The Politics of Experimental Drama: Unexpected Conformity and Weird Resistance in Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona*

Literature and Theatre, Form and Politics

In an essay published in 1931, Bertolt Brecht wrote ‘theatre “theatres” everything into theatre’ (Brecht 71).[[1]](#footnote-1) This pithy line addresses a tension between plays and the institution in which they are performed. Brecht argues that the theatre is a fundamentally conservative institution that seeks to perpetuate its own existence by selling tickets for material acceptable to its audience. It does this not only by staging plays that accord with this aim, but, more importantly, it ‘neutralizes’ (Brecht ibid.) plays that seek to disrupt it. Brecht’s contention posits a set of processes in the production system that regulates unruly texts. While he asserts in the essay that his own play, *The Threepenny Opera*, was designed to resist these processes, its production history unfortunately undermines Brecht’s optimism: it is played worldwide and presents itself as a standard feature of the repertoire. I am not suggesting that the play cannot be offered as challenging,[[2]](#footnote-2) but that an amount of effort has to be invested in order to achieve such a goal.

Heiner Müller develops Brecht’s argument about the nature of the resistant play text. First, in 1975, he stated: ‘I fundamentally believe that it's literature’s task to resist the theatre. Only when a text can’t be staged in a way to which the theatre is accustomed is it productive or interesting for the theatre’ (Müller 2008 57).[[3]](#footnote-3) His point here is radical: playwrights must develop dramaturgies that force the theatre to rethink its staging practices. He focuses on how material is presented in a play, not on the material itself, and in 1985 he clearly contrasted the two: ‘the utopian moment is in the form, and in the elegance of the form, the beauty of the form and not in the content’ (ibid 373). A prime example here would be his own play, *The Hamletmachine*, where it is impossible to imagine quite how the ten-page text might appear on stage. Müller invites playwrights to undermine their own centrality and thereby compel theatre-makers to play a more active role in the construction of a production (Lehmann 21).[[4]](#footnote-4) Müller paradigmatically signals this gesture in a pair of stage directions in *The Hamletmachine*: ‘*A Photograph of the writer’ / ‘*[The Hamletperformer] *tears up the photograph of the writer*’ (Müller 1995 93). In 1986, directly addressing Brecht’s line, Müller stated that enlivening play texts resist the ‘pressure [Zwang] or the demand for illustration [Abbildung], the mere reproduction of reality […]. And through this, theatre then also calls reality into question, that’s also indeed the important political function of the theatre’ (Müller 2005 303). Here, he aligns actively frustrating the representation of reality with political critique: by offering an audience an experience of a different kind of reality, the playwright is challenging that which is taken for granted, the system that underpins the representations, and foregrounds the theatre’s artifice and its potential to offer different realities for the audience.

Taken together, Müller’s proposals lay a foundation for playwrights to challenge the world as they experience it, with the clear aim of changing its politics by proposing different ways of constituting reality. Here, I understand politics as ‘the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space’, to cite Stefan Collini’s definition (Collini). The task is ‘inescapable’ because politics pervades all relationships and ‘difficult’ because these relationships are both hard to articulate and subject to change over time. The ‘attempt’ becomes a playwright’s contingent approach to structuring the stage world in such a way that conventional forms of representation are eschewed. In this reading, the political is to be apprehended in relative terms, in the organization of its parts; the parts themselves are not autonomous ‘things-in-themselves’ and have no meaning in themselves. Again, the emphasis in on form and not content.

With Brecht and Müller in mind, I want to examine how a formally complex play text may or may not challenge the institution of the theatre and examine the effects on the play’s politics, its representational strategies. I have chosen Alistair McDowall’s popular, critically acclaimed and much staged *Pomona* for a couple of reasons. The first should be obvious to anyone who has read the play or seen a production: as will be discussed below, the reality rendered by the play is extremely unstable, undeniably satisfying one of Müller’s criteria. The play also features sections in which the text surrenders its authority and defers input to the theatre-makers, addressing Müller’s other criterion. However, the play makes no claim to being politically progressive. In an interview coinciding with *Pomona*’s German premiere, McDowall categorically insisted: ‘I don’t write to comment on society. I simply only write stories’ (McDowall 2016b). Dan Rebellato, the hitherto most frequent commentator on the play, agrees: ‘*Pomona* has no evident political ambitions for itself’ (Rebellato 2017).[[5]](#footnote-5) There is thus little overt in the play that seeks to address politics directly, and, of course, there is no need for a playwright to take up arms for one cause or another. But there is more to politics than posting colours to masts or offering incisive critiques: the ways that playwrights represent reality will be political in their very nature, suggesting relationships and how they may function.

