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## Timeless Radcliffe: A Review of *Ann Radcliffe, Romanticism and the Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014)

The year 2014 was notable from the perspective of both Gothic scholars and casual readers of Gothic fiction. First of all, it marked the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, "the first official Gothic romance and progenitor of an enduring genre" (Snodgrass 69). Moreover, it also marked the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), the leading figure of Gothic fiction in the 1790s, whose novels, such as the bestselling *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1796–97), reformulated the Walpolean model of a Gothic story. No matter that they were simultaneously criticized and revered, their influence on the development of Romantic fiction was undeniable. Even though Radcliffe's *oeuvre* has already undergone a meticulous analysis, not only in Great Britain and the United States (one could list the following works: Joyce M. S. Tompkins's *Ann Radcliffe and Her Influence on Later Writers*, 1980; Robert Miles's *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress*, 1995; Rictor Norton's *Mistress of Udolpho: the Life of Ann Radcliffe*, 1999), but also in Poland (Marek Błaszak's *Ann Radcliffe's Gothic Romances and the Romantic Revival*, 1991; Witold Ostrowski's "The Mysteries of Udolpho and Much More," 1997), an anniversary like this prompted a special commemoration. In June 2014, the University of Sheffield organized an international conference devoted to "the Great Enchantress," which was followed by a publication of a special volume, assessing Radcliffe's body of work and her importance for Gothicism.

The volume entitled *Ann Radcliffe, Romanticism and the Gothic*, published by Cambridge University Press, is divided into three main sections, devoted respectively to "cultural contexts," the author's "creative output" and her links to "Romantic literary culture." The editors, Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, two renowned Gothic scholars themselves, carefully picked a selection of texts by other Gothic specialists. Among them are the aforementioned Robert Miles, as well as Sue Chaplin (author of *Gothic Literature: Texts, Contexts, Connections*, 2011), Jerrold E. Hogle (who penned e.g., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 2002)

and Diane Long Hoeveler (author of numerous articles, books and book chapters on various aspects of Gothicism). Their articles demonstrate that the fiction of Ann Radcliffe still remains open to new interpretations.

The volume starts with an overwhelmingly detailed text concerning the “critical reception” of Radcliffe’s prose and poetry between 1790 and 1850. Its authors, Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, punctiliously collect and quote opinions on Radcliffe’s *oeuvre*, referring to versatile documents—press reviews, letters, journal entries, frequently authored by other significant literary figures of that era (i.e. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, William Hazlitt). Most of them favourably assess Radcliffe’s work and affirm her “exceptionality, be it aesthetic, generic, political or otherwise; her inventiveness, originality or genius, her central place within the development of the English novel and the history of English letters in general” (Townshend and Wright 14–15). Edward Jacob’s article on Radcliffe’s influence on print culture in the Romantic period is very similar in tone, and so is Samuel Baker’s compelling text about Radcliffe’s final novel, *Gaston de Blondville*, published posthumously in 1826. Jacob explains that “Radcliffe’s works transformed the status of the novel within literary culture” (49). Reading these three texts immediately called to mind the previous volume of *Text Matters*, which was devoted to collecting, publishing and archiving as “ways of ‘framing of how literary and cultural materials are received’” (Chambers qtd. in Maszewska 7). These words aptly summarize the aims of the reviewed collection—to preserve our memory of Radcliffe’s fiction, but also to emphasize her impact on textual culture in general.

Nevertheless, the fragment I found particularly praiseworthy in the first section of the book was Joe Bray’s insightful study of the role of portraits in Gothic fiction. The focus of the article obviously lies on Ann Radcliffe; the author, however, skillfully introduces the subject referring to her predecessors, Horace Walpole and Sophia Lee, paying attention to “the ways that portraits can complicate, rather than verify, notions of identity, and cast doubt on the ‘mimetic matching’ of subject and image” (35).

The second part of the volume explores selected works of the Gothic “enchantress.” Alison Milbank, the editor of *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), opens this section with an article devoted to ways of seeing as interpretative modes in Radcliffe’s early fiction, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789) and the aforementioned *A Sicilian Romance*. Milbank suggests that Radcliffe actually tries to impose a particular perspective on her readers:

Radcliffe . . . wants [them] to learn to see through a kaleidoscope that mixes Shakespeare and the Bible, Shaftesbury and Milton: a lens that

dramatizes the distance between the self and the world for the education of an ethical way of seeing the moral beauty of the created order and through which to imagine and enact social change, however muted. (98)

Focused mostly on the “melancholic gaze” and “ethical lens,” Milbank, unfortunately, perfunctorily treats the issue of masterly gaze as a manner of looking and an interpretative device, which, in my opinion, would enrich her valuable study had it been addressed in more depth.

This section also includes a compelling contribution from an acknowledged scholar, Diane Long Hoeveler, whose article covers several different aspects of Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), from codes of femininity inscribed into the novel to, as Hoeveler puts it, a “ruins discourse” (100). The author’s vibrant and engaging style compensates for the slightly incoherent structure of her article. Each of its subunits could be, in fact, read as a separate brief analysis. A text of a similar structure can be found in the third part of the volume; however, Sue Chaplin’s research into Ann Radcliffe’s impact on Romantic fiction gives an impression of more unity.

The third part, the shortest in the volume, touches upon Radcliffe’s ties to the Romantic movement in England, and includes the aforementioned article by Chaplin. It also contains two informative and well-researched texts: about Radcliffe’s poetry (written by Jane Stabler) and stage adaptations of her novels at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (penned by Diego Saglia).

