

Lawrence's plays on the stage: an evolution from 2009 to 2016

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During the past decade, D.H. Lawrence's dramas have repeatedly been staged at in-the-round theatre venues, where the audience is situated on all sides of the action. This turn towards in-the-round staging culminated in the National Theatre's high-profile production of *Husbands and Sons*, a composite piece based on three of Lawrence's early plays, which was staged at the Dorfman in London between October 2015 and January 2016, and subsequently at the Royal Exchange in Manchester in February and March 2016. In this article I will discuss some of the theatrical decisions made in the National Theatre's work, and point to the way that this high-profile production compares and contrasts with a series of less familiar stagings of Lawrence's plays that have been occurring since 2009.

One of the people whose fingerprints can be seen on the recent productions of Lawrence's plays is Peter Cheeseman, the late theatre director who worked for twenty years to inaugurate Europe's first purpose-built theatre-in-the-round, which opened as the 605-seat New Vic in 1986, in Stoke on Trent. Paul Allen has characterised Cheeseman's approach in the following way:

[...] most famously he brought a new ideology to mainstream theatre-making. It emphasised local stories often told in the purest documentary form in which every word of the script had to have been previously spoken or written by the people whose stories were being told. Research was conducted by writers and actors – including, in the 1960s, the future director Mike Leigh who was infected by Cheeseman's

determination to be ‘political and truthful’, and among the actors to work with him were Bob Hoskins, Ben Kingsley, Robert Powell and Ken Campbell.¹

In 2009 Cheeseman’s theatre in Stoke on Trent staged a version of D.H. Lawrence’s play *The Daughter-in-Law*, in a version evidently guided by Cheeseman’s dramatic principles. Lawrence’s playwriting found a natural home in a playhouse that was based on that idea of being ‘political and truthful’: after all, Lawrence’s Eastwood plays are in some ways a precursor to the style of Mike Leigh, presenting apparently day-to-day ideas about working-class life and female existence in order to draw attention to those who have not hitherto been adequately represented in the realm of performed drama. As Jessie Chambers put it when she first heard one of Lawrence’s Eastwood plays, ‘it troubled me deeply to see his home put before me in his vivid phrases’.² And when Lawrence himself described one of his plays he asserted that ‘much of it is word for word true’, with Frieda adding, ‘it’s all of it really lived’ (*Letters I*, 466-67).

Furthermore, Peter Cheeseman had consistently championed plays about the local community in Stoke. For instance, he directed plays such as *The Jolly Potters* (about the history of the Potteries) in 1964, the *Knotty* (about the local railway) in 1966, and *Fight for Shelton Bar!* (about the closing of a local steel works) in 1974. Hence Cheeseman’s entire theatrical philosophy was based on the idea that there was an intrinsic value to regional, industrial, and working-class life, and that such life deserved to be represented on the stage. A comparable theatrical philosophy evidently motivated Lawrence’s dramatic writings. Of the eight complete theatrical scripts that Lawrence completed, five of them all set in or

¹ Allen, ‘Peter Cheeseman: Pioneer of theatre-in-the-round whose reality-based approach to drama influenced his protégé Mike Leigh’, *Independent*, 11 May 2010 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/peter-cheeseman-pioneer-of-theatre-in-the-round-whose-reality-based-approach-to-drama-influenced-his-1971163.html>>.

² Chambers, Jessie, *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record by E.T.* (London: Frank Cass, 1935), p.166.

around recognizable versions of Lawrence's hometown, and a sixth play, *The Fight for Barbara*, which has an Italian setting, nonetheless features a male protagonist who is the son of a coal miner and who uses the language of Lawrence's English Midlands ('Not a scroddy atom').³

Of course, when Cheesemen's theatre opted to produce a version of *The Daughter-in-Law*, the playhouse was dealing with a text that has had a rather difficult history. The script has been hailed by Lawrence's biographer Mark Kinkead-Weekes as 'not only well made but (arguably) Lawrence's best, and his most original play'.⁴ Yet the major problem with the text has been that it simply remained missing from Lawrence's canonical writings for so many years. Although written in 1913, *The Daughter-in-Law* had to wait for more than half a century before being published in 1965, and even then appeared in a highly corrupt version that garbled many of Lawrence's lines. Furthermore, the play wasn't premiered on the stage until 1967, at the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh, and even on that occasion the reviewer for *The Times* got the title wrong and applauded a piece called 'The *Mother-in-Law*'.⁵ Only with the publication of the Cambridge edition of Lawrence's plays in 1999 did an authoritative version of *The Daughter-in-Law* emerge, with one of the volume's editors, John Worthen, lamenting that 'actors, directors, and audiences have been struggling to make sense of words and phrases for which no obvious meaning exists'.⁶