This essay will explore the tension between *Pomona*’s form and its content, and the politics that emerge from this relationship. It will test Müller’s claims against a play that very much *appears* to satisfy his criteria. It will also challenge the most sustained extant analyses of *Pomona* and their political evaluation of the play, and offer an alternative reading that uncovers political resistance in one of the play’s key intertexts.

*Pomona*’s Experimental Dramaturgy

*Pomona* mixes two plot threads: on the one hand, it is a thriller; on the other, it exhibits features of a role-playing game. The thriller concerns Ollie’s hunt for her unnamed twin sister (although both are referred to as ‘Ollie’ in the text). In the first scene, she seeks help from Zeppo, an immensely wealthy man who owns vast amounts of commercial property in Manchester. He mentions Pomona, a concrete island in the centre of the city, as a possible place to investigate, although he recommends against it. In a brothel, presumably in or near Pomona, we meet Ollie’s twin and a fellow sex-worker, Fay. Fay has stolen a laptop from the brothel’s boss, Gale, which contains unsavoury and incendiary information. We later learn that the brothel is a place from which women are abducted. They end up having their bodies used to grow babies for sale and once they are exhausted, their organs are harvested for sale as well. Keaton, an enigmatic and powerful woman, charges Gale to capture and eliminate Fay. Gale engages the services of Moe and Charlie, two security men at Pomona. They apprehend Fay, but Moe lets her go (he has previously had a profound experience with her in the brothel, discussed below). Moe accidentally kills Charlie in a bid to cover up his kindness by trying to convince Gale that they were both overpowered. Ultimately, Ollie’s twin, against the odds, escapes from Pomona.

Odds are important in this play because of the elements of role-playing games (RPGs) that are introduced in the play’s sixth scene. Keaton replies to Charlie’s advertisement for RPG players. She is a novice and requires instruction. In three subsequent scenes, Keaton plays an RPG that Charlie has designed, based on H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Call of Cthulhu’. In the first of these scenes, however, Keaton swiftly transforms into Ollie:

charlie: You are walking through a shopping centre.

keaton: You are walking

ollie: I am walking through a shopping centre […][[6]](#footnote-6)

The connection between the role-playing game and the apparently real events of the thriller create uncertainty about what can be understood as really happening in the play. The interweaving of the two strands is already signalled in the first scene: Ollie and Zeppo discuss the missing twin while a figure in a Cthulhu mask sits in the back of the car. The instability is reinforced when Keaton introduces herself to Charlie: he is so impressed by her name that he retains it for the game: there is a clear overlap between a real participant and her character in the apparently fictional game. Elsewhere, the sense of an external narrative controlling the action may be found in echoes in the text, as when, for instance, Zeppo says that Ollie’s name reminds him of the name ‘Oliver’ (308), just as it does to Fay later (357). The formal blurring of boundaries clearly makes a definitive statement about what is actually happening impossible to assert, and so *Pomona* can be said to ‘call reality into question’ as Müller put it. And there are other formal features that augment this fundamental instability at the heart of the play.

McDowall’s treatment of time is unconventional in that there are (perhaps) two main structures in play. The first in a circular one, and this is already hinted at in the first scene, which takes place on Manchester’s orbital motorway, the M60. When Ollie emerges from Pomona in the final scene, she is disorientated and only now believes that her sister has gone missing. Keaton advises her to seek a man who circles the M60 every night in his car, the situation we encounter in the first scene. Rebellato calls this structure ‘a kind of Möbius strip in which we might imagine the two sisters’ stories continually swapping over and repeating’ (Rebellato in McDowall 2020 xix). This observation problematizes the ontology of the twin sisters in that we presume that the sister that has escaped is the twin, but that it is Ollie, and not the twin, who initiates the search. The first scene also gestures to the last when Ollie recalls ‘nightmares’ that foreshadow her experiences in Pomona together with ‘cuts all over me’ (315) that may represent physical evidence of her escape in scene nineteen. Circularity is also to be found in scenes four and sixteen: the former opens where the latter ends.