Overall, this carefully edited collection merits attention, being a worthy contribution to the field of Radcliffean studies. Quite ironically, its recurring motif, repeated in at least three articles in the collection, is a famous passage from John Keats’s letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, in which the poet facetiously imitates Radcliffe’s style: “for I am going among Scenery whence I intend to tip you the Damosel Radcliffe—I’ll cavern you, and grotto you, and waterfall you, and wood you, and water you, and immense-rock you, and tremendous sound you, and solitude you” (71). Contrary to Keats’s tongue-in-cheek comment, the volume confirms that Radcliffe’s literary output is so much more than banditti hiding in dark caverns or hypersensitive damsels in distress who swoon at the mere sight of sublime landscapes. The editors explain in the preface that they intended to “extend the appreciation of Radcliffe in critical directions that, to date, are only in the early phases of development, particularly with regards to those aspects of her *oeuvre* that lie beyond the narrow confines of the Gothic” (xiv). Undoubtedly, they successfully attained their ambitious goal.

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**Yeats's Genres and Tensions: A Review  
of Charles I. Armstrong's *Reframing  
Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History*  
(London and New York: Bloomsbury,  
2013)**

The last decade has brought a series of excellent monographs on the life and work of W. B. Yeats. Those have both built on and sought to go beyond R. F. Foster's magisterial two-volume biography in supplying contexts against which to place Yeats the man and the poet. Such studies as Ronald Schuchard's *The Last Minstrels* and Joseph M. Hassett's *W. B. Yeats and the Muses* have tilted the critical balance in favour of biographical approaches, in a sense continuing the work begun by Ellmann and Jeffares, and more recently Terrence Brown and Foster. As a result, Yeats, whose work allured New Critics and attracted deconstructionists, is now approached mainly through the lens of his own life, both public and personal as well as literary. That approach tends to produce high quality criticism that, while being suffused with theoretical insights and postulates, endeavours to cling to lines of explication that the poet himself may have pondered when composing poems. The theoretical background notwithstanding, critics in an overwhelming majority prefer to discuss the internal relations between Yeats's poetry, critical/journalist prose, autobiography and his ample correspondence. This is evidenced in the extremely well-researched introduction *W. B. Yeats in Context*, where much attention is given to the poet's affinity with his friends and family and the battles with his enemies. Amid this vogue, there have been studies like Nicholas Grene's *Yeats's Poetic Codes* and Helen Vendler's *Our Secret Discipline*, which have emphatically drawn attention to Yeats's poems as poems, rather than cryptic, occasionally abstruse, commentaries on his life that call for almost sleuth-like investigation. It is within the latter, far less pronounced tradition, that Charles I. Armstrong's *Reframing Yeats* positions itself.

In the introduction, Armstrong distinguishes between two approaches to Yeats that "privilege form and close reading, on the one hand, and more historical and biographical approaches on the other." He adds that

his “study will seek to mediate between these opposing methodologies” (Armstrong 3). This sounds a high tone for the study even though the following pages, despite their genuinely fresh readings of Yeats’s major works, both poems and plays, do not seem to effect a major dam-breaking in Yeats studies. Nevertheless, the in-depth analyses of Yeats’s work more than compensate for the fact that the study does not always manage to stay as good as its introductory word. For Armstrong, Yeats is a crucial figure of contemporary poetry, and crucial as it appears for modernism, due to the fact that his poetic gift, as it transpires from the study, outgrows Yeats’s declared statements.

Armstrong opens with what is his arguably strongest hand. His reading of Yeats’s “General Introduction for My Work” never takes the claims made there at face value and redirects the focus of some oft-quoted passages onto ideas that have received little attention. At the outset, Armstrong trains his critical eye on the striking metaphor of a poet sitting to the breakfast table that Yeats summons twice in the opening pages of his “Introduction”: “[a poet] never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria” and later “he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast” (Yeats, *Later Essays* 204). Armstrong rightly emphasizes the pertinence of this insight, as the “Introduction” addresses one of the ideas that have been considered to underpin Yeats’s conception of the poet as a creation of his own phantasmagoria (cf. Gould 45–47) and so demands acceptance as a “summation” of Yeats’s creative life (Foster xxii). Armstrong is, however, the first to unpack the allusion to breakfast rather than pouncing on the more readily riveting opposition to accident and incoherence, both of which have served to situate Yeats in the current of high modernism. Armstrong observes that “the motif of breakfast can highlight some of the specific aspects of the everyday excluded by Yeats’s poetic ideal” (16). Most importantly, “breakfast is an interruption of the poet’s proper business of engaging with his own dream world, and the phatic chit-chat of the morning repast constitutes a jarring contrast to the inner theatre of the night” (Armstrong 17). Whereas the night is the time of imagination, self-creation, in a word: of poetry, day-time is the domain of business-like earthly involvements, something Yeats as a public figure and one of the Abbey’s directors would have known and come to curse: all this “Theatre business, management of men” (Yeats, *The Poems* 93). Armstrong’s analysis draws attention to the conflict with mundaneness that Yeats waged throughout his life; however, despite the wide treatment that this aspect of Yeats’s idea of poetry is given (including a thought-provoking suggestion that George Moore might be implicated as a member of the sublunary breakfast-league), Armstrong goes on to argue that

the separation of poetry and the quotidian is not quite this permanent and inflexible in Yeats's oeuvre as a whole. In poetic diction, for instance, he may deny everyday chatter, but he still espouses a kind of ordinariness, trying . . . "to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech." (20)

Moreover, "his investment in traditional Irish poetry pulls him towards that which is common rather than elevated" (Armstrong 20). This tension between the mundane and the elevated is explored with some detail but it is only one of many such inner disputes that this inherently conflicted poet kept up and Armstrong duly probes deeper.

