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*Spaces of Entanglement:  
Negotiating European Crossroads*

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Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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Janine Hauthal – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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# Europe at the Crossroads

## Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath*

Janine HAUTHAL

Vrije Universiteit Brussel<sup>1</sup>

### “Where Were All the Plays About Brexit?”<sup>2</sup>: Europe and/in British Theatre

When, on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2016, it turned out that the majority of the British had voted for ‘Brexit’ in the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, theatre critic Dominic Cavendish wondered publicly on his twitter account why British theatre had failed to tackle this momentous decision proactively. However, as fellow critic Matt Trueman suggested in response: “We might not have seen *Brexit: the Musical* – and nor would we want to – but many playwrights have explored the social and political factors that fed into the result” (n. pag.). Indeed, since the 1990s, a number of British plays have been set in or concerned with Europe, and Eastern Europe in particular, as e.g. Caryl Churchill’s *Mad Forest* (1990), Tariq Ali and Howard Brenton’s *Moscow Gold* (1990), David Greig’s *Europe* (1994), Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *The Break of Day* (1995) as well as David Edgar’s trilogy *The Shape of the Table* (1990), *Pentecost* (1994), and *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (2001) demonstrate. The majority of these plays were premiered between 1990 and 1995, i.e. in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the ‘Eastern bloc’ and the collapse of communism. They are therefore frequently referred to as ‘post-wall plays’.<sup>3</sup> Depicting

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<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was financed by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO).

<sup>2</sup> Matt Trueman (n. pag.) is quoting a fellow theatre critic: “Where were all the plays about Brexit? So wondered Telegraph critic Dominic Cavendish’s question the day after the EU referendum. ‘I must have missed that,’ he tweeted. ‘What a squandered opportunity by the theatre establishment to take a proactive role?’” I thank the anonymous reviewer for his/her inspiring comments that were particularly helpful for revising the following section.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mohr, Pankratz, and Hauthal.

British characters who travel to Europe and form love relations or adopt children there, many of these plays demonstrate an uneasy relation to Europe or include ambivalent representations of Europe. Often, the Eurocentric perception and ‘invention’ (cf. Wolff 4) of Eastern Europe as Western Europe’s ‘other’ is challenged, as, according to Ludmilla Kostova (84), it tends to exhibit “an undue and distorting privileging of Europe’s Western half”. Post-wall literature also often revokes the binary division between East and West, centre and margin, as well as the idea of Europe as a homogenous cultural space. In this way, post-wall literature contributes to rethinking the ‘New Europe’ that emerged after 1989 – if not from an East European point of view then at least with an East European focus.

In addition, as the following quote from Wertenbaker’s *The Break of Day* highlights, the turn to (Eastern) Europe in post-wall literature does not only stimulate reflection on British national identity, but also serves to point to transnational points of view:

MIHAIL: I am an old man. [...] I loved the future [...]. I still believe in history. Now, it will be in the hands of the children, possibly most of all, these cross-border children I have helped to get out. Born in one country, loved and raised in another, I hope they will not descend into narrow ethnic identification, but that they will be wilfully international, part of a great European community. (Wertenbaker 86)

Offering audiences a glimpse of the transcultural utopia of a future European community, Wertenbaker’s play demonstrates in an exemplary way that the reflection of Europe in British post-wall plays significantly broadens the insular outlook of previous ‘state of the nation’-plays, such as Howard Brenton’s *The Churchill Play* (1974), a dystopian picture of England 10 years in to the future, and Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* (1994), reflecting on the UK in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the new millennium, the British concern with Eastern Europe has been taken up by Tom Stoppard (*Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 2006), Tim Luscombe (*The Map of the World*, 2009; *The Second World*, 2011), and Simon Stephens (*Three Kingdoms*, 2012). While scholars have focussed on the counterhistorical account of communism (cf. Meerzon) and the confrontation of East and West (cf. Schreiber) in Stoppard’s play, the British-German-Estonian co-production of *Three Kingdoms* directed by Sebastian Nübling received critical attention for not only thematising

British writers' literary interest in 'post-wall Europe'<sup>5</sup> has often been ascribed to the parallels between the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989 and the disintegration of colonial empires in the process of decolonization. Kostova, for instance, points out:

Central to the perception of both historical shifts has been a crisis of (self-) representation involving, among other things, the reshuffling and/or downright disruption of traditional dichotomies such as self/same–other, here–there, and inside–outside. The serious problematisation of the idea of Europe as a unified whole may likewise be placed among the signs of the new condition. (83)

Accordingly, British post-wall literature often indicates a crisis of nationalist imagination on behalf of the British. Moreover, it tends to challenge British Euroscepticism – a sentiment that, as Menno Spiering has demonstrated, has fuelled constructions of a 'European Other' in British literature and culture by emphasizing the continent's difference, and often implying its inferiority in comparison to England. That such a representation of Europe, and of Eastern Europe in particular, has a long tradition in British literature is demonstrated by the exemplary case of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which characterizes England "as not-Europe" (Nyman 3).