In contradistinction to the Möbius pattern, scenes two and three appear to show the last moments of Fay and Gale, respectively, but this only becomes apparent to a spectator retrospectively, as David Ian Rabey observes (Rabey 43). As such, a plot that appears to be moving forward through time actually starts with at least two characters’ imminent deaths before they reappear in subsequent scenes. Scene four, in which the feigned attack on Charlie turns real and he appears to die of his wounds, also depicts Charlie’s last breath; the circular structure resurrects him in subsequent scenes. The retrospective realization regarding these early scenes adds frustration to any easy account of the plot or the time scheme McDowall employs.

The relationships between the scenes are also problematic. As already noted, it is not clear whether the action is actually taking place or is being played out in the RPG. On top of that, McDowall exploits the gaps between the scenes. Almost no single scene features the same characters that appear in the previous or subsequent one. He has compared the gaps to the space between panels in comic books: it is the spectator’s job to connect them, not the playwright’s (McDowall in Trueman).

The character’s names also point to fictionality as they are taken from comic stars of early cinema (Ollie Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, Zeppo Marx, Fay Wray, etc.). McDowall has commented that he deliberately freed himself from using more naturalistic, real-sounding names to confer an ‘elasticity’ on his figures, an ability to surprise and move them in unexpected directions (McDowall in Rebellato 2015) . This can be felt in a number of situations, such as when Keaton is contrasted as being ruthless towards Gale, but tender towards Charlie, but the approach to nomination also opens up a route into the unexpected. In scene eighteen, for example, Charlie encounters Zeppo as a seagull; both are flying over Manchester. Charlie may be dead here, in a limbo state before his resurrection. The point is that, by this stage, such a surreal move is just another element of the play’s phantasmagoria.

In two of the RPG scenes, there is further dramaturgical uncertainty when character names are replaced by dashes. This may remind readers of plays like Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on her Life* or Sarah Kane’s *4:48 Psychosis*, in which no characters are attributed to speeches, a feature that has the power to call the nature of the individual into question. McDowall notes that ‘these lines are split between the actors as the director sees fit’ (304). I will discuss the effects of this device below.

Taken together, the formal articulation of a series of actions and events radically replaces certainty with doubt and makes definitive or even speculative accounts of what is happening, not to mention why the events are happening, virtually impossible. Consequently, one could hardly deny that reality is being called into question, thus unleashing a potential political challenge to the institution of the theatre as envisaged by Brecht and Müller.

The Politics of *Pomona*

According to Müller, there is a connection between formal experimentalism and a radical politics. The theatre’s artifice can open new ways to perceive the world and thus frustrate inured receptions of reality, delivered by a stable representational system such as naturalism.

There are certainly difficulties involved in making sense of the play, or the world of the play, and I want to explore some of the different possible interpretations. One way of understanding how the political, following Collini, might be understood in this play would take its lead from the proposition that we assume the whole play is an RPG. Such an approach takes seriously the potential reading that the action we watch is predicated on Charlie’s game where Keaton manages Ollie’s journey through Pomona. If this were the case, then all the human relationships in the play would have been defined by Charlie, the dungeon master. With such power, he would be able to create strange, fantastical and wonderful worlds, and the politics of the representations would have to be traced solely back to his whims. This interpretation, however, is unlikely, as the world that is conjured in the thriller scenes bears more than a passing resemblance to a version of the contemporary world. Trish Reid suggests that:

*Pomona* stages a dystopia that is particular to late capitalism. In it, catastrophe seems to have been normalized, and far from acting as a pretext for the emergence of a different way of living, the imagined world feels like an extension or an intensification of our own. (Reid 78-9)

Her qualifications of this dystopia are materialist ones, a suggestion that real socio-economic pressures have created something more concentrated and threatening than our own actual experience of contemporary reality. Rebellato does not ascribe to *Pomona* as a dystopia, instead noting:

But realism still. This isn't just fantasy. There's a patterning of motifs and events and concerns and attitudes that play out across the surface of the play that suggests our own culture, in our own time: drugs, faddish religions, faceless corporations, pervasive capitalism, school shootings, pornography, prostitution, gaming and body horror. (Rebellato 2014)

Indeed, the world of *Pomona* is marked by several features that are shockingly recognizable in our own world. Both Rebellato (Rebellato in McDowall 2020 xv) and Rabey (6) cite real-world sources attesting to the scale of the trade in babies and human organs, and to the presence of subterranean communities, living under the radar of the everyday world.