Armstrong devotes a substantial part of his study to the problems with Yeats's biographies, paying particular attention to Foster's *W. B. Yeats: A Life*. He commends Foster's painstakingness but criticizes him for being "less than definitive about Yeats's autobiographical writings" (37). In chapter 4, he seeks to unravel the poet's own pattern of autobiographical self-mythologizing and claims that "the patterning of Yeats's autobiographical writings . . . implies something more than a mere copying of facts. It implies an internal structuring that shapes the events of the story into the organicism of a well-crafted plot" (Armstrong 43). This repeats the classic perception of Yeats's autobiography that early commentators, Ellmann and Jeffares (together with Sean O'Faolain, the best-known author of Yeats's never-written biography), pointed out and seconds the view meticulously discussed nearly half a decade ago by Joseph Ronsley in *Yeats's Autobiography: Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Whereas those critics would recurrently argue that Yeats wrote the autobiographical pieces to construct a self, Armstrong concurs only in part and goes on to assert that

[Yeats] may desire *muthos*, but he certainly also pulled towards a very modern form of fragmentation. This fragmentation is evident not only in the internal structure of some his memoirs, but also . . . in his tendency to publish discrete and shortish instalments of biographical writing. In the irregular start-stop rhythm of the writing of these instalments, one can locate an even more radical challenge to the form of cohesive life story that Foster and other biographers have tried to construct for Yeats. While their divisions of the life into two or three parts only articulate the unity from within, the poets' (sic) own more diversified approach arguably goes beyond unity. (47)

This is an apposite remark that stresses an aspect of Yeats's life that most biographers have realized but none acknowledged and demonstrated with quite such lucidity.

Armstrong then carries on to investigate the inner tensions in Yeats's oeuvre, focusing on *A Vision* and its "obtuse parody of scholarly prose" implicit in the paratexts that open the 1936 edition of the treatise. He observes that "it would make more sense to read these metatextual parts of *A Vision* as partially anticipating, say, a work such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* than simply a poet's bungling attempt to pull off an alien, academic genre" (Armstrong 58). Furthermore, much of his study is devoted to reading particular plays (especially noteworthy is his analysis of *The Player Queen*) and much-discussed later poems like "Easter 1916," which is shown to absorb various registers of orality (100), "Lapis Lazuli," which for Armstrong displays "a transcendence of both [comedy and tragedy]" (91), and *ekphrastic* lyrics such as "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," which shows "Yeats's investment in images leading him to construct a challenging form of poetry characterized by dizzying excess" rather than an "appropriation of tangible solidity, or the attainment of a restful simplicity borrowed from art" (122). He ends by confronting Helen Vendler's study of the ways in which Yeats plays with genres and poetic conventions. He shows that Yeats transcends genres and "[enters] into the impure regions of generic monstrosity," whereby "douzains, sonnets, curtailed sonnet and other short lyric forms overlap and intermix" (Armstrong 138).

Armstrong's is a very well-argued and thoroughly-researched study of Yeats that by all means deserves to be counted among the contemporary classics like *The Last Minstrels*, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* and Edna Longley's *Yeats and Modern Poetry*. That said, it needs to be noted that even though his delving into the hybridization of genre in Yeats's poetry, drama and prose offers fruitful readings, Armstrong's emphasis on a paucity of genre-related studies of Yeats must surprise. It is with an eye to the modifications of genre that critics have long looked into Yeats's poetry, with pertinent commentaries coming especially from textual scholars like Curtis Bradford and more recently Vendler. What distinguishes Armstrong's book is not so much its shifting of critical emphasis to a subject matter thus far left unattended as its unorthodox treatment of this subject matter. Armstrong builds on the existent Yeats scholarship but his skill lies in the ability to shed light on aspects of the poet's work that have been given short shrift. Indeed, this is less of an act of reframing than deepening the insight into the frames already available.

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Review of Anna Pochmara's  
*The Making of the New Negro: Black  
Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in  
the Harlem Renaissance* (Amsterdam:  
Amsterdam UP, 2011)

The history of African American culture—much like the history of almost any culture developed in, or under the influence of, the West—is dominated by the figures of dead men, who loom over all historical studies with a matter-of-factness that has long remained disconcertingly appropriate. Two strategies are typically employed to interrogate this masculine bias. One consists in the exploration of the under-recorded and often unwritten history of the role women played in the formation of a given culture or movement. Such archaeological works often deliberately set out to tackle the bias by highlighting the ways in which history “forgot” about the women—as was the case with Rosa Parks, for years remembered almost exclusively as the lady who refused to give up her seat. The other strategy turns the spotlight on the masculine heroes themselves, questioning the rules of the game instead of trying to play it.

This is the course Anna Pochmara follows in her study of the origins and development of the idea of the “New Negro.” Her analysis focuses on how several illustrious Black men of letters involved in the Harlem Renaissance—Alain Locke, Wallace Thurman, Richard Wright—dealt with the question of Black manhood in the racist America of the early twentieth century. With this purpose in mind, Pochmara invokes two well-established theoretical paradigms: Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s anxiety of authorship. In the context of a “manly” struggle for supremacy in Black American culture,

[t]he black male writer is caught in a double bind between the need to engage in “heroic warfare” with his strong predecessors and the need to establish a legitimate patrilineal lineage, which will both validate black male authorship and set off the specters of social illegitimacy resulting from white men’s symbolic and biological fathering of black children. (9–10)

In other words, for an early-twentieth-century Black writer to achieve artistic recognition (i.e. find favour with white readers), he was obliged to produce an art that broke with established conventions while paying heed to a certain tradition of Black art.