When the *Guardian* described the 2009 version of *The Daughter-in-Law* at the New Vic, their reviewer, Alfred Hickling, commented that 'Lawrence was the first working-class realist', and that the play was 'written in a Midlands dialect so thick that Joanna Read's fine

³ Lawrence, *The Plays*, ed. by Hans-Wilhelm Schwarze and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.243.

⁴ Kinkead-Weekes, *D.H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.60.

⁵ 'Original Play by Lawrence Revived', *The Times*, 28 January 1967, p.13.

⁶ Worthen, 'Towards a New Version of D.H. Lawrence's "The Daughter-in-Law": Scholarly Edition or Play Text?', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 29 (1999), 231-46 (p.237).

revival takes some tuning into'.⁷ The dialect may not have been exactly that of the Stoke area, but the idea of exploring the lives of those affected by the mines spoke profoundly to local concerns and interests: coal mining had, after all, been one of the major industries of the area within the living memory of those watching the show. Indeed, over seventy square miles of coal seams had once been mined beneath Stoke.⁸ The show's designer, Nancy Surman, therefore emphasized this aspect of Lawrence's drama positioned coal around the stage and suspended a pit's winding wheel from the ceiling of the theatre – something that would resonate, as we shall see, with some of the onstage effects later achieved when the National Theatre came to stage Lawrence's drama in 2015-16. In Stoke, of course, putting Lawrence's theatre show about the lives of those in a coal-mining community onto the stage had the potential to feel directly relevant to the personal and family history of those in the audience, and the method of staging the piece in-the-round had the potential to make the auditorium itself feel like an extension of the stage.

The New Vic's version of *The Daughter-in-Law* was judged sufficiently successful by the theatre's management for the playhouse to stage another Lawrence play three years later, when the venue produced *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*. This work was Lawrence's second stage script, and revolves around a wife in a mining community who worries about why her husband has failed to return from work, before she is told that he has suffocated to death in the mine. The play concludes with the dead man's wife and mother washing the corpse, with the mother commenting on the beauty of her dead son's white skin.

Unfortunately for the New Vic in Stoke, Peter Cheeseman had himself died in 2010, but the 2011 production of the Lawrence work continued to focus upon the 'truthfulness' of

⁷ Hickling, 'The Daughter-in-Law', *Guardian*, 30 September 2009, <
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/30/daughter-in-law-review>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

⁸ Ian Harrison, *Britain from Above* (London: Pavilion, 2008), p.28.

Lawrence's script, with the action taking place on a realistic set, with audiences able to smell the carbolic soap and hear the Nottinghamshire accents, and with the *Stoke Sentinel's* newspaper reviewer praising the naturalistic acting as being reminiscent of television soap opera. That reviewer continued by saying, 'No other writer of his time was giving the working classes such prominence in realistic depictions of their everyday lives. It's kitchen sink drama from a time before most people had indoor plumbing'.⁹

Meanwhile, in 2009, the Sheffield Crucible had appointed a new associate director, Paul Miller, who had originally started his career at the Traverse in Edinburgh. Miller knew that, of Lawrence's eight plays, three of them had enjoyed widespread acclaim during the late 1960s when staged by the theatre director Peter Gill. In 1965, Gill mounted a version of Lawrence's first play, *A Collier's Friday Night*, at the Royal Court, and after this production received a great deal of praise, Gill went on to stage another two of Lawrence's scripts at the same venue. *The Daughter-in-Law* appeared there in 1967 and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* in 1968, with all three plays performed in repertory for that last season. Gill had therefore realised that these plays might form a powerful trilogy of work all set in the domestic spaces of mining towns that resemble Eastwood, the location in the English Midlands where Lawrence was born and raised.