To this day, British novels and TV mini-series continue to effectively exploit Eurosceptic sentiments. In the post-wall period, Eurosceptic attitudes, for instance, play a major role in Channel 4's *The Gravy Train* (1990) and *The Gravy Train Goes East* (1991), written by Malcolm Bradbury, as well as Bradbury's *Doctor Criminal* (1992), Tim Parks' *Europa* (1997), Michael Dobbs' *A Sentimental Traitor* (2012) and Alan Judd's *Uncommon Enemy* (2012). Set in the present, each of these narratives demonstrates how British Euroscepticism equips those

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but also embodying processes of Europeanization, in particular through its 'aesthetics of excess' and 'European' production process (cf. Zaroulia).

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to geopolitically defined terms such as Eastern or Central Europe, 'post-wall Europe' "refers to the whole continent in the aftermath of the fall of communism" (Kostova 83, note 1).

well who seek to counter and defy ‘Eurocratism,’ ‘Euroconspiracy,’ and ‘Eurofraud’. Other British Eurosceptic fictions are set in a dystopian future and exploit fears of a European super-state even more forcefully. Depicting the EU as a totalitarian institution that erases British sovereignty and national identity, novels such as *The Aachen Memorandum* (1995) by Andrew Roberts and the *Fractured Europe* trilogy by Dave Hutchinson (*Europe in Autumn*, 2014; *Europe at Midnight*, 2015; *Europe in Winter*, 2016) combine patriotism with Euroscepticism.<sup>6</sup> *The Aachen Memorandum* is set in 2045 and can be read as an anticipation of the Brexit referendum under different terms. In Roberts’ futuristic dystopia, the historian Horatio Lestoq discovers that the 2015 British vote to join the “United States of Europe” (Roberts 9), which turned Britain into a minor satrapy of a vast, protectionist, anti-American, and overly politically correct EU, had been rigged by a pro-European elite. Lestoq’s exposure of the referendum fraud eventually restores an independent United Kingdom in which expressions of nationalism and patriotism are no longer liable to prosecution.

While an exploration of British Eurosceptic prose is beyond the present article’s focus on playwriting, similar attitudes can also be found in two British plays written in the new millennium. Tim Luscombe’s *The Schuman Plan* (2006) and Richard Bean’s *In the Club: A Political Sex Farce for the Stage* (2007) specifically target the EU. Both plays premiered in London’s Hampstead Theatre. Spanning seventy years from 1935 to 2006, Luscombe’s play reportedly emerged out of the author’s “lifelong love of Europe and things European” (Luscombe 115) and was written with the aim “to explore and dramatise Britain’s anti-European feelings” (*ibid.*). The play accommodates both Europhile and Eurosceptic voices as it follows Bill Bretherton’s career from his childhood in rural Suffolk and his experience as a

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<sup>6</sup> Of these British writers, most have made their political views public. Only Hutchinson, however, has declared not to be in favour of ‘Brexit’ (“The Secret”), while Dobbs (Palmeri, Dobbs), Judd (Moore), and Roberts (Spear’s) have publicly supported the “Vote Leave” campaign. Parks (n. pag.), in turn, has expressed both his love for Europe and his growing sympathy for ‘Leave’ voters.

soldier in the Netherlands during the Second World War to his employments first as civil servant under UK prime ministers Clement Attlee and Edward Heath, then as an increasingly disillusioned Eurocrat, and finally as resigned but efficient Chief Inspector of the UK Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.<sup>7</sup> Luscombe's play juxtaposes the idealistic and peace-keeping undertaking of European integration as outlined in the Schuman Plan with the undemocratic, over-regulated, intransparent, and corrupt "devilish monolith, populated by swarms of evil-doing Eurocrats" (95) that the EU has eventually turned into and under which the British local population suffers. With its satirical portrayal of scheming, corrupt, incompetent, misogynist, and self-centred EU parliamentarians, *In the Club* even more clearly fuels Eurosceptic attitudes. Set in "the function suite of a superior Strasbourg hotel" (Bean 22), Bean's farce centres on the hapless British MEP Philip Wardrobe and his efforts to father a child and become the future president of the European Parliament. With its stereotypical portrayal of British, Eastern European, French, German, and Turkish characters, *In the Club* clearly exploits and affirms national and gender clichés.