The study opens with an analysis of the relations between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois in the context of turn-of-the-century ideas about manliness and masculinity—the transition from the idea of man as the agent of civilization to one of man as the embodiment of virility. According to Pochmara, though Washington pays heed to Victorian values throughout his output, he manages to assert his own masculine privilege in less overt ways, for instance, by citing his popularity as a public speaker among White female audiences. Du Bois, on the other hand, addresses the tension between the two concepts of masculinity more openly. He claims that the racial oppression of Blacks feminizes Black men, enfeebling the Black community. In spite of his firm opposition to Washington's ethics of accommodation, he effectively upholds them by advocating the “respectable” care of Black men over Black women, claiming manliness while eschewing masculinity.

During the interwar years, with Victorian ideas out of favour, “respectability” lost some of its lustre, while Black male privilege retained virtually all of its allure. Building on the concept of “respectable” Black masculinity responsible for the uplift of the “race,” Alain Locke put forward the idea of a “New Negro” that celebrated the manly vigour of the urban Black. In this context, Pochmara highlights the way in which Locke is positioned not as a father of the “New Negro” movement—the Harlem Renaissance—but rather as a midwife: a gesture that neatly circumscribes Black womanhood. Her analysis goes even further by identifying the European roots of the movement, traced to both ancient Greece and the more modern *Jugendkultur* of *fin-de-siècle* Germany. The homoeroticism of Locke's vision is identified as part of a modernism that celebrates masculinity at the expense of the feminine, positing the “ruthless” and “penetrating” new aesthetic against “mawkish” Victorianism (98).

Where Locke glorifies the Black masculine artist, Thurman revels in the infertile figure of the dandy. In his works, Thurman consistently portrays the Black aesthete as a “fake” and a failure whose notion of uplift is highly limited and irrelevant, if not injurious, to the Black community at large. Pochmara devotes significant attention to Thurman's curious reversal of the logic of the “New Negro”: while Locke glorified the impact of urban life on Black men, Thurman rued the feminization it brought. Thurman elevated the masculine figure of the “rough” lower-class urban Black above the modernist artist. Pochmara carefully details the writer's

sardonic representations of the intellectual life of the Black elites, whose value is repeatedly challenged by the “normalcy” of the down-to-earth (and typically female) “authentic” Blacks (151–53).

In her study, Pochmara also repeatedly stresses the impact of the racist tropes of Blackness on the formation of the Harlem Renaissance. Locke’s “New Negro” is purposely distanced from the mythical Black rapist, while the virtual exclusion of women from the programme of the movement reinforces that effect. Thurman’s “queerness” and interest in dandyism partly serves the same purpose. Pochmara’s decision to close her narrative with a discussion of Richard Wright as the heir of both currents of the Harlem Renaissance is particularly notable: Wright’s explicit masculine bias, after all, depended on a rejection of the “respectable” image of Black manhood as a classist fiction (184–88). His works reverse the polarity of Thurman’s argument, identifying women as passive objects within the racist system and describing literature as a manly pursuit (189).

Pochmara’s argument is fairly compelling—the particular masculine biases involved in the production of the Harlem Renaissance clearly merit the attention she gives them. To study them is to uncover the strategies involved in the definition of the members of the movement and of its purpose. However, the elaborate manner in which the author pursues her subject seems at times to prevent her from developing her claims fully. For example, her discussion of the “criminal” mode of Black urban masculinity, which has been in place since the nineteenth century, appears to evade the role criminality has played since in Black culture. While the figure of the “sweetback” may serve a particular purpose for Thurman, it also stands for the “underground” culture of the ghetto and the long-standing glorification of the sexual Black, as evidenced in the recurrent trope of the Black pimp across innumerable texts of Black popular culture (from the legend of Stack O’Lee to rappers like 50 Cent). In a way, this omission is explained by the perspective of the author, who is explicitly involved in a pursuit of transatlantic connections. Another somewhat disturbing feature is the treatment of significant quotations; Pochmara appears to approach each of them in a manner befitting a poem, highlighting a relatively high number of key terms on each occasion and providing detailed analyses which do not always seem strictly necessary. These problems notwithstanding, *The Making of the New Negro* is an important study whose value is defined by the way in which it reorganizes the common perceptions of the Harlem Renaissance and of the politics of masculinity in Black American literature of the early twentieth century.

# “Artful Exaggeration”

Krzysztof Majer (University of Łódź) Interviews

Bill Gaston

**Krzysztof Majer:** To what extent do you think that particular physical space—say, the British Columbia coast, with places like Victoria and Vancouver—has affected your writing? Do you feel that it is particularly tied to the region, or even think of yourself as a regionalist? Also, do you have a sense that your writing is, in some overarching way, Canadian? Or do you perhaps feel part of a broader—say, North American—current of writing? Are such distinctions (cultural, regional, national) important for you?

**Bill Gaston:** I feel place strongly, either in tune with it or struggling against it, which, strangely, is sort of the same thing. That is, place feels *us*, stroking or punching, as the case may be. This is as true of a rural landscape, as of wilderness, or city or—even more so—a neighbourhood. So I think place makes any writer, whether they know it or not, and if they use the detail of their past and present lives, they are regionalists, by nature if not by design. Joyce and Faulkner are nothing if not regionalists. But in Canada to be thought a “regional writer” is to be damned, or at least to be described as someone who writes about a certain place, usually

rural, and who doesn’t sell many books. Alice Munro, who has all the hallmarks of the regional writer, is maybe our one exception to this rule. Many Canadian writers share the story of publishers or agents pushing them to change the setting and place names in their novel from Canada to the U.S. in hopes of pandering to American self-interest and selling more books—by abandoning the authenticity that comes from allegiance to place.

