Introduction

> Comoran. Woden. Jack-of-Green. Jack-in-Irons. Thunderdell. Búri, Blunderbore, Gog and Magog, Galligantus. Vili and Vé, Yggdrasil, Brutus of Albion. Come, you drunken spirits. Come, you battalions. You fields of ghosts who walk these green plains still. Come, you giants!
> (Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem*, p. 109)

Johnny 'Rooster' Byron's rallying cry, accompanied by the relentless beating of his drum, brought Jez Butterworth's 2009 *Jerusalem* to its close on the stage of London's Royal Court theatre with an invocation of the still talismanic power of England's green spaces — of the 'pleasant pastures', 'mountains green' and 'clouded hills' of William Blake's poem which gives the play its name. Butterworth's play brought to the stage two versions of the rural, as Laura Barton identified in the *Guardian*: 'the country we recognise, scruffed right up against that dreamy, idealised place of popular imagination — that scepter'd, green, and pleasant land, stewed with an island that is squat and gristly and fierce' ('Why I love Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem', *Guardian*, 25 October 2011). In other words, for every Rooster, whose character seemed to Barton to contain resonances of 'Robin Hood, Will o' the Wisp, Puck, John Barleycorn, the Green Man, [and] George and the Dragon', Butterworth also provides a Davey, working in the abbatoir: 'Get there six in the morning — hungover, hazmat suit, goggles — and I stand there and I slay two hundred cows. […] Have lunch. Pot Noodle. Come back. Slay two hundred more' (p. 89).

Jerusalem brought to the London stage a complex, double-edged experience of the rural. Its audiences were confronted both with the proscenium adorned with cherubs and woodland scenes and the '*Rubbish. Empty bottles. A car seat, a swing [… and] the remains of a smashed television*' scattered around the woodland clearing. Their experience thus mirrored the unexpected reality facing the residents of the 'seventy-eight brand new houses' on the nearby estate mentioned in the play:

> DAVEY I bet it never said in the brochure: 'Detached house, three beds with garden overlooking wood with free troll. Free ogre what loves trance music, deals cheap spliff and whizz, don't pay no tax, and has probably got AIDS. Guaranteed non-stop aggravation and danger.' I bet that weren't in the brochure. (p. 30)

Rural ideal/rural reality

With its contrasts between the ancient landscapes of prehistoric England and the encroaching houses of the new estate, David Rabey suggests that Butterworth's play raises a wider set of questions about English society and culture: questions 'about belonging and corporate power and local control and who is in charge; about a sense of place and what constitutes it' (2015, pp. 108-9, citing Kingsnorth 2008, p. 106). Those questions run urgently through this volume, and through my discussion of theatre that both represents a rural sense of place and plays a part in constituting it. The next section of this book, 'Defining the Rural', thus begins with an interrogation of that rural sense of place, and the freight of imagery that it carries. While acknowledging that the rural is multiple and varied, woven into the different elements of the increasingly complex relationships between the different countries, regions and communities that make up the United Kingdom, I argue that there is a tendency to persistently return to a nostalgic and idealised perspective of the rural as a 'green world'. As the Marxist critic and key twentieth-century cultural thinker Raymond Williams recognised in his seminal discussion of *The Country and the City* (1973): 'on the country' — what I am terming the 'rural' in this book — 'has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue' as well as 'backwardness, ignorance, limitation', even though 'the real history, throughout, has been astonishingly varied' (p. 9).

Using the framework of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's threefold understanding of space as perceived, conceived and lived, through which he argues that space is always produced rather than natural and neutral, I argue in 'Defining the Rural' that the reality of the lived rural is frequently overlaid with external representations and perceptions, which can shape the potential of rural lives. Indeed, it is partly the aim of this volume to explore the ways in which theatre has had and might have a role to play in the cultural production of such perceptions. But I also argue that, setting aside such perceptions, we need to re-engage with the actual place and lived practices of the rural in order to fully understand the nations that we live in or visit. Thus, while the examples here are largely taken from a UK or Irish context, the questions raised here will resonate in other countries and nations, wherever divisions between urban and rural exist.

Rural representations

The implications of our repeated failure to fully engage with the rural in all its guises are problematic, as Christine Hamilton and Adrienne Scullion make clear in *The same, but different*, their 2004 report on rural arts touring in Scotland:

> we must be aware of a broader cultural tendency to see the rural […] as a romanticised space, a magical and uncanny space. If we continually cast the rural in this way — without countering it with a more pragmatic reading — then we also romanticise rural policies and strategic solutions that emerge from rural areas. (p. 20)

Through the discussion of theatre and the rural in this book, I want to suggest that theatre and performance offer a space and a stage through which different visions of the rural can be explored, countered and critiqued. Indeed, despite what I identify below in 'Performing the Rural' as theatre's persistent focus on the rural as romantic, magical or uncannily alien, there is also a long established history of dramatic engagement with the pragmatic and political reality of the rural. In the context of British theatre this reaches back to the origins of British drama in the medieval mystery plays of the Corpus Christi cycles, where before the performance of the Annunciation to the shepherds, the actors playing those characters reminded their spectators of the practicalities of working life in the countryside. Some five hundred or so years before Butterworth's play attracted full houses and fulsome reviews at the Royal Court, the shepherds of the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play* complained to their audience of the realities of rural life: livestock disease, physical hardship, enclosure, and unhappy marriages which — they made clear — existed just as much in the country as in the city. Their experience of the rural is far from the idealized version of country life that the word might first summon to our imaginations:

> But we sely husbands
> That walks on the moor,
> In faith we are nearhands
> Out of the door.
> No wonder, as it stands,
> If we be poor,
> For the tilth of our lands
> Lies fallow as the floor,
> As ye ken.
> We are so hammed,
> Fortaxed, and rammed,
> We are made hand-tamed
> With these gentlery-men. (Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play* in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol 1. 8th edition. 2005, p. 409)

'We are so hamstrung,/Overtaxed and beaten down', they claim. Writing about the pastoral ecology of the play and its companion, the Towneley *First Shepherds' Play*, Lisa J. Kiser identifies

the major cause of the shepherds' suffering as being the system of enclosure which affected the lives of rural peasants during the period 1440-1450 by turning them from tenant farmers into wage labourers. As a result their 'identity with the land' was lost (2009, p. 338). That relationship with the 'land', embodied both by the shepherds in the *Second Shepherds' Play* and by Rooster and Davey in their very different ways in Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, is at the heart of this book, a key aim of which is to examine some of the different ways in which theatre has performed the rural from medieval to contemporary times.

It is worth noting that Kiser here seems to be invoking the sense of an earlier, better rural, capable of being lost, the turn towards enclosed pasture from shared commons 'destroy[ing] the cohesion of the medieval rural communities' (p. 338, citing Hilton 1975, p. 168). The singing of Blake's poem as hymn at the start of *Jerusalem* suggests, too, that there just might be a green and pleasant — and powerful — land, embodied by Rooster, which is similarly threatened by the bureaucracy of Kennet and Avon Council. Both Kiser and Butterworth point towards a rural ideal that is apparently always just disappearing, just out of reach. This is a key theme of 'Performing the Rural', where I argue that in performances from the early modern period onwards, the rural often stands for a particular kind of 'otherness', to be visited and returned from, perhaps transformed.

Viewing the rural

One reason for that repeated turn to the 'lost' rural might of course be that the rural on stage is most often seen from the perspective of the city, where theatre and its associated buildings have historically and conventionally been situated. Claire Cochrane makes the case that an 'unexamined prejudice has driven much British theatre history to skew the record towards the assumption that everything important in British theatre happened in London' (2011, p. 3); I would argue further that theatre scholarship is often city-focused, whatever the nation being considered. In the *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, for example, Christopher Balme states that 'a theatre building is part of the cognitive cartography of a town or city. Thus, a place of performance is determined by its integration into the wider referential system of the urban environment' (2008, p. 58). Balme's claims would be right for the majority of the plays and theatre spaces I've mentioned so far. Butterworth's play began life on the main stage of the Royal Court in London's Sloane Square (some 50 years after Wesker's *Roots* was staged there), next to Sloane Square underground station and just across from Peter Jones' department store, before travelling to Broadway and back to the Apollo Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue in London's West End, where it was close by the Lyric, Gielgud and Queens' theatres and no more

than a few minutes' walk from the neon lights and noise of Piccadilly Circus, not to mention the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace.

Similarly, while theatre scholarship has often neglected the role of the spectator, what work *has* been done on audiences has focused on urban contexts, with little attention paid to rural audiences. Arguments about both the writer and the performance location of the Towneley pageant cycle mean that we cannot be totally sure where that play would have been performed. But perhaps the pragmatic reality of the *First and Second Shepherds' Plays* reflects the likelihood that the audiences for that mystery cycle — thought to be located in the then small West Yorkshire town of Wakefield in the mid to late-fifteenth century — had a much closer relationship to the reality of rural life and work than might the citizens of York, an already substantial medieval city. The final section of this book thus considers the rural as a site of performance. By looking at theatre sited *in* the rural as well as *about* the rural, I aim to identify key questions about the relationship between place, audience and performance. How do theatre-audience relationships change when theatre comes to the audience, and to the place in the rural landscape where the audience is already 'at home'? More widely, given the increasing emphasis in social and political geography on rural, local communities as representing places of belonging and of shared knowledge which complicate and resist the apparent threat of globalization, how might theatre of and in the rural help to build and complicate our 'sense of place and what constitutes it', in Paul Kingsnorth's terms?

Defining the rural

> … we have this beautiful earth. Very efficient, flat land, plough right up to edge, no waste. […] We now among many illustrious landowners, Esso, Gallagher, Imperial Tobacco, Equitable Life, all love this excellent earth. How beautiful English countryside. […] Now I find teashop, warm fire, old countryman to tell tales. (Caryl Churchill, *Fen*, p. 147).

The Japanese businessman whose voice frames the action in Caryl Churchill's play *Fen* (University of Essex Theatre, Colchester, 1983) highlights two very different, but perhaps equally commodified views of the 'beautiful English countryside': as an economic resource for exploitation, and as a site for old countrymen to tell tourists tales. I will return to Churchill's play in more detail later; here her play's beginning helps to highlight the varied understandings of the rural that this section seeks to address.