When Gill had directed *A Collier's Friday Night*, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, and *The Daughter in Law* at the Royal Court between 1965 and 1968, he had done so with great naturalistic precision that was widely praised by reviewers. Lawrence's plays had been generally neglected up until this point, but in this era of the 'Angry Young Man', Gill had made the Eastwood dramaturgy feel fresh and urgently relevant. In 2009, Miller believed

⁹ 'A Little-Known Gem from D.H. Lawrence', *Stoke Sentinel*, 1 October 2012, <<http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/little-known-gem-d-h-lawrence/story-17014953-detail/story.html>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

that a production of one of these plays could again be successful at the Sheffield Crucible, which, although not entirely an in-the-round venue, is a playhouse that does feel extremely intimate: in the 980-seat auditorium, the audience sits on three sides of the stage, with everyone sitting within 20 meters of the stage.

Paul Miller believed that Lawrence's drama might have a particular purchase at the Crucible because, like Eastwood and Stoke on Trent, Sheffield is a former mining town. Accordingly, during the production the audience felt sufficiently drawn into the drama that spectators gasped aloud at certain moments. For example, there was usually an audible response when Joe smashed the plate belonging to his proud sister-in-law, and again when Luther burned the paintings that his wife has bought. Indeed, in conversation with me, Paul Miller has since admitted that he sought precisely that kind of reaction, and that one of the more unorthodox parts of his preparation for the production was his decision to audition not only actors but also the crockery: he experimented with different types of plates to see which would smash in the most satisfactory way on the stage.

When Katie Galbraith reviewed the Sheffield production of *The Daughter-in-Law* in *The Stage* she praised the female roles, interpreting the play as essentially a battle between two women, the 'commanding' Lynda Baron in the part of the mother-in-law who 'who controls everything', and Claire Price, the 'wonderfully seething' daughter-in-law.¹⁰ In the *Guardian*, Alfred Hickling commented that this production revealed Lawrence's playwriting as being 'so ahead of its time'.¹¹ If it had mainly been local newspaper reviewers who had been commenting upon the Stoke productions of Lawrence's work, the Sheffield production showed that national newspapers might also take an interest in such drama.

¹⁰ Katie Galbraith, 'The Daughter-in-Law', *The Stage*, 14 March 2013, <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/38321/the-daughter-in-law>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

¹¹ Hickling, 'The Daughter-in-Law – Review', *Guardian*, 5 March 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/mar/05/the-daughter-in-law-review>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

Shortly after directly that production of *The Daughter-in-Law*, Paul Miller left the Sheffield Crucible. In 2014, he took charge as only the second ever artistic director of the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, an intimate 172-seat theatre, and London's first and only permanent theatre in-the-round. Here he immediately decided to replicate his recent success with staging Lawrence's work. Thus, when Miller arrived at the Orange Tree in 2014, he decided to present *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* as his inaugural work.

The audience composition at the Orange Tree is, of course, somewhat different from that in Sheffield and Stoke. In Richmond during 2015, according to the Rightmove estate agents, 'Terraced properties sold for an average price of £976,022, while semi-detached properties fetched £1,323,310'.¹² By contrast, in 2014, Stoke had been one of the top four cheapest places to buy a house in England and Wales: the Land Registry data for that year revealed the average house price in Stoke was £69,862.¹³ But if staging the play in Richmond meant that the work lost some of its immediacy and its connection with the lives of those who might be in the audience, a distinct boon was that this theatre, the Orange Tree, was in easy reach of London's theatre critics, and so the production received far greater coverage in the national newspapers than any of those earlier productions. In the *Observer* Susannah Clapp praised the female acting in this 'bracing battle of the sexes', and in the *Daily Telegraph*, Dominic Cavendish commended 'a powerful, autobiographically influenced portrait of a miserable marriage'.¹⁴

¹² 'House Prices in Richmond upon Thames, <<http://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices-in-Richmond-Upon-Thames.html>> [accessed 13 September 2016].