I don’t think Canadian writers, while writing, think of themselves in terms of region, nationality, or tradition. I certainly don’t, and I actively resist using it as strategy. But after-the-act I do love being considered a B.C. writer, and even more so a West Coast writer, if we include everything from here [Victoria, B.C.] to southern California. I feel more cultural kinship with Oregon than with Toronto or Montreal, feel more aesthetically in line with Ken Kesey and Gary Snyder than with Robertson Davies or Mordecai Richler, and likely this is proof of the shaping power of place, beyond political boundaries.

Apart from all that, I think that the West Coast has peculiar and powerful qualities affecting all who live here. “Go west, young

man” has fuelled a particular sensibility for at least a couple of centuries, and now we have a population that has indeed “gone west,” finding itself pressed up against a wall of ocean, with nowhere else to go. A lawlessness or restlessness continues, as witnessed by the creative fever found here, most famously in California. North of the American border there’s also a wildness, an unforgiving harshness that an intuitive person—a.k.a a writer—can feel issuing from the ground, the stormy coast, the gigantic trees. It isn’t welcoming. I think its energy derives from fault lines, and is nothing but tectonic. Laugh if you want. It’s not a friendly place, so we won’t notice you laughing in any case.

**KM:** But it’s interesting to consider that in some of your books, the characters go east instead, perhaps because there is no route going further the other way. In *The World*, for instance, Stuart Price, who has been pushed to various other limits, drives all the way to Toronto. You have him go through all those places in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario—that first third of the novel feels almost like a reverse *On the Road*, with a “beat” character searching for renewal, and with an acute sense of physical space, of landscape.

**BG:** I think it’s significant that he “goes east” only after he retires, his house burns down, his mar-

riage ends, and he falls out with his daughter! His failed life causes him to reverse his tracks, so to speak, perhaps searching for renewal, but perhaps searching for the culprit, who in this case is embodied in the soulless person who has rejected his house insurance claim. The “going east” intrigues me, in much the same way as the term “widdershins” intrigues me; in witchcraft it means going against the natural order, or literally against the route of the sun. Practitioners will walk widdershins in order to affect some kind of positive change. By shaking things up, I suppose. Stuart does this unknowingly, by driving widdershins across the vastness of Canada, and of course things get even worse before they begin to get better.

**KM:** My next question is also connected, although deviously, to issues of region and tradition. An early story of yours, titled “A Forest Path,” riffs on Malcolm Lowry’s famous novella *The Forest Path to the Spring*. Your narrator believes himself to be Lowry’s illegitimate offspring, and his evidence is largely textual, taken from that novella. The story seems to parody the situation of a Canadian writer—maybe especially a West-Coast Canadian writer?—who has to grapple with the uncomfortable legacy, the shadow of the Father. Given also that you’ve written the introduction to the 2014 Penguin edition of *Under the Volcano*, do you feel that Lowry’s shadow still

looms large over your writing, and maybe over Canadian writing in general?

**BG:** I enjoy a complex relationship with Lowry, one that begins with an odd coincidence. As teenagers learning to drink, and forced outdoors to do it, we would gather at “the drinking spot,” a forest clearing jutting into the waters of Indian Arm, in a place now called Cates Park, a short hike from where we all lived. There we’d go crazy with booze and psychedelics and whatnot, and only later, doing postgraduate work on Malcolm Lowry, did I learn that this was the spot—we had gathered on *the spot*—where he’d had his last squatter’s cabin and wrote *Under the Volcano*. None of us had heard of him. And now a sign went up at the head of our path—Malcolm Lowry Walk. In any case my readings of Lowry built a love-hate relationship. He represented my literary roots, or perhaps my forebears—the monolith of English Literature—while I was a carrier of water and hewer of wood. Canadians simply could not write sentences like the British, and we still can’t. At the same time, I saw him as an outsider who had presumed to invade my beloved wilderness—but the English private-school dandy couldn’t survive it, couldn’t have his tea and sherry, and a cougar simply scared the shit out of him. This of course was my vanity talking: it was alcohol, nothing else, that brought him down.

But I saw his writing as Old World fancy; needlessly verbose, baroque, laden with allusion, symbol and portent. This was the New World, the landscape could kill you, and there was no need for anything but plain speaking. I saw his brilliance to be misguided and ill-used. And in this I was arrogant enough to depict him as a clueless madman in “A Forest Path,” my comic response to his *Forest Path to the Spring*, which in truth was nothing but a naïve love story and a needlessly fanciful description of my neighbourhood. I showed a draft of the story to my mother’s best friend Dorothy, who’d played lots of bridge with Lowry’s wife Marjorie, and she thought it naughty but funny. It was the first piece of fiction I ever wrote, and it remains my most anthologized.

**KM:** I’m intrigued by the idea that Canadians can’t—or won’t?—write like Lowry, which I take as a refusal to emulate. Earlier you distanced yourself from Robertson Davies on geographical grounds, but I assume he would be exactly the sort of writer who tried to “write British.”

**BG:** I think we can’t *and* wouldn’t even if we could. There’s no need. Nor would there be readers. So that “shadow of the Father,” which is our colonial past, has largely faded, if not vanished, I think. I still admire the effortless correctness and ingenuity of a Martin Amis sentence, but I love more his street smarts and slang-wit

and vast irony. I think the idea is to write like we speak. Good writing needs to belong to, and perhaps have some role in shaping, contemporary thinking and speech, which have a syntax, and ours is not the same as Lowry's and never was, notwithstanding old guard writers like Robertson Davies, who indeed "wrote British." Lowry's language was foreign to us, and now it's also dated, and so even less suitable for public consumption. But I remember quite well my reaction to reading Lowry and, yes, it was partly impatience. It went something like, "You lived a tough, cool, squatter's life in my backyard, and you appreciated this place just like I do—so why aren't you talking to *me*?" He had demons, and lived in a painful fantasy, but he was clearly brilliant—so why didn't he communicate directly to me, like other writers did? And maybe herein lies an opportunity to answer a part of a previous question, about my identifying as a Canadian writer. To generalize grandly, I'll say that Canadian writers are less direct than American writers, but more subtle. And we are less subtle than British writers but more direct. I think we are stylistically well-positioned between the culture that used to dominate us, and the one that continues to, more and more.