More specifically, the world of *Pomona* exhibits several features of contemporary neoliberalism. Virtually everything has been commodified and monetized,[[7]](#footnote-7) something most brutally evidenced in Pomona’s secret production of human beings and organs for sale. Conversely, the wealthy and powerful minority (Zeppo and Keaton) can enforce their wills unencumbered. While no mention is made of Keaton’s income, Zeppo’s derives his from rents. Rentier capitalism places great wealth in the hands of a slender few, exacerbating inequality while producing little in itself.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is no sense of a meritocracy, and ownership is dynastic: Zeppo has inherited or managed to secure (through force, one can only assume) his dead father’s extensive property portfolio and the privileges it confers. And in a world that trades on violence and reproduces itself through unchallenged hierarchies, the quality of the systems it maintains is shoddy and substandard. Zeppo feeds on an excess of chicken nuggets every night; the brothel is tawdry and security has only been put in place to protect the sex-workers as human capital, not as human beings; and Gale assures Keaton that the men she has tracking Fay down are ‘good’ (392) when we know how inept and flawed Moe and Charlie actually are (and Gale has previously called Charlie an ‘idiot’ (349)). When the pair try to decline the commission, Gale informs them that, due to their relatively high pay as security men, they have no choice. The absence of humane options is echoed in Ollie’s sister’s move to the brothel; her dangerous attempts to earn more money by participating in violent pornography; and Fay’s inability to turn to the police for help because her abusive husband is a policeman himself. In addition, labour itself is alienated in the Marxist sense of the word:[[9]](#footnote-9) Moe and Charlie do not know what they are guarding; the sex-workers and even Gale, their nominal boss, have no idea of their real roles in Pomona’s dark industry.

One of the most pervasive qualities of neoliberalism is the ways that it affects the individual: ‘the analysis of the person associated with neo-liberal political economy centres on individual independence rather than membership of society. This leads to a greater emphasis on choice and responsibility for outcomes’ (Gooby and Leruth 31). The problems faced by Ollie, Moe or Fay, as self-regulating, autonomous individuals, are both accepted as non-negotiable and have to be dealt with by them with no reference to any other instances. The status of society as unchangeable and unquestioned is mirrored in a discourse of passivity and reaction that pervades the play. From the outset, Zeppo decries any sense of engagement or intervention, arguing that his father came to grief after taking an interest in the properties he rented. ‘Not getting involved’ diminishes Moe and Charlie’s curiosity as to what they are actually guarding; the Ollie we encounter in the brothel does not want to involve her twin sister, despite having been beaten and raped in order to earn extra money. Passivity is not, however, a guarantee of a trouble-free life. We learn in scene ten that Charlie has a criminal record (which makes him virtually unemployable) although he was not actually involved in the school shooting for which he was charged. Getting involved, on the other hand, is certainly a route into trouble: a commitment to a sense of human contact or exerting active compassion for one’s friends leads to disaster for Fay, Moe and Charlie.

A language that turns (often nefarious) human activity into a series of depersonalized events serves as a convenient cloak for social relations in the play. In scene five, Fay comments on a colleague who has disappeared: ‘That’s the second one that happened to’ (335), using an impersonal construction to disguise the human trade we learn about later. Even when she gets her moment with Gale, she is only able to say ‘[the women] didn’t *leave*. They’re *gone*’ (372). In scene fifteen, when Keaton finally reveals the dark trade in which she is a major player, she nonetheless refers to a faceless ‘they’ (394) that control the business. And when causation is obscure or absent, it is invented. For example, when tasked with killing Fay, Moe defends the prospective deed by surmising that ‘there are *reasons*’ (364), the emphasis lending him a sense of authority where he clearly has none.

