplay*, to the video-dating agency in the last scene, Hearts International, which brings together the final pair of lovers, Dieter and Brigitta. In *Luminosity*, we see the appropriation of imperial wealth, and the products of slave labour, benefiting a murderer who cloaks himself in religion at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1999 the artist Debra is criticised for “political correctness” when she makes a body cast of herself as a black Britannia, as if, two centuries later, a body like hers is still not thought to “belong” here (Stafford 2001, 61).

Yet what is surprising about the “This Other Eden” season, given its preoccupation with place, is how geographically off-centre the openings were. *Loveplay*, *Back to Methuselah* and *Luminosity* opened at The Pit at the Barbican. *Thoughts of Joan of Arc* opened at the Young Vic. *Brixton Stories* opened as a workshop performance in April, and then was fully staged that October, at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn: a north-west London opening for a play with a south London district in its title, in a co-production with the West Yorkshire Playhouse. As far as the RSC’s archive shows, in production files and rehearsal notes, these plays were not publicly presented at Stratford. They are plays about the importance of place, but only *Luminosity* mentions the West Midlands, the RSC’s home turf. The other productions imagine an “Other Eden” that seems mostly metropolitan. The Other Place, Stratford’s experimental performance venue, where the season was developed (and from which, it might be said, the season title borrows its designation “Other”), was closed in 2002 as part of Noble’s redevelopment plans (Chambers 2004, 105, 164, 172). The RSC was also on the verge of withdrawing from the Barbican altogether in this period (Chambers 2004, 108), rendering it “homeless in London” (Trowbridge 2013, 136) and reliant on West End transfers. Thus, even the season’s adopted metropolitanism was on shaky ground.

## The RSC and the New Labour Years

In this final section of my paper, I seek to further historicise these history plays, by placing the curiously unmoored quality of the RSC’s Eden performances, as discussed above, more distinctly in its institutional and socio-political context. As noted earlier, the season was a product of the final years of Adrian Noble’s tenure as Artistic Director of the RSC. Having taken up the position in 1991, Noble was an Artistic Director for the decade that was often referred to as the “caring, sharing nineties” (Barnes and Bellas 1999, n.pag.). His rhetoric might even be described as “touchy-feely”, a phrase often used to describe Prime Minister Tony Blair (BBC News 2005; Rentoul 2004; Hollingshead 2010). For instance, Noble distributed a personal manifesto to staff, based on an interview that he had given for the *Times*, in which he argued that the RSC should present new plays, “not because they’re new […] but because they excite and amaze people, because they make them emotionally more literate” (Nightingale 1991, 20).

Nevertheless, just as the governments of the 1990s, both Conservative and Labour, had ineluctable continuities with Thatcherism, so Noble’s tenure as Artistic Director can be read structurally as a neo-liberal, marketizing revolution, even as its leader emphasised soft power and emotional literacy. Noble’s organisational innovations, like the “new access operating model” and its successor, “Project Fleet”, announced in 2001, were designed to make the RSC leaner and more flexible (Chambers 2004, 107-108), with shorter contracts for actors, more touring, more stand-alone productions, and a producer system to replace the organisational principle of associate directors. These changes, too, reflected the political climate of the time. New Labour, like the Thatcher and Major governments that preceded it, emphasised the importance of worker “flexibility” as a key component of the globalised, insecure, knowledge economy of “post-Fordism” (Driver and Martell 1998, 43, 44). Yet these changes alienated many members of the RSC’s staff, imposing a flavour of the “multinational conglomerate” on what had previously been a “cottage industry”, according to Simon Trowbridge in his history of the company (Trowbridge 2013, 134). Moreover, the resentment in Stratford-on-Avon itself that Noble’s modernising reforms were breaking up patterns of local and family employment that had held for decades (Chambers 2004, 186-188) surely contributed to the speed of his demise. As even Fukuyama recognised, economic rationalism requires allegiance to older, “non-universal forms of recognition” in order to sustain itself (Fukuyama 1992, 335). By breaking up the “pre-liberal traditions” of the local Stratford theatre community in the interests of economic efficiency, Noble appeared to cut himself adrift from RSC history (Fukuyama 1992, 335).