**KM:** Could you tell me something about your other literary or artistic influences, past and present—not necessarily North American? Who

do you feel has shaped your sensibility, perception, style?

**BG:** I see two kinds of writerly influence. The first are those writers I deeply admire, and emulate, actively *trying* to be influenced. This list is long, but would include the Brits Martin Amis, John Fowles, T. S. Eliot, and John Cowper Powys; the Yanks Thomas McGuane, the recently departed Jim Harrison, John Gardner, Hunter S. Thompson, and George Saunders; Canadians Douglas Glover, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Alice Munro. These writers are utterly different from one another, of course, and there are many others, but each of them has something I covet. Another list would be those who influenced me largely without my knowing it, and these would include Dr. Seuss, John Steinbeck, Scott Young and, I have to say, Shakespeare. The Beats, for their sensibilities if not their style, are probably on both lists.

**KM:** I'll bite. Dr. Seuss?

**BG:** When my first child was a few months old I began reading to her, lying beside her in bed. (This may sound early to begin reading to a child, but I now take full credit for Lise becoming a published poet.) She would hear the words and become wide-eyed under the pictures, and squirm with excitement beside me. One night I began to read to her Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!* and



only several words into it, my hair stood on end. I had never read the book before but knew every word by heart—it was from my mother reading it to me, probably many times, when I wasn't much older than Lise. I knew the words, their nonsense and their musicality, in my body. I likely learned rhythm from Seuss; I probably also learned something about words and play, and the freedom from logic. Many Seuss stories have a great sense of calamity and are models of dramatic tension. Who knows what I learned! Babies can learn a lot, some of it subtle. My oldest son had a pronounced sense of irony by the time he was one.

**KM:** And has teaching literature or creative writing influenced the way you think about it? I recall an interview with Mark A. Jarman, where he said that going over the classics with students again and again has strengthened his appreciation for the way these texts were built, for their form; have you had similar experiences?

**BG:** My teaching has influenced my writing in a curious way, one that has little to do with appreciation of classic texts and more to do with the *via negativa*. In thirty years of creative writing workshops, I've read mostly student work, not literature, and without denigrating their writing too much I have to say that they are just beginning to find their way, and most of it is mediocre. One result of

decades' wading through mediocrity, trying to think of something helpful to say, is an enhanced appreciation for what in prose narrative does shine, does wink magically from the page. In working to locate gems in the fluid murk, I've had opportunity to learn, and relearn, much about both gems and murk.

**KM:** Let's talk about how your own fiction is made. Some recurrent themes in your writing, I think, are the breakdown of a family, and—as a flipside of sorts?—establishing unlikely, spontaneous, short-lived alternative communities, alternative families. This is crucial in *The World*, where high school friends are reunited when their family life, or life in general, reaches an especially low point. But you always seem to be interested in families—in what brings them together or tears them apart. Sometimes this can be one and the same thing, like the death of the family dog in “Honouring Honey” or a Leonard Cohen concert in “Geriatric Arena Grope.”

**BG:** The family, or some version of it, including its complete lack, appears to be my reservoir. There's a simple and practical reason for this. When Tolstoy said that all happy families are the same, and all unhappy families different from one another in their unhappiness—something like that—he was identifying a vast garden of conflict that's endlessly nourishing for

a writer. The conflicts are as endlessly varied as the personalities of the people involved; yet readers can relate to these conflicts because at least to some degree they've tasted something similar, or can imagine it. Maybe most importantly, unlike most political or social conflict, or the man-versus-nature variety, in family conflict there's a ready-made poignancy, because what's reflected is the breakdown of a relationship that is idealized and not expected to fail, or to be anything but perfect. Expectations about family are so rich, and need no explanation. A mother's love, a father's pride, sibling rivalry—none of that needs to be explained, and any deviation from the ideal is instantly rich as a result. Putting conflict within the family is a kind of shortcut for me.

**KM:** Your writing is often associated with the eerie, the grotesque, the bizarre. I feel that in part this is a response to your most famous collection of short stories, *Gargoyles*, which seemed to be organized around portraits of individuals whose life had been touched by absurdity in one way or another. Although your stories teem with black humour, the atmosphere is really far from grim. Does all this relate to a particular world view, a sense that reality is bizarre and that by foregrounding this quality we get to its core? Is there a connection here with your practice of Buddhism?

**BG:** The word “humour,” black or otherwise, is key here. I think my work is quite funny, if I do say so myself. It disappoints me greatly that not a lot of reviews of my work mention humour. Maybe I'm funny only to myself! The first time I saw David Adams Richards read was a revelation. His writing is famously thought to be dire and grim, but as he read he could hardly contain his laughter, and his laughter was a guide for me, because I could now see where and how his work was actually funny. What before was merely dark, now was dark humour.