Before the play starts, McDowall does not offer a standard ‘dramatis personae’, but instead calls his characters ‘Active Ingredients’ (304). It is hard to read this denotation as anything but ironic in the context of this analysis, and it is actually offset by his more general directions, which follow on the same page: ‘Recommended Consumption’. While this, too, is also ironic, given the effort required to stage a play, there is something disquieting about the headings all the same. Social relations are obscured as a way of making it all but impossible to trace cause to effect and thus identify a mechanism that can be changed. Activity in the figures themselves is strictly limited to the carrying out of other people’s orders. As such the play presents a strikingly conservative view of its society in terms of its day-to-day functioning: a pernicious society regulates itself without a hint of even the possibility of change.

Experimental Dramaturgical Conservatism

The social picture of *Pomona* is bleak; it is an unappealing world characterized by great wealth inequality. There are squalid conditions for the working majority and a complete lack of accountability for the powerful minority. However, as Müller stated, an experimental dramaturgy has the ability to call the norms of a society into question and to offer spectators new perspectives and approaches to tackling its problems. The question thus arises as to whether *Pomona*’s experimental dramaturgy is able to call this state of affairs into question. In my reading so far, it appears that the politics of *Pomona* are the politics of contemporary neoliberalism, but that does not necessarily tell the whole story, given the prominence of the RPG thread.

In principle, the role of chance is central to all politics, given that none of us choose to be born in any specific place or at any specific time. That is, our *initial* place in the world is determined by chance. (As we develop, we then have possibilities to negotiate the social positions in which we find ourselves.) The potential for productive acknowledgement of this initial condition could well have been engineered through the RPG frame, but this, as will become evident, is not the case.

The RPG takes the material world of *Pomona* as a given and the choices offered are all bounded by the limits of the political situation described above, as Rabey notes: ‘the incorporation of the dice-throwing motifs into *Pomona* does not, admittedly, determine the (re)direction of the play’s scripted plot’ (Rabey 38). The RPG does not open up new possibilities or ones that may surprise us, as the overt RPG scenes merely compound their particular situations. At the end of the final RPG scene, when Ollie finds herself in the organ-harvesting facility, we find the following:

*All of* [the figures apart from Ollie] *roll dice, again and again and again throughout the following.*

* You’d be lucky to get
* You feel the hand close around your ankle
* You’d be lucky
* You feel the hand
* The hand
* The hand pulls
* The hand pulls you out into the open
* You’d be lucky to get out of here
* dead

*One last dice is rolled and they all lean in to see the number*.

The sequence highlights the role of chance in the pursuit of survival in hostile terrain. A fortunate outcome is possible (and, indeed, is realized here), but is solely dependent on good fortune, as the cliff-hanger of the final stage direction makes clear; a sense of agency is lacking. The RPG thus integrates itself into the fabric of *Pomona*’s society, reflecting the arbitrary way in which most of the figures progress through the scenes. The dice do not open wondrous new vistas, but retain the kinds of choices one encounters in everyday life. As such, the RPG element serves to reinforce the world of the play rather than to challenge it.

The unattributed fragments of dialogue in the quotation above are also revealed to be considerably less dramaturgically radical that they may at first appear. McDowall instructs theatre-makers that ‘the actors enter the space with the audience, and remain on stage throughout’ (304). That is, while Ollie is the focus of the scene, it is likely that the other six actors will be onstage surrounding her in some formation or other. Their identity is not of any import to the dice-rolling, and so while identity is actively problematized in *Attempts on her Life* or *4:48 Psychosis*, here it is effectively excised: it is not important who is rolling the dice, and the individual and, more importantly, its agency, have been erased. The potentially challenging dramaturgical device actually serves to hide the material processes of the stage world, reinforcing the obscured structures.

Elsewhere, there are hints that the seemingly dominant temporal structure of an eternal recurrence may be assailable. In scene thirteen, Moe pays for Fay’s time in the brothel, but not for sex. He confesses that he does not feel able to touch other people any more. By the end of the scene, Moe holds Fay’s foot and we read the direction: ‘*The world falls around them*’ (390). It appears that challenging the status quo can radically change it. However, a mere two scenes later, the world has been reconstituted, and Moe, together with Charlie, hold Fay, bound, as their prisoner. Such a rupture in the circular flow of time was already pre-figured in scene seven, when Ollie, in the RPG, finds herself walking in endless circles around a shopping centre. She is interrupted by a screaming woman with a laptop, someone we may identify as Fay in the thriller. Ollie reflects: ‘she broke my flow of looping and thinking’, before anonymous voices announce:

* The loop fractures
* But continues (345)

Indeed, the play itself concludes with this desire from Keaton: ‘I should burn it all to nothing. But they’d just start again’ (414).