British Euroscepticism and Little Englandism even extend to British discourses on theatre and playwriting. With his experimental postdramatic style of writing, Martin Crimp, for instance, has repeatedly been labelled a 'European' playwright, and his works for the stage have been described in terms of a 'continental aesthetic' (cf. Sierz 2006: 167-172).<sup>8</sup> Another case in point is a 2011 *Guardian* article by Andrew Haydon. Prompted by the negative reviews that London's Young Vic production of *I Am the Wind* by Norwegian playwright Jon Fosse, directed by Patrice Chéreau, had received, Haydon poses the following question: "Does Britain

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<sup>7</sup> Focusing on transnational events in the history of twentieth-century Europe (from a British perspective), one could connect Luscombe's play to practices of "performative historiography" (30) through "staging the European century" (216) which Adrian Kear has explored in works by European theatre companies such as Needcompany (Belgium), Jaunais Rigas Teatris (Latvia), Societas Raffaello Sanzio (Italy), National Theatre Wales (UK) and Studios Kabako (France/Democratic Republic of the Congo). For a further discussion of works of theatre and performance concerned with Europe, cf. the contributions in Zaroulia/Hager.

<sup>8</sup> Crimp has also reflected on how his works relates to British theatre as an institution (cf. Crimp).

have a problem with European theatre?” The debate concerning British theater and Euroscepticism culminated in January 2017, when award-winning British playwright David Hare controversially claimed in an interview that continental director’s theatre has ‘infected’ British theatre and ousted the “state-of-the-nation tradition”:

To me [the tradition of ‘state of England’ plays is] the strongest line in British theatre. *Jerusalem*, the Jez Butterworth play, is the last surpassingly successful play in that tradition. Now we’re heading in Britain towards an over aestheticized European theatre. We’ve got all those people called theatre makers – God help us, what a word! – coming in and doing director’s theatre where you camp up classic plays and you them and you prune them around. And all that directorial stuff we’ve managed to keep over on the continent is now coming over and beginning to infect our theatre. And of course if that’s what people want, fine. But I’ll feel less warmth towards the British theatre if that “state-of-the-nation” tradition goes. (Hare qtd. in Sweet 68-69; cf. also Alberge)<sup>9</sup>

If, for a moment, we were to take Hare’s claim seriously, it could imply that there have been no ‘Brexit plays’ on the British stage because works by continental European theatre makers have displaced the traditional state-of-the-nation play, and that only the latter may have been capable to unravel and discuss the sentiments that informed the ‘Brexit’ vote. Of course, already the plays by Luscombe and Bean counter the argument presented by Hare. However, Hare may have a point in so far as the statistics and commentaries in the aftermath of the ‘Brexit’ vote showed that the vote was only partly informed by British Euroscepticism and a resurgent nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it also reflected anti-establishment as well as anti-immigration and

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<sup>9</sup> A similar debate ensued in Scotland where the National Theatre was “under fire for neglecting homegrown drama” (Fisher n. pag.; cf. also Kemp) but playwright and first NTS dramaturge David Greig – who has repeatedly stressed his interest in Europeanness and European identity (see, for instance, Greig in Wallace 165-166) – as well as later NTS directors objected to such expressions of ‘Little Scotlandism’ and professed a more open attitude to Europe and European theatre.

<sup>10</sup> According to Spiering, British Euroscepticism can be distinguished from that of other nations: “Perceptions of identity are formed by means of oppositional thinking, by contrasting the Self with the Other. The British are not French, the French are not German. The case of Britain is special in that the Other can also be Europe” (20). Hence, for the British, Eurosceptic attitudes are a means to express national identity. However, the rise of nationalist parties in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and other European member states demonstrates that Euroscepticism and allegations of corruption against the EU are by no means uniquely British.

xenophobic sentiments.<sup>11</sup> In her keynote at a Tory conference on 5 October 2016, British Prime Minister Theresa May claimed that the ‘Brexit’ vote “was a vote not just to change Britain’s relationship with the European Union, but to call for a change in the way our country works – and the people for whom it works – forever” (“Theresa” n. pag.).