We can face up to the human condition: we are flying through space on a watery dirt ball and don't know how this happened or why, or if there is a why, and all sorts of strange and sometimes torturous shit happens to us, yet we have the audacity to become bored, and then we suffer great pain and die. This prototypical absurdity can make us depressed, or become self-protectively insane, or laugh. Perhaps laugh gently. The mention of Buddhism is astute. For fear of boring anybody I'll say only that the Buddhism I adhere to is a view, or way of seeing, rather than a belief of any kind, and that one of its main effects is a heightened sense of absurdity. One great teacher suggests that it deserves not anger or nihilism but a sense of appreciation, because within this absurdity we find great beauty. One name for the situation is “The Cosmic Joke.” Another is “Lion's Roar,” which suggests that

the absurd situation we face is also both loud and sincere. In any case, a gentle laugh is my choice, and I find my characters' strange situations to be funny. I'm laughing with their pain, not at it. And I trust that readers will potentially identify with anything strange that they read from me, seeing as they live smack in the middle of the strange themselves. My process is to tease the details so to make the scene almost but not quite larger than life—I call this “artful exaggeration”—in order to make this intention clear and free it from the confines of realism. And also to make it funnier and more entertaining. My psychologically gnarled characters entertain me in any case, and often I type with an inner wry smirk. Again, I'm not looking down at them; I'm identifying fully, and my hope is that readers find familiar ground as well. And perhaps chuckle, rather than wince, in recognition.

**KM:** You've mentioned the experience of hearing David Adams Richards read aloud, and the relationship between sound and meaning. I'd like to ask about musicality—or perhaps, to use Werner Wolf's term, “musicalization”—in your writing: your texts are awash in musical references. Some are delightfully precise (say, a particular song on an early Brian Eno album); others allude to a certain phase in a band's work, and others still are fairly obscure. I have a sense that 1970s/1980s rock is very

prominent. Is this a way of building some sort of bond with readers who have similar associations, or “awarding” your characters with some of your own musical taste? Is music a large part of your writing life, and do you see any similarities between the processes?

**BG:** I find that pinning a certain song or band on a character is a vital, simple way to give them significant flesh. That a character favours the Beatles over the Rolling Stones says a lot. That a person gets mad hearing Abba is revealing. The song or band I use doesn't necessarily reflect or expose my own taste, although it might. And of course anything obscure will be lost on most readers. To say a character loves early Ornette Coleman might not mean much to most readers, but some will know it refers to the birth of a certain kind of improv, others at least will know it refers to jazz, and the rest will know that the character likes music that they don't know anything about, which itself says lots. And I do like harbouring the fantasy of bonding with certain readers. If I reference the vainglory of a certain Strawbs album, for instance, a few people will know exactly what I mean. It's an easily-attained objective correlative.

Another issue entirely is what I consider the musicality of writing itself. I used to play guitar and I composed perhaps a hundred songs. I wasn't talented enough to be professional, and I can't sing,

but I dropped music mostly because I loved it so much that it could easily satisfy my creative urges and then I would not have written fiction at all. In any case, I may be deluded, or tone-deaf, but I find my prose musical. I'm aware of the rhythms and beats of sentences—I'm never *not* aware of them. I hear them rhythmically, and that's how I compose prose. An old friend of mine, a writer who used to drum in rock bands, would have to change a sentence on page 50 if he changed some words on page 2, certain this would resonate *rhythmically* and the reader would hear it whether they were aware of it or not. I'm not as fanatical as that, but I do hear my developing sentences in terms of their subtle rhythmic patterns and inflections, beyond meaning.

**KM:** I also notice that the music is rarely foregrounded—even in “Geriatric Arena Grope,” the Leonard Cohen-themed story, he is not the main focus. Have you ever been tempted to write a novel or short story with a clearly defined musical theme? Maybe even with a particular musical structure in mind?

**BG:** I have a new story, which the aforementioned Mark A. Jarman will soon be publishing in *The Fiddlehead*, the journal he edits, entitled “Oscar Peterson’s Warm Brown Bum.” This might well be the most overtly music-centric thing I’ve written. In it, a Canadian jazz pianist working a steady gig in an Australian

club must literally move aside when the famous musician comes with his group to perform for a week. Then when he sits back down on the stool recently vacated by Peterson, the wood is still warm—hot, actually—from the heavy-set pianist’s bum. Various life-changing things are communicated through the heat. It was fun getting into some descriptions of music, mostly of “feeling” the music, and the inspiration required to play well. But I kept discussion of the actual music well off to the side, mostly because I can’t conceive of a story not about people, and in this case the effect music has on them. Yet again I’ve gone and exaggerated things! But the actual music, good as it was, needed to stay in the background.

**KM:** Let’s circle back to the sense of place. There is an interest, especially in your last two novels, in historical writing, in tapping into the colonial past of Nova Scotia and British Columbia. But especially in the final part of *The World*—the novel which we talked about earlier—history is mediated, inaccessible: the historical document at its centre is a first-person account, translated from a foreign language, and largely invented (by the translator). Is there a larger statement here about writing history—or indeed about the unreliability of translation?

**BG:** There is, but this larger statement is a simple one, better-elucidated by

others, that sees “history” as a concept made impossible by faulty memory, cultural blindness, racism, ignorance, bias and agendas of all kinds, not to mention time itself and the impossibility of experiencing anything other than the immediate present. The most basic fact is that a person can never translate another’s experience, and time and place compound the problem. *The Order of Good Cheer* and more so *The World* indeed play with all that, but are mostly interested in how characters feel about—and make decisions based on—all of these failed translations. In this regard, one might say that any love affair is an attempt, and ultimately a failure, to arrive at a shared language. A close examination of this ongoing failure—by turns funny, poignant, or tragic—is possibly the goal of my fiction. To put it more simply and humanely, we neither speak nor listen all that well, and much sad shit ensues.

**KM:** At the risk of literalizing some of what you’ve just said: what has your experience been with having your work translated? Have you been tempted to follow up on the texts to see how they have fared in their new context, or have you perhaps been able to verify them yourself?