¹³ 'Revealed: Stoke-on-Trent Home of Some of the Cheapest House Prices in England and Wales', *Stoke Sentinel*, 19 September 2014, <<http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/revealed-stoke-trent-home-cheapest-house-prices/story-22948779-detail/story.html>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

¹⁴ Clapp, 'The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd Review', 14 September 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/14/widowing-of-mrs-holroyd-review-orange-tree-richmond-dh-lawrence>> [accessed 14 September 2016]. Cavendish, 'Bring the Classics Back to the Theatre', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/11099518/Bring-the-classics-back-to-the-theatre.html>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

Once more, in terms of theatrical style, Miller aimed for a scrupulous naturalism in the style of Peter Gill. As in Sheffield, Miller made the audience gasp at the moment when an object is smashed on the stage – this time the moment when Lizzie Holroyd reached up to place the lamp-glass over the flame and accidentally dropped and smashed the glass. More problematic, perhaps, was the fact that this play involves onstage fighting, which is difficult to do convincingly when the audience is in such close proximity, on all sides of the action. Similarly, the appearance of a rat on the stage (done in this production purely as an imaginary animal) tended to break the naturalistic spell. Still, Michael Billington continued to act as a longstanding champion of Lawrence's drama by reviewing the production in the *Guardian* and writing 'this is a play that catches you by the throat and makes you wish Lawrence's palpable dramatic gifts had been encouraged in his own lifetime'.¹⁵

The positive and relatively extensive press coverage of the Orange Tree production helped to bring Lawrence's theatrical work to the attention of those now working at the National Theatre in London. In particular, the up-and-coming dramaturg, Ben Power, now became interested in what he might be able to do with Lawrence scripts. Power had worked for the touring theatre company Headlong between 2006 and 2010, and had then then moved to a role as associate director at the National Theatre.

By this stage, Ben Power had made his name operating in the role of literary adapter and dramaturg, taking a philosophy more commonly associated with German than British theatre, that the literary text is ripe for adaptation and should only be the starting point of any director's interpretation (for example, when Thomas Ostermeier directed *Richard III* in

¹⁵ Billington, 'The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd Review: A Cracking Lawrence Revival', *The Guardian*, 11 September 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/11/widowing-of-mrs-holroyd-review-dh-lawrence-orange-tree-richmond>> [accessed 16 September 2014].

2016, he observed that, ‘it has become possible to tell the play’s full narrative even without all the business of the battle that makes up the play’s final 20 or so pages’).¹⁶ While Power was still in his twenties, he had created a number of radically reshaped plays based on the work of other artists. For example, with Headlong Theatre he created a version of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* that incorporated a new subplot about the present-day visual artists Jake and Dinos Chapman. For the RSC he created a version of *Romeo and Juliet* (retitled *A Tender Thing*) in which the two main characters were recast as pensioners. Power subsequently wrote a version of Ibsen’s *Emperor and Galilean* for the National Theatre in 2011, and in the same year he used the King James Bible in order to create a work for the Bush Theatre’s *Sixty Six Books* production. The BBC also employed Power to adapt Shakespeare’s history plays (all the way from *Richard II* to *Richard III*) as *The Hollow Crown*, which aired in 2012 and 2016, and which again made major changes to the Shakespearean material (rolling *Henry VI Part Two* and *Henry VI Part Three* into a single film, and completely ditching the storyline about Jack Cade’s rebellion). Power’s star was sufficiently in the ascendant that, in 2015, shortly before the National Theatre tackled Lawrence’s work, the organization appointed Power (still in his mid-30s) to a newly created post of deputy artistic director.

Power knew very well that Peter Gill had achieved a great success with three of Lawrence’s plays in the 1960s. Indeed, scenes from *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* had been performed in February 1999 as part of the National Theatre’s ‘100 Plays of the Century’ series.¹⁷

Power now looked again at the three plays that Gill had staged in the 1960s – *A Collier’s Friday Night*, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, and *The Daughter-in-Law* – which, as we have seen, had become known as a kind of trilogy. Of course the conception of these works as a

¹⁶ Thomas Ostermeier, ‘Embodying Dark Desires’, *Richard III, Schaubühne Berlin, Lyric Theatre Programme* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh International Festival, 2016), p.22.

¹⁷ Warren Roberts and Paul Poplawski, *A Bibliography of D.H. Lawrence*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.24.

trilogy owed a great deal to Peter Gill. Lawrence had certainly not written the plays as a trilogy, and the concept of these three plays being a distinct grouping had not really existed before Gill's pioneering work in the 1960s. Nonetheless, under Ben Power's guidance, the National Theatre opted to revive precisely the three plays that Peter Gill had staged, but to do so in a radically different way.