Hence, based on the often-voiced view that the ‘Brexit’ vote was not (only) about Europe and the EU, but (also) a call for change concerning Britain’s domestic and foreign policies, indeed, Eurosceptic plays may not be adequately described as ‘Brexit plays’. Instead, this term may be better suited for plays addressing Europe’s so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and the fear of foreign immigration that the “Vote Leave” campaign fuelled, for instance, with its slogan “Let’s take back control of our borders”.<sup>12</sup> Based on these considerations, this article shifts focus from 1990s British post-wall plays and the Eurosceptic plays of the new millennium to a more recent British play about Europe, namely *How to Hold Your Breath* by Scottish playwright Zinnie Harris. Concretely, the following case study will show how Harris’s play not only continues the rethinking of Europe necessitated by the integration of formerly Communist East European states so characteristic of post-wall plays, but also – by engaging with Europe’s financial and refugee crisis – addresses topics more closely related to issues that allegedly informed the British ‘Brexit’ vote.

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<sup>11</sup> See, by way of example, Busquets Guàrdia. See also Sayer who opposes interpretations of the ‘Brexit’ vote as “a revolt of the deprived and the dispossessed” (102) and, instead, explains it with reference to post-factual politics and white privilege as well as to assumptions of national exceptionalism and racial superiority. Channel 4’s comedy series *Power Monkeys* (original released between 8 June and 6 July 2016) also connects the ‘Brexit’ vote to post-factual politics. Set during the British EU referendum campaigns, this mini-series follows both camps as well as political aides who serve Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

<sup>12</sup> See also Haydon, according to whom critical attacks of European drama and theatre are indicative of a deep “suspicio[n] of foreign drama” in Britain (n. pag.).



### ***How to Hold Your Breath as Post-Wall and ‘Brexit’ Play***

Premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in February 2015 – just when Europe’s so-called ‘refugee crisis’ began to gain momentum –, Harris’s dystopia flips the divide between North and South on its head by inviting spectators to imagine what would happen if Europe were suddenly plunged into a massive financial crisis and Africa became the promised land. The play depicts Dana and her sister Jasmine on a nightmarish trip through Europe that culminates in their desperate attempt to reach the Egyptian city of Alexandria by crossing the Mediterranean in an overcrowded boat – a journey only Dana miraculously survives.

Harris’s engagement with Europe sixteen months before the British voted to leave the EU contrasts sharply with the turn to national concerns that tends to characterise British artworks conceived after the vote. In those works that publishers and journalists have started to promote as so-called ‘Brexit’ novels or plays, Europe is rarely mentioned. ‘Brexit’ novels and plays, instead, are focussed on the attempts of their protagonists to make sense of the vote and depict Britain as a deeply divided nation. These focal points as well as a turn to national concerns, for instance, clearly inform the series of nine mini plays, created by British playwrights (including David Hare, Abi Morgan and A.L. Kennedy) and commissioned by *The Guardian*, as becomes already manifest in the series’ title: *Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation* (2017).<sup>13</sup> Hence, by clearly mirroring the inward-turned gaze of British politics in the aftermath of the vote, ‘Brexit’ novels and plays differ significantly from the European outlook of earlier post-wall plays.

In this context, Harris’s play is of particular interest. Just like earlier post-wall plays, it clearly engages with Europe and thus sharply contrasts with the ‘Brexit’ novels and plays

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<sup>13</sup> Focussed as they are on the national divide as a result of the vote and on dramatising difference, the short novel *The Cut* (2017) by Anthony Cartwright and commissioned by Pereine-publisher Maïke Ziervogel, as well as *Autumn*, the first of four seasonal novels by Ali Smith (2017), are further cases in point.

published after the referendum. At the same time, it clearly explores more pertinently social and political factors that fed into the referendum result than earlier post-wall plays did and in this respect qualifies as a ‘Brexit’ play in the sense initially introduced by Cavendish. Yet, except for a review article by William C. Boles who praises the play’s “powerfully dire view of a future Europe” (105), Harris’s play has not yet received any critical attention beyond a number of theatre reviews, with assessments ranging from “terrifically satirical nightmare fantasy” (Sierz 2015: n. pag.) to “ragbag dystopia” (Clapp n. pag.). The focus of my analysis will be threefold. Firstly, I will explore the play’s representation of space and how its strategy of reversal urges us to look at Europe as a ‘space of entanglement.’ Secondly, Harris’s way of addressing manifold political and social issues through magical realism will be scrutinized in order to investigate whether the play’s aesthetics can be related to the notion of entanglement. Thirdly, I will look at the peculiar combination of satire and moralisation in *How to Hold Your Breath* that has earned the play mixed reviews.