The restitution of broken cycles finds a correspondence in Lovecraft’s Cthulhu intertext where the ancient creature is finally woken from its slumbers. It pursues a boat whose crew realize that its only chance to escape is to ram the monster. This it does, but as the vessel heads off, the sailors notice Cthulhu regenerating.

This process of mirroring is repeated in more formal *mises-en-abîme* in *Pomona*. Perhaps the most apparent instance is the parallel between the figures’ inability to fathom the nature of their world – the deferrals of agency in the language, the refusal or disinclination to ask questions – and our own inability, predicated on the impossibility of fully understanding what is happening in any one scene. This is compounded by a second act of mirroring that takes place in the very long opening speech. Zeppo opens *in media res* enthusiastically describing the finale of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to Ollie. McDowall stated that he wrote this opening as a way of reconciling the spectator with this ‘very threatening and strange and unwieldy’ man through ‘a shared mythology that we all have’ (McDowall in Haydon). Ollie rather deflates Zeppo by acknowledging the universality of this shared experience, and it is here that another parallel between play and reception arises. Zeppo believes, as we may, that we are seeing something new, experiencing it for the first time. Yet Ollie notes that *Raiders* is old and well-known, and, as the play progresses, we recognize beneath the new dramaturgy, an old and familiar social set-up that admits no questions and brooks no contradiction.

It would seem that the experimental dramaturgy actually shuts down a radical review of the society it represents in the fractured forms discussed above. The spectator discovers Pomona’s secret by the end of the play and Ollie escapes a slow and gruesome end by chance, but the play suggests that the cycle will simply start all over again as Ollie, dazed and confused, seeks help to locate a twin sister she believes has gone missing. For all its challenging forms, the play appears to be complicit with the world it stages.

A Weird Ray of Hope

The two critics who have engaged with *Pomona* most thoroughly disagree with this sentiment. Rebellato understands the play as ‘a scream of rage’ (Rebellato 2014) and Rabey as a ‘howl (no less than Allen Ginsberg’s poem) against human objectification and *waste*’ (Rabey 72). Most clearly, this force is felt in three different scenes, but takes the same form: a desire to destroy everything. In scene nine, Ollie’s twin seeks apocalyptic revenge on the city, wiping it out in a rain of fire; in scene fourteen Moe wants to wake up and find everyone gone; and, as noted above, Keaton, in her final lines of the final scene, imagines burning the city away, but, pointing to impersonal agents, she concludes that ‘they’d just start again’ (414). She reveals the hollowness of the eschatological fantasies, something actually pre-figured as early as scene three. Here, Gale, shortly before what we may believe is her death, instructs her banker to burn all her money, preferably in front of a ‘food bank, or a homeless shelter’ (323). This is a particularly telling incident in that it points to a contradiction at the heart of the play of ideas in *Pomona*. Gale articulates a Romantic desire (however bitter), just like those of Ollie’s twin, Moe and Keaton: to erase this terrible world alone. The problem is that this position emanates from and ends with the individual: they represent a moral repulsion. As Aristotle argued, some two millennia ago, ethics are subordinate to the dominant political system of the time:

Being naturally incapable of self-sufficiency as individuals, humans are naturally political animals. This human activity of politics involves the domination of other activities and, for Aristotle, their hierarchical ordering. (Knight 16)

Here, ethical positions, however nihilistic, do not call the political system into question; they are a safety valve that may indulge the complainant while preserving society. Gale’s demand to her bank falls on deaf ears; capital survives – the banker will not burn the cash – while the malcontent perishes. But Gale was also a functional part of the system until her own place in it was threatened by Keaton, demoting her response to one of existential petulance. It is certainly not a principled stand.

Rabey also considers that the changes evidenced in the final scene (Keaton developing a capacity for empathy through her friendship with Charlie; Ollie’s self-sacrifice that had liberated her twin) might either ‘instigate further violent rebirths’ or open up the possibility that the loop may be broken (Rabey 71 and 57). This seems highly unlikely, given that the promised violence is both uncoordinated and fanciful, while the system regenerates itself with apparent ease.