Thus, in the National's 2015-2016 season, a large cast performed all three of the pieces simultaneously, under the pseudo-Lawrentian title *Husbands and Sons*. The Dorfman stage presented a street with three houses, in which action from each original play largely took place, but with the activity of one house being continually interrupted and intersected by the activity of the others. The plays were thus spliced and edited by Ben Power to allow certain thematic resonances to develop. For example, when the drunken miner Charles Holroyd went to the outside toilet, he bumped into another intoxicated collier Walter Lambert – a figure originally from a completely different drama. Elsewhere, Lizzie Holroyd had one child less than Lawrence intended, a change which may have been made for pragmatic economic and rehearsal reasons, but which also highlighted some nicely worked connections between the family dynamics of the different households. And the boldest editorial interventions came at the end of *Husbands and Sons*, when death brought the characters from the different plays together in one place.

The style of performance offered a stark difference with the groundbreaking work of Peter Gill. In Gill's production of the trilogy, as one of his actors remembered, 'Water steamed when it came from the hob, meals steamed and there was a wonderful smell of freshly baked bread and Yorkshire pudding'.¹⁸ By contrast with such naturalistic precision, the new National Theatre production presented an in-the-round set with houses largely rendered as

¹⁸ Eddie Peel quoted by Benedict Nightingale, *Great Moments in the Theatre* (London: Oberon, 2012) p.140.

schematic diagrams on the floor, and actors miming the opening of doors, the eating of food, and the putting on of outdoor clothes. This was Lawrence's Eastwood as Lars von Trier's *Dogville*.

The opening stylisation was disconcerting, and if the audience did become accustomed to those initial conventions, the show was repeatedly punctuated by other surprising expressionistic moments. For example, at one point the miners swept across the stage like Lowry's matchstick men; whilst elsewhere the women from the different households simultaneously sang, simultaneously prayed, and simultaneously writhed on tables. Meanwhile, the warlike world of the mine was indicated by subterranean searchlights, by haunting sirens, and shifting stage rigging that – with explosive noise – appeared to symbolise the pit's winding tower. Naturalism, this was not. There was even a Beckettian tree on the stage.

For those who already knew Lawrence's plays, and particularly for those who remembered the Peter Gill productions, the approach taken by Ben Powers may have felt jarring, and there was indeed a degree of awkwardness in the production. Some of the least convincing editing was done in order to reduce the action of *The Daughter-in-Law*, which Lawrence set in two separate homes, to just one location. *A Collier's Friday Night* provided some nice vignettes, but that script's development of Lawrence's autobiographical character Ernest Lambert was stymied by some severe cutting. And the climactic moment of *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, the washing of a dead miner's body, felt like it needed much more time and space. Michael Billington, for one, attacked the National Theatre production as a 'soapy mishmash which simply proves three into one won't go'.¹⁹

¹⁹ Billington, 'Husbands and Sons Review', *Guardian*, 28 October 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/28/husbands-and-sons-review-anne-marie-duff>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

Certainly the director of the show, Marianne Elliott, was alive to making changes at a relatively late stage of the show's preparation. Indeed, one symbolic moment appeared in the preview performances but was ditched for the main run of the show. Originally the production began with white laundry-style drapes all around the set, blocking the audience's view of the stage. Onto those drapes were projected images of the countryside, before these drapes were raised upwards in the clanking style of a winding-tower. This linked the domestic work of the women with the underground labouring of the men. But perhaps the audience frustration at seeing the stage blocked, and the somewhat unconvincing computer-generated projections of the countryside, meant that this opening sequence had to be abandoned.

Nonetheless, there was much to enjoy and to savour in *Husbands and Sons*. The actors brought to life the vivid Lawrentian dialogue that he intended for the stage but which has too seldom been heard there, and they revealed aspects of Lawrence's work that are not widely acknowledged. For example, the new production repeatedly emphasized the humour of Lawrence's writing. Katherine Pearce, in the relatively minor part of Gertie Coomer, stole the show at various points, particularly with her impersonation of how a flighty Nottinghamshire teenager might speak posh in order to win attention from boys. At other times, Susan Brown, in the part of Mrs Gascoigne, knew exactly how to use deadpan and pause in order to maximize the laughter that greets lines such as: 'Marriage is like a mouse-trap, for either man or woman. You've soon come to th' end o' th' cheese'. The editing of the scripts also overcame some of the inherent problems of Lawrence's original plays: for example, the over-hasty resolution that Lawrence gave *The Daughter-in-Law* was ironed out here through conflation with *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*.