### **Harris’s Dystopian Europe as a ‘Space of Entanglement’**

Harris’s play is predominantly set in what is just called “Europe” (Harris 13). In the course of the play, we learn that Dana and her pregnant sister Jasmine live in Berlin (cf. 53, 81), but leave the city together for a job interview that Dana has in Alexandria. What starts as a Grand Tour through Europe, however, soon turns into a desperate bid to flee as illegal immigrants to safety in Africa.

Throughout the play, references to Europe are frequent. They allude to Europe as a way of life based on a shared system of values. In the supra-nation of Europe, individuals are protected from economic hardships and helped in case of medical emergencies. Europe is where politicians act on behalf of people’s interest, where men usually do not pay for sex and where “people did use to care” (123). The persistence of this idea of Europe shows, when – after the

ever-helpful Librarian informs the sisters about Europe's "internal collapse" (83) and the economic disaster that has caused all banks to "shut their doors [...] again" (*ibid.*) – Jasmine's confidence in Europe is unshaken:

JASMINE: [...] what we need is an embassy. We're Europeans. We'll go to the embassy tomorrow and tell them what has happened, OK? This sort of thing happens, all the time. No one actually loses money. They sort it  
[...]  
when we go to the embassy we will explain we need some petty cash to tide us over. We won't be the only people in this boat. I told you.  
DANA: there isn't an embassy. (88-89)

However, the fact that Jasmine's use of metaphor ("we won't be the only people in this boat") foreshadows her disturbing death by drowning, implicitly mocks her belief in Europe as a superpower. Jasmine's arrogance (or naivety?) makes her unable to realize that her mantra "because we live in Europe, because nothing really bad happens" (92) no longer conforms with reality. Even when, as the stage directions indicate, she and Dana are with "*hundreds of other people*" (143) on a boat, "*jammed in like sardines*" (*ibid.*), and are about to lose their lives in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean by night, Jasmine still wonders whether they "should ring [their] local politician" (*ibid.*). Through the character of Jasmine, Harris thus reveals how Europe functions as a "fantasy homeland, [...] as an *a posteriori* invention, [...] [t]hat Europeans were urged to wait for" (Zaroulia/Hager 6).

Although Jasmine's adherence to an idea of Europe that the play's dystopian vision has clearly abandoned fits with Harris's overall portrayal of Jasmine as the more naïve of the two sisters, it should be noted that smart and capable Dana, an expert in "Costumer Dynamics" 36), expresses a very similar belief in Europe. While her one-night-stand Jarron tells her that "Europe is in the shit" (98), Dana initially remains convinced of Europe's ability to overcome its crisis, objecting that "Europe will pull together" (*ibid.*). Therefore, calling for an ambulance to attend her sister's miscarriage, she is shocked to learn that her sister will only be treated if

Dana can pay for it in cash (cf. 110-114; we learn later that Dana sold her mobile in order to pay for her sister's treatment.)

The sisters' shared belief shows that, for them, transnational Europe (initially) functions as an "imagined community" in the sense that Benedict Anderson has outlined in his theory of the modern nation: "[The nation] is an imagined political community [...] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Dana and Jasmine conceive Europe as a community with a shared system of values. Especially in times of crisis and danger, the sisters take refuge in a 'European we,' thus holding up in their minds "the image of their communion" with fellow Europeans, confirming that, as Anderson remarks, the nation should be "treated as if it belonged with 'kinship' and 'religion,' rather than with [ideologies such as] 'liberalism' or 'fascism'" (5).

That one of the play's main concerns is the contemplation of identity and belonging is already indicated in the first encounter between Dana and Jarron when she repeatedly asks him where he comes from but he refuses to tell her (cf. Harris 15, 19). Following the argument that *How to Hold Your Breath* imagines Europe as a supra-nation with a shared system of values, the dialogue also insinuates that Jarron is of non-European descent because he does not share Dana's system of values: "JARRON: so? I pay for sex, I thought everyone does // DANA: not around here // JARRON: they do where I come from // DANA: and where the fuck is that // hell?" (19). Jarron's implied non-European origin, then, gives a different ring to his allegedly black semen (cf. 23).

In her play, Harris does not problematize European identity as such, nor does she seek to diversify it. Rather, her dystopian depiction of Europe ironizes her characters' belief in Europe as a community of shared values. In an act of reversal, Harris's apocalyptic play turns ideas on immigration on their head, as characters look for aid and support in countries south of Europe.