In addition, in 2001 Noble was beset by opposition to his plan to demolish the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and to establish a theme-park-style “Shakespeare Village” by the River Avon, with very public criticism from celebrity actors and a grassroots organisation called HOOT (“Hands Off Our Theatre”) (Trowbridge 2013, 136). There is an irony, then – possibly even a gross institutional insensitivity – to the “This Other Eden” season’s celebration of the history of precise localities taking place in London while the Royal Shakespeare Theatre dispute was taking place in Stratford. “This Other Eden” ran in the period just after the celebrations of a new millennium, symbolised by New Labour’s project, the Millennium Dome, with its fourteen celebratory – and corporate-sponsored – zones, bearing names such as Shared Ground, Living Island, and Home Planet. Had the Shakespeare Village been built, it might have been regarded as Adrian Noble’s own Millennium Dome project. Like the Pit season’s white box, the Millennium Dome was a deliberately blank space, “Open land”, as Buffini’s stage direction has it (Buffini 2001, 13) from which the public were invited to inspect national history.

Meanwhile, Noble’s global ambitions for the RSC took him increasingly away from Stratford, and led to the RSC’s involvement in some expensive and time-consuming projects in America (Chambers 2004, 107). Noble announced his departure from the company just after his successful opening of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* in the West End, having been hurt, according to Chambers, by criticism of his absence from Stratford “to prepare the lucrative musical at the crucial point in his own plan when the redundancies took place and the new structure for the company was being established” (Chambers 2004, 111). The news was greeted by further opprobrium from the press, with a *Times* headline memorably referring to him as “the most reviled man in luvvieland” (Morrison 2002, 2) and another opinion piece reporting that the company’s “morale is so low […] that its director is now known as Osama bin Noble” (Nightingale 2002, 8).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored several meanings of the phrase “before the fall”, referencing Bernard Shaw’s originating time-hop play and its Garden of Eden setting, the resignation of Adrian Noble as Artistic Director, and the fall of the twin towers in September 2001. This latter event, as mentioned earlier, marks the transformation of a strand of British historical playwriting from a relatively becalmed millennial perspective to a period of anxious post-imperial introspection in response to the War on Terror. It marks the transformation of Noble into an arch-villain, and Shayler into a 9/11 “Truther”, while for Pryor it marks the beginning of new attempts to suppress queer time (Pryor 2017, 18). The falls that I have discussed are aesthetic, geopolitical, and institutional. A fall, of course, is an irreversible historical or mythical rupture, which contradicts the idea of a steady horizontal passage towards a unifying frontier, the “end of history” that Fukuyama proposed.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to suggest that the season’s plays and performances were “problems” that could have been “solved” by paying more attention to the dramaturgy of place. While it is tempting to imagine that the promise of *Luminosity* and *Loveplay* could have been fulfilled by making them site-specific productions – taking place in a “physic garden” and a square of land that has now become a dating agency, respectively – this would be to match the liquid dramaturgy of time that these plays display with a literalism of place that recalls the tenets of what Grochala calls “serious drama”, which suited the “solid modernity” of the early twentieth century, but not the liquid modernity of today (Grochala 2017, 32, 77). The season’s difficulties with time and space run deeper than that, however. The unresolved contradiction between “Britishness” and globalism was already present under Thatcherism, and was reproduced under New Labour. It was this tension, expressed here as the conflict between a vision of the RSC as global brand, and a vision of it as a Stratford-based, “family” firm, that seems to be at the heart of the company’s institutional strains in the 1990s.

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1. To gain a sense of the book’s influence, one need only look at the range of articles published around the time of the 25th anniversary of its publication (Horvat 2017, Stanley and Lee 2017, Glaser 2017, Moosburger 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shayler some years later declared himself the Messiah (Malmo 2017, n.pag.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Cloud 9* has been extensively revived both in the UK and internationally, while the controversy over the male rape scene in *The Romans in Britain*, and the ensuing obscenity trial, have made the play more written about, as an example of the putative limits of theatre censorship, than performed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grochala in turn draws on sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry’s periodisation of liberal capitalism, organised capitalism, and disorganised capitalism (Grochala 2017, 77). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For her discussion of time-space compression, Grochala in turn draws on the theories of geographer David Harvey (Harvey 1990, 240-284). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I should concede here that in *Luminosity*, the 1899 sequence is set in Bloemfontein, South Africa, even though the play text insists on the West Midlands location, noting only the need for a large projection screen (Stafford 2001, 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It should perhaps be noted that Fukuyama blithely speculated that “the end of history will mean the end, among other things, of all art that could be considered socially useful”, and saw the future arts scene in post-historical societies as following Japan’s example, and consisting of “a series of perfectly contentless formal arts, like Noh theatre, tea ceremonies, flower arranging, and the like” (Fukuyama 1992, 320). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)