The casting of Anne-Marie Duff (as Lizzie Holroyd) was also a particularly inspired decision. Not only did Duff bring a certain celebrity glamour to the show, she also revealed a particular adeptness in handling Lawrence's text, having had a longstanding experience of reading the work. She herself came from a working-class home in Hayes, and first encountered Lawrence's drama when, as a teenager, she happened upon a copy of *The Daughter-in-Law*. She later commented that 'I first read *The Daughter-in-Law* when I was 18 – I found it in the Uxbridge Library one afternoon – and I loved it, though in hindsight, I don't think I really understood it. I had just discovered Lawrence and was devouring his work'.²⁰ Subsequently, when Duff trained at the Drama Centre in London (which was then the breeding ground for a very impressive group of actors including John Simm and Helen McCrory) she found half of her year group producing *A Collier's Friday Night*, and again she found this an incredibly powerful piece of writing. She subsequently leapt at the chance to act in the part of Minnie Gascoigne for the Young Vic's revival of *The Daughter-in-Law* in 2002. And such was her commitment to understanding Lawrence's world before she acted in the National Theatre's 2015 version of *Husbands and Sons* that Duff, and other members of the cast, travelled down a coal mine and also journeyed to Eastwood to see the birthplace museum and to speak with Lawrence's acclaimed biographer Andrew Harrison.

During the performances of *Husbands and Sons*, Duff, who is slightly built, could at times look desperately frail and vulnerable on the stage. Yet she also proved capable of holding herself with angular and wiry fortitude, and speaking powerfully. A similar effect was achieved on the stage by Louise Brealey in the role of Minnie Gascoigne, with both actors combining well together and revealing just why the miners' wives in Lawrence's work are more than a match for the men.

²⁰ '20 Questions With... Anne-Marie Duff', *The Stage*, 9 September 2002, <http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/news/09-2002/20-questions-withanne-marie-duff_27302.html> [accessed 14 September 2016].

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, *Husbands and Sons* managed simultaneously to incorporate a higher degree of international as well as a higher degree of local thinking than many other works at the National. In international terms, the production was clearly governed by a Central-European dramaturgical attitude in which original texts are apt for radical reshaping to serve a particular directorial vision. But at the same time, Ben Power brought finely wrought English regional dialect to the playhouse without feeling the need to provide the kind of explanatory glossaries that sometimes accompany productions of Lawrence's work. The vocal accents may have wandered at times, but it was refreshing to hear, on the stage of the National Theatre, one character saying, 'Hello, my duck', and another replying, 'Oh, alright, my bird'.

Although Michael Billington remained unconvinced by the production (awarding it two stars out of five in his *Guardian* column), the general critical reaction to the National Theatre's *Husbands and Sons* proved extremely positive. In the *Stage*, Natasha Tripney described the piece as 'potent and atmospheric' and 'never less than engaging'; whilst in the *Independent*, Paul Taylor called the production 'A magnificent evening of revelatory marvels', and added, 'I would happily have watched this quietly towering three-hour achievement all over again'.²¹ The *Daily Telegraph* had, in 1994, condemned D.H. Lawrence's playwriting by calling him that 'appalling bearded loony' whose theatre comprised 'a hilarious parody of all the clichés of Northern working-class drama'.²² Yet in 2015, the *Daily Telegraph's* reviewer

²¹ Tripney, 'Husbands and Sons Review at the National Theatre – Potent', *Stage*, 27 October 2015, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/husbands-and-sons-review-at-the-national-theatre-potent/>> [accessed 14 September 2016]. Taylor, 'Husbands and Sons, Dorfman, National Theatre, Review', *Independent*, 28 October 2015, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/husbands-and-sons-dorfman-national-theatre-review-a-magnificent-evening-of-revelatory-marvels-a6712056.html>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

²² Spenser, 'A Long, Bad Friday with D.H. Lawrence', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 1994, p.16.