LIBRARIAN: the borders are shut. Istanbul has shut its borders  
 one way, Alexandria the other  
 all of Europe is trying to get out  
 DANA: they'll let us through  
 LIBRARIAN: you think  
 why you?  
 [...]
   
 it's quite different over there. Better  
 of course everyone wants to get through. (119)

With Europe suffering from crisis, Africa becomes a new beacon of economic hope. In the aftermath of its financial collapse, Europe changes beyond recognition. Significantly, in the process of change, Europe loses its name and is likened to hell, as the following exchange between Dana and the Librarian demonstrates.

DANA: is there a guidebook to this place?  
 LIBRARIAN: there is a guidebook to every place.  
 DANA: what is it called here then?  
 LIBRARIAN: I don't think it has a name.  
 DANA: it's hell then  
 it might have been Europe yesterday. [...]
   
*Beat.*  
 people did use to care, didn't they? We didn't just imagine it.  
 LIBRARIAN: they did use to, yes  
*Beat.* (122-123)

One of the many harrowing scenes that ensue shows Dana prostituting herself for just 10 euros in order to earn the money to pay for her sister's and her journey to the border and being brutally beaten up and mugged by two other women reduced to the same circumstances (cf. 138-143). By demonstrating "how quickly economic collapse could lead to the loss of a moral compass among Europeans deprived of securities they have always taken for granted" (De Ambrogio n. pag.), Harris makes us aware of how values attached to binary divisions of us–them, centre–margin, inside–outside can change and how rapidly the idea and ideal of Europe can deteriorate. Her strategy of reversal undermines the notion of a "Fortress Europe" and, instead, urges us to look at Europe as a 'space of entanglement' in the sense of Rey Chow who defines

“entanglement” as “a topological looping together that is at the same time an enmeshment of topics” (1) and “a figure for meetings that are not necessarily defined by proximity or affinity” (2). Seen through the lens of Chow’s concept of entanglement, Harris’s imagination of Europe suggests that – as critic Marco de Ambrogi puts it in a phrase echoing both Jasmine’s metaphor and the play’s ending – “there is no ‘them’ as distinct from ‘us’: we could easily all be in the same boat” (n. pag.). Inspired by quantum physics, “in which the term ‘entanglement’ designates mysterious connections between particles” produced by “reactions that are not the result of proximity” (Chow 2, note 2), Chow’s concept, moreover, allows us to further define the kind of entanglement that Harris’s strategy of reversal produces. Hence, with Chow, the kind of entanglement resulting from *How to Hold Your Breath*’s representation of space “might be conceivable through partition and partiality rather than conjunction and intersection, and through disparity rather than equivalence” (1).<sup>14</sup>

### **Magical Realist Ambiguity in *How to Hold Your Breath*: An ‘Aesthetics of Entanglement’?**

Having explained how the play’s representation of space envisions entanglement through topological looping and disparity, I would now like to turn the play’s aesthetics and explore the possibility of relating Harris’s use of magical realism to the notion of entanglement. Harris’s play operates on several levels and invites audiences to believe that Dana’s one-night-stand Jarron, a UN-worker, is a demon. Jarron represents the reduction of all human relationships to a monetary transaction: He seemingly orchestrates the social and economic collapse of Europe to bring about Dana’s ruin and to punish her for her refusal to be paid 45 euros for their night

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<sup>14</sup> Expanding this article’s focus on the play as text, a performance analysis of the piece would be desirable. In particular, such an analysis could investigate to what extent the representation of scenic space by means of different signifying practices (including stage design and sound) in a performance of *How to Hold Your Breath* could itself be described as ‘entangled’. Moreover, it could examine how the added entanglement of live performance potentially affects spectators’ perception and whether (or not) it makes them feel viscerally implicated in the play’s representation of Europe as a space of entanglement.

together.<sup>15</sup> In the course of the play, Dana is repeatedly offered these 45 euros but steadily refuses. The play, however, leaves it up to recipients to decide whether they follow Dana and read these coincidences as temptations of the demon or whether they believe the whole play (or at least Dana's later encounters with Jarron) to be merely imagined. In this way, Harris manages to implicate spectators and readers in Dana's quest.