Rebellato, on the other hand, contrasts the human dramas of the play with the figure of Cthulhu, whom McDowall, following Lovecraft, understands as representing ‘this embodiment of the universe’s apathy’ (McDowall in Haydon). Rebellato observes that the play consistently displays ‘an attention to and sympathy for the plight of its characters and a subtle strain of ironic commentary that invites concern for the callousness of this world’ (Rebellato in McDowall 2020 xiv). This is undoubtedly true, and he provides an extensive list of examples (ibid. xvii), but, again, this does not address the overarching structures of the play’s politics. We may sympathize with the figures’ plights, but find no way to alter the conditions in which they struggle. The play continues its cycle from the nineteenth scene back to the first, regardless.

The division between the ethical and the political is obliquely addressed in a further *mise-en-abîme* when Charlie outlines the general principles of his game. He states: ‘it’s not hard to learn, but it’s hard to *master*’ (337). Participation in the world is deliberately simple, and making decisions permitted by the world is a part of the process. Yet an ability to control or even to change the rules is all but precluded, something emphasized by McDowall’s use of italics in this piece of dialogue. However, the line dialectically suggests that mastery *is* possible, opening the prospect of an escape from the apparent political inevitability encoded in the play’s form.

The implicit challenge to the order of *Pomona*’s systems is to be found in the figure of Cthulhu and in Zeppo’s warning not to get involved. Mark Fisher, approaching the Lovecraftian category of ‘the weird’, opens an interesting line of argument. He proposes that:

a weird object or entity is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. *Yet* if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. (Fisher 15)

The weird makes a brief appearance in *Pomona*. Although Cthulhu is mentioned in the RPG scenes, he is only seen in scene one, as a figure wearing a Cthulhu mask, who, without explanation, is able effortlessly to solve Rubik Cubes. In the final scene, Keaton, Ollie and the rest of the figures solve a Cube each before finally exiting the stage. While evidence of solving Rubik Cubes in a matter of seconds can be easily found on YouTube, the action is nonetheless remarkable and strange, and opens a vista onto the weird in the play. And if the weird supersedes present accepted categories, then the question arises as to how one might bring about such a revolution.

In the first scene, Zeppo offers Ollie a choice: she can accept the world as it is or question its appearances and start to understand how it works. Just like everyone in *Pomona*, Ollie chooses ignorance and encounters the world as she finds it. But as audience members, we may glimpse the weird at the start and the conclusion of the show and imagine the possibility of an alternative. That this, however, is a feature of the play’s content invites us to reconsider Brecht and Müller’s thoughts on the politics of representation in the theatre.

Conclusion

*Pomona* is a deeply troubling play. It offers a nightmarish world that is, however, a little too close to our own to be considered a fantasy. Its formal experimentalism mostly serves to support its conservative politics rather than to challenge them. This conclusion thus contradicts Müller’s suggestion that radical uncertainty is a prerequisite for play texts that can resist the limiting and reactionary institution of theatre. Indeed, *Pomona*’s remarkable popularity[[10]](#footnote-10) suggests that the play, for all its thematic and interpretive uncertainty, is eminently stageable, and a simple Google image search reveals surprising similarities between productions the world over. These may be predicated on McDowall’s instruction that ‘the actors enter the space with the audience, and remain on stage throughout’ (304), coupled with the dark setting and mood of the play.

It is difficult to locate *Pomona*’s deployment of the weird in the contemporary English-language playwriting landscape. D.C Moore’s *Common* (2017), for example, entertains ideas of the supernatural and contrasts rural Paganism with the nascent realities of capitalism in the early nineteenth century. The play’s language is also stylized, full of jarring compound formulations that frustrate simple understanding. The play’s world, then, is similar to that of *Pomona* in that it is marked by the instability of competing epistemologies and potentially contains strange phenomena. Yet these phenomena are themselves uncertain, such as when the central, possibly diabolical figure, Mary, casts doubt on her own paranormal powers by asking: ‘Yet twice now I am true-seeming-psychic. Or no p’aps I have such talent for deception I now deceive myself? Did not see in that Lord’s Soul except by reasoned deduction’ (Moore 64). The weird, then, is open to materialist scepticism and thus not necessarily present at all in what remains a peculiar play.