Dominic Cavendish now described *Husbands and Sons* as a ‘compelling evening’ of ‘gritty lyricism and hard-won wit’.²³

Since that production at the National Theatre, the critical response to *Husbands and Sons* has proved sufficiently positive to inspire other theatre makers to revisit Lawrence’s drama in novel and surprising ways. In the wake of the success of *Husbands and Sons*, the theatre developer Vanessa Rawlings-Jackson commissioned the playwright Stephen Lowe to write a new script that would *Altitude*, an unfinished dramatic sketch that Lawrence abandoned in 1924. In that unfinished skit, Lawrence parodies his friends and suggests that living at 7,000 feet above sea level might cause the residents of Taos in New Mexico to behave somewhat oddly. Stephen Lowe’s new play, entitled *Altitude Sickness*, received its first rehearsed reading at Nottingham’s Lakeside Arts Theatre on 17 May 2016, and took the bold step of imagining Lawrence himself performing *Altitude*. In Lowe’s play, *Altitude* is therefore delivered with bravura by the character of Lawrence in the opening scene, as a game of charades, in front of acquaintances in Taos, New Mexico. This serves to highlight Lawrence’s own real-life skill as an actor and mimic, before Lowe’s script then abandons Lawrence’s own dialogue and moves on to show Lawrence’s complicated relationship with Taos characters including Dorothy Brett, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Frieda. *Altitude Sickness* ultimately ends with a comparison between Lawrence and James Joyce, showing that, for all that Lawrence raves in the play against Joyce, there may actually be some affinity between author of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and the author of *Ulysses*.

In addition, in the same month that Stephen Lowe’s *Altitude Sickness* was first given a rehearsed reading, the nearby Nottingham Playhouse staged another innovative Lawrence

²³ Cavendish, ‘National Theatre Dorman, Review’, *Telegraph*, 28 October 2015 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/husbands-and-sons-national-theatre-dorfman-review/>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

performance. The local director, Martin Berry, was keen that, in the light of the National Theatre's success with *Husbands and Sons*, the Nottingham Playhouse should be able to reveal another new side to Lawrence rather than simply delivering a straightforward version of one of Lawrence's dramatic scripts. Thus Martin Berry opted to direct a rehearsed reading entitled *D.H. Lawrence: By Night and By Day*, which paired two separate theatre works together. The first piece on the programme was Lawrence's rarely performed play *The Fight for Barbara*, which revolves around a fictionalized version of Lawrence's own early relationship with Frieda. And the second piece on the bill was the premiere of an unfinished play about Lawrence by Tennessee Williams, *The Night of the Zeppelin*, which had recently been discovered in 2014 by the scholar Gerri Kimber. Pairing these two works allowed audiences to see the way that Lawrence profoundly influenced Tennessee Williams, and to perhaps even consider how even Williams's most famous work – *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) – has at its heart the distinctly Lawrence-like theme of a woman with social pretensions finding herself forced into sex with a relatively base man.

Since the work of James Joyce went out of copyright in 2012 there have been some deeply innovative theatrical performances based upon his writings (most notably Olwen Fouéré's reimagining of *Finnegans Wake* in her touring production of *Riverrun*). Perhaps, for Lawrence scholars, it might be gratifying to see that it is not only the work of Lawrence's great Irish rival that can inspire new creative work in the playhouse. Indeed, as the past seven years have shown, Lawrence's theatre work has been continually evolving by being revisited by innovative theatre makers and producers, and by being placed into contact with different kinds of audience in different parts of England. Ultimately, in an assortment of performance venues between 2009 and 2016, the words that Lawrence scripted for the stage have revealed themselves to have a continued purchase in new contexts, and to be malleable enough to suit theatre makers who take radically different decisions about how to treat the

text. After all, Lawrence himself was always refreshing unfussy about having his scripts edited and rearranged for the purpose of getting them onto the stage, acknowledging that even some of his best playwriting ‘wants weeding out a bit’ (*Letters I*, 500-1). We might remember that his advice to potential theatrical collaborators was: ‘My idea of a play is that any actor should have the liberty to alter as much as he likes – the author only gives the leading suggestion’ (*Letters III*, 509-10).

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