In a performance of the play directed by Vicky Featherstone, featuring Maxine Peake as Dana and Michael Shaeffer as Jarron, that I saw at the Royal Court in February 2015, both readings were possible. Readers of the play, by contrast, might notice one stage direction that explicitly refers to Jarron as "the demon": "DANA: someone will help us // JARRON: do you think? // DANA: as long as there are people there is some kind of civilising influence // *The demon laughs at that. Long and hard*" (Harris 103). However, several of the play's stage directions break with the convention of an outside perspective and are focalized through Dana. When Dana gets stuck in her presentation for her first interview, for instance, a stage direction states: "*She feels like an idiot*" (37). Similarly, there is a stage direction when Dana has just prostituted herself that reads: "*Thank god it is over*" (137). Readers, therefore, might refuse to treat the stage direction concerning Jarron's devilish nature as (objective) evidence and might read it as an expression of Dana's point of view instead. Hence, in both playtext and performance, Harris's use of magical realism creates an ambiguity that prompts recipients to make up their own mind about how to conceive the play's relationship with reality and conspiracy, respectively. While speaking of 'an aesthetics of entanglement' might be a bit of a metaphorical stretch, Harris's way of implicating the audience by way of ambiguity nevertheless makes it possible to relate the play's aesthetics to the notion of entanglement.

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<sup>15</sup> For an exploration of the connections between Europe, capitalism, and crisis see Zaroulia/Hager.

Yet, critics of the play did not uniformly appreciate the ambiguity of Harris's play as Susannah Clapp's truculent verdict in *The Guardian* (15 Feb. 2015) demonstrates in an exemplary way:

When the 'devil' says what a powerful person he is, are we supposed to take this as fact, or with a pinch of (over-the-shoulder) salt? There is no way of knowing. What does it mean in a play that talks about debt and Europe, that the villain thinks of himself as being in debt? It is more puzzling than intriguing. [...] How not to write a play (n. pag.).<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Harris's combination of satire and moralisation in *How to Hold Your Breath* has earned the play mixed reviews and provides the third and final aspect of my analysis of the play.

### **A Modern Morality Play? The Play's Satirical Dimension**

While, all by all, a majority of critics responded positively to Harris's play, they did level criticism at its moralistic attitude. Michael Billington, again in *The Guardian* (11 Feb. 2015), for instance, holds that "the piece itself feels like a modern morality play that allows little room for argument. [...] [T]he play, which basically shows once-comfortable capitalists put into the position of refugees, feels as if it were illustrating a thesis rather than exploring a conflict" (n. pag.). Billington certainly has a point in claiming that Harris conceptualises her characters rather allegorically than psychologically (cf. *ibid.*). But he fails to acknowledge "the satirical streak" of *How to Hold Your Breath* that Dominic Cavendish has pointed out in his review of the play in the *Telegraph* (11 Feb. 2015):

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly, online reviewer Stephen Collins wondered: "But what does it all mean? Does it mean anything? // Is this a state of Europe piece or a state of modern society piece or something like that? Is it a series of vignettes which depict aspects of modern life but in a mostly disconnected, jarring way – thereby reflecting the disconnected, jarring way modern life lurches? Is it a kind of tapestry, with snatches of observations or portents about the near future to make us think? // Or is it just a badly conceived hotchpotch of omens and 'truths'?" (n. pag.)



The ingenuity of Zinnie Harris's piece [...] is that it operates on multiple levels. Our heroine's perturbing odyssey [...] has a satirical streak. Imagining Europeans as refugees is an exaggerated doomsday scenario that could be read as the product of Dana's mental disintegration and the sort of collective hysteria that privileges Western panic over real Third World tragedies. (n. pag.)

Not only does the play's satirical dimension become manifest in Dana's interaction with Jarron/the demon, but even more so in the character of the Librarian who pops up at regular intervals in Dana's life with increasingly absurd "How to" self-help books such as "*How to Find a Bank when They Have All Shut*" (Harris 83) and "*How to Spot Danger and Do Something About It*" (149) which, however, never fail to correctly predict the turns that Dana's life takes in the course of the play. The Librarian figures as a guardian angel of sorts, symbolising – as Billington aptly puts it – "a consumerist belief in easy solutions to every problem" (n. pag.). At the end of the play, he pleads for Dana's death, as she – in his eyes – has lost everything and has been traumatized by her experience, while Jarron makes her survive with a shot of adrenaline and sends her back to a "modern living" (Harris 158) based on hazy forgetfulness. With this final twist, Harris possibly sought to extend the audience-involving impact of her play, leaving it up to recipients to learn from her imaginary dystopia, as Cavendish's review aptly illustrates:

[...] [L]anding on stage in the week that the ramifications of a Grexit and the engulfing ills of the Eurozone have become yet more starkly apparent, Harris is tapping into something deep and dark in our show of "business as usual": what if things do take a relentless turn for the worse and we all end up in "hell"? While we may laugh at superstition, have we not, in some way, sold our souls? (n. pag.)