The work of Annie Baker comes closer to a collision between a world that we might recognize and manifestations of something beyond it. The very title, for instance, of *The Antipodes* (2019) already gestures to a world that is different from our own, drawing on pre-industrial notions of an inverted domain with inverted values on the other side of the world. The play is set in a windowless room, where a group of writers struggle to tell the next big story. They know that they want to focus on something monstrous, but are never able to locate it. The play features real, recognizable power hierarchies inside the room, while the most frequent references to an outside world are to the many new restaurants that specialize in specific forms of international cuisine. This proliferation already presents the world beyond the room as something familiar in a globalized world, yet striking in its capacity to generate culinary novelty so easily. The play takes a strange turn in its final pages when one of the writers seeks to circumvent the group’s block by invoking the paranormal and engendering a ritual, the chanting of a mantra. This, in itself, is not necessarily weird, and taps into contemporary mysticism as an antidote to overweening rationalism. However, a mere six pages later, the same writer inexplicably vomits ‘*a small jellyfish or a seahorse or anemone, covered in blood*’ (Baker 76). This instance turns a familiar situation into one that defies usual categories, satisfying Fisher’s definition of the weird. And while the incantation may simply gesture towards the esoteric as a desperate bid to achieve an end (which it does not, in any case), the production of the creature is utterly unfathomable. As such, it plays a similar role to that of the Cubes in *Pomona*: its presence radically changes the way we read and respond to the reality presented on stage.

The proposal I make to consider the weird as a catalyst for imagining a different politics is an element that exists in both *Pomona*’s and *The Antipodes’* printed forms, something which, in turn, contradicts Brecht’s claim that the theatre’s processes neutralize radical plays unless they are built to resist them. Here, merely enacting the weird ability to solve complex puzzles effortlessly or to eject a curious creature from one’s own body activates the plays’ invitation to call their stage worlds into question. It is nonetheless worth noting that *Pomona* is working on a very different scale from *The Antipodes* and its deployment of the weird is coupled with an invitation to ask difficult questions of reality. *The Antipodes* opens a vista on an inverted world and the presence of incomprehensible foreign bodies. That is, its solutions inhabit a world we no longer recognize whereas *Pomona* puts a response to very human problems in human hands, quite literally. However, McDowall notes in the introduction to his first volume of collected plays how the original director of the play, Ned Bennet, replaced the solution of the Cubes with the rolling of polyhedral dice, a move the playwright considered ‘really smart’ as a way of connecting the thriller to the RPG (McDowall 2016a xx). The Cubes can, however, remain on stage as an important part of the action if directors ignore McDowall’s approval of Bennet’s exchange (and the actors learn the requisite tricks of solving them quickly). The utopian moment thus rests not on the formal challenges the play sets the audience, but on an element of content: stage directions to perform defined actions. As such, *Pomona* presents itself as a counterexample to Brecht and Müller’s positions regarding the relationship between a play’s content, its form and politics. Here, experimental form serves to obscure social relations, but, counterintuitively, offers the play as eminently performable; a nugget of content, on the other hand, opens the possibility of another politics.

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1. The translation here, however, is mine. *Brecht on Theatre* offers ‘[theatre] ‘theatricalizes it all’ (71). As Brecht’s theatre often exploits theatricality, I find this translation misleading. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From my own experience, Opera North’s production of 1983-4, which I saw revived in 1990, and the Graeae production of 2014 amply deliver on the text’s disruptive promise. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Translations from the German are mine, unless otherwise acknowledged. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. He writes: ‘dramatic theatre is subordinated to the primacy of the text’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I will return to Rebellato’s additional considerations of the play’s politics, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All subsequent references to the play will take the form of a bracketed page number in the text itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Streeck for a detailed examination of the increasing encroachment of capital into every aspect of human existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Christophers for the connection between deriving wealth from rents and the neoliberal economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, for example, the chapter on alienation in Harvey, pp. 154-68.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rebellato lists over twelve productions worldwide (Rebellato in McDowall 2020 xi), and more have taken place since publication, such as ones in Sydney and at McGill University, Canada, on the eve of the global pandemic in early 2020. It was performed at RADA in London in June 2021. It is difficult to imagine that further productions will not be forthcoming over the years. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)