The didactic message of the final scene may not make *How to Hold Your Breath* "a play of enduring power" (*ibid.*), but – to quote Cavendish once again – one that "has its finger on our jittery pulse" (*ibid.*). Hence, Cavendish – namely the critic who attacked British theatre makers for having missed the opportunity to take a proactive role in 'Brexit' debates – does acknowledge the timeliness of Harris's play. Following Cavendish's lead, this article will

therefore conclude by exploring how the play's depiction of a Europe as a space of entanglement contributes to imagining Britain in/out of Europe.

### **Conclusion: Just another Europe or an other Europe?**

Staging refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean by boat six months before the image of a young drowned boy who was found on a beach near Bodrum received massive media attention,<sup>17</sup> and confronting British anti-immigration sentiments more than a year before the UK Independence party of Nigel Farage published racist posters such as “Breaking Point” in support of the “Vote Leave” campaign,<sup>18</sup> the example of *How to Hold Your Breath* shows that British playwrights have indeed explored factors that fed into the British EU referendum result. However, while the play depicts a Europe that stands both literally and metaphorically at the crossroads, its strategy of reversal falls short of offering alternative, inclusive, or diversified images of Europe. Moreover, set on a continent in turmoil, the play does not challenge British insularity or the “Vote Leave” campaign's geopolitical claim that the UK can put an end to immigration by stepping out of the EU.

Comparing Harris's play with the earlier post-wall plays set in or concerned with (Eastern) Europe mentioned above, it becomes clear that, with the exception of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, Harris provides the only play that does not turn to Eastern Europe to stimulate reflection on British national identity. Her “state of Europe piece” (Collins n. pag.) is directly concerned with Europe and European issues without getting tied up in the EU-conspiracies and EU-bashing that British Eurosceptic fiction tends to indulge in. *How to Hold Your Breath*, in

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., the article “Shocking images of drowned Syrian boy show tragic plight of refugees” by Helena Smith, published in *The Guardian* on 2 September 2015.

<sup>18</sup> UKIP's highly controversial anti-migrant poster used a photograph of migrants crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015 and had the only prominent white person in the photograph obscured by a slogan which read: “We must break free from the EU and take control of our borders.” According to *The Guardian*, the poster had been reported to the police by a member of the Unison trade union based on its alleged ignition of racist hatred (cf. Stewart/Mason).

particular, critiques a specifically European way of life by undermining Europe's alleged superiority and stability. Thus, similar to other post-wall plays and even more clearly, Harris 'writes back' against Eurocentric attitudes. Her strategy of reversal turns the tables by making Africa the new beacon of hope. But, by having doctors there act on the basis of economic rather than humanitarian values, weighing up the costs of burying or shipping back the drowned, the play remains committed to a binary spatial logic that crucially limits its critical exploration of Europe as a space of entanglement.

DOCTOR: well, if you will be stupid enough to cross on a boat like that  
they bring it on themselves

[...]

why do they do it?

why do they take the risk?

*Beat.*

JARRON: what should we do with the body?

DOCTOR: we'll organise some kind of burial. See, that is our problem too. We either bury them here or pay to have them shipped back to where they came from. Either way it comes to us to fork out. The economics of the European collapse will go on and on.

*The Doctor starts to go off.*

get her processed and get on to the other ones. Don't spend too long. (Harris 153-154)

Putting the blame on the refugees, revealing a lack of understanding when it comes to the reasons for their flight, and complaining about the burden of burying the dead migrant bodies or shipping them 'back to where they came from', the female doctor, as a representative of the new beacon, repeats well-rehearsed European reactions about the refugee crisis. Also her handling of Dana's death demonstrates that Harris's Africa is like Europe. Holding up a capitalist ethics devoid of empathy, it epitomizes 'another Europe' that is simply located elsewhere. Therefore, despite her distinctly critical stance, Harris's topology in *How to Hold Your Breath* is oddly devoid of the borderscapes, contact zones, and liminal spaces that feature so prominently in other post-wall plays and that possibly could have allowed Harris to imagine an other (alternative) Europe instead of just 'another Europe'. Yet ultimately, given the inward-

turned gaze of recent ‘Brexit’ novels and plays, it remains to be seen whether British novelists and dramatist in a post-Brexit future will (again) follow Harris’s example and imaginatively venture across the Channel or whether the inward turn and national concerns will prevail in the years to come.

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