**BG:** I’ve come to understand that a purely literal translation will not be worth much, and that a good translator is also a good writer—that both context and spirit must be forged anew. I’ve also learned

that any translation of my work is so far out of my hands that I’d simply best ignore it. My early curiosity about a translation—the novel *Tall Lives*, into French—was particularly painful. The novel was a kind of sustained comic hyperbole bordering on magic realism, involving twin brothers who had been born joined at the big toe and separated at birth by their father, a veterinarian. One twin was naïve, innocent, good, and the other canny, experienced, evil. While in Europe, the bad twin wrote his brother postcards, one of which described his agony at being rejected by the woman of his erotic dreams. His manner was always hyperbolic; for instance, if he drank seven beers he would say that he drank ninety-three. In the postcard, he told his brother that, in order to get over the woman, he had to come home, drink a gallon of vodka and stick a refrigerator up his ass. In the freshly translated version, I knew where to find this postcard and knew enough French to read it. And it said, “When I got home I had to drink too much and have a cold shower.” This is exactly the kind of clichéd, expected, mundane language the bad twin would never, *could* never use—in fact it was his mission in life to violate such language. So I was, needless to say, disappointed. And never again tried to read, or ask about, a translation.

# Transcultural Theatre in the UK

## Uilleam Blacker Talks to Joanna Kosmalska (University of Łódź)<sup>1</sup>

**Joanna Kosmalska:** How did you start working with Molodyi Teatr?

**Uilleam Blacker:** My wife, Olesya Khromeychuk, came up with the idea of starting the theatre group in 2010, and I was involved from the beginning, though not in all the early shows. At first, the group consisted of people who were already friends, mostly Ukrainians, but also Russians and Russian-speakers from Central Asia. The members have changed over the years. It's hazardous to work with migrants as they tend to come and go. Before *Bloody East Europeans*, we had to advertise for new members. Now, we have a mix of British people and Ukrainians. They come from all sorts of backgrounds and do very different day jobs—some work in construction, restaurants, market research, and a couple of us are academics. They also have very diverse experiences of immigration, from the straightforward to the very complicated.

**JK:** Multicultural and multilingual plays have become quite common in the UK. Was this trend an inspiration for writing *Bloody East Europeans*?

**UB:** When I set about writing the play, I'd already been part of Molodyi Teatr for a couple of years. The first two shows we did were adaptations of Gogol's early stories set in Ukraine. These were put on, to great success, for the Ukrainian community in London. Then we performed some short original pieces in Ukrainian, taking contemporary poetry and making a performance out of it or adapting Taras Shevchenko's work. We've also done a few *vertep* plays—the traditional Ukrainian Christmas plays, which we adapted with a bit of satirical political humour. We put in some jokes about the Maidan and migration.

But in 2013, we decided to do something longer, and in English, to give ourselves a challenge and to widen our potential audience.

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was carried out as part of the research grant for young scholars financed by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

The inspiration for the show came in part when Olesya and I went to a show by the company Ad Infinitum that told the story of Israel in this really funny, quasi-cabaret way. We decided to move away from that format a bit, but we kept the idea of a central narrator, a kind of cabaret atmosphere, and using humour and songs. Another key factor was that the theatre became a space where the members would meet and exchange stories about their lives as migrants in London. One day we realized that we had heard a lot of interesting stories. Given the fact that the public discourse around immigration in the UK was getting worse and worse, we felt it was important to bring migrants' voices into the open.

**JK:** Is the play then based on true stories?

**UB:** There are no characters or stories that are exactly based on real people. Olesya and I sat down and recalled all the stories we had heard from the members of the theatre or from other migrants we knew and we began to plot out some ideas for characters, songs, and storylines. We used real migrants to create caricatures and combined real stories of different people into one. I wrote the script and then we read it to the theatre members in order to get their feedback about what seemed convincing, funny, accurate or otherwise.

**JK:** Was it difficult to assume the voice of a different group and “speak for them”?

**UB:** I was always aware of it and didn't presume to speak from the migrants' point of view. I'd lived abroad for a couple of years, but in very different circumstances to most of our actors, so I can't claim to share their experience. That's why it was important for me to get feedback and to respond to it. As a result, we changed the play quite a lot during development.

**JK:** In the play, you have intertwined English with Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Belarusian, Serbian, Hungarian and Georgian. Why did you include such a wide range of languages?

**UB:** One reason why I wanted to introduce other languages was to underline a key part of the migration experience, which is precisely working across and between languages. It was meant to keep the audience on their toes and disorientate them a bit with words they didn't understand, but also make them think about learning languages. We even make a joke at the beginning of the play that we are going to teach the audience to “speak Eastern European.”

Besides, we wanted to show how different Eastern Europeans communicate, or miscommunicate, with each other. This is why we've

included a scene where a Russian tries to chat up two Polish girls, leading to some misunderstandings. This reflects reality. I've actually witnessed a number of conversations between people from different Slavic countries, where I saw evident cultural differences that came through in the similarity and mismatch of the languages.

The only tricky thing was to find the balance between incorporating words or whole sentences that weren't understandable and making sure that it was clear what was going on. But I think that this problem will come more and more into drama in the UK, as our society has become very diverse.

**JK:** The actors change accents and make some mistakes throughout the play. Is it because you wanted them to mirror the way migrants speak English?

**UB:** Yes. But actually this worked in a completely different way than I had expected. In the first draft, I deliberately wrote in lots of typical mistakes that speakers of Ukrainian or Polish make, such as misusing articles or tenses. But when it came to rehearsals, the actors sometimes found these a bit confusing, and started to correct the mistakes but also introduced their own idiosyncrasies. In the end, I realized that, with our group of actors anyway, it made sense to write in standard English and let the foreign inflec-

tions happen naturally in rehearsal. It was interesting to see that everyone was really conscious of how they sounded to native speakers, and they were willing to play that up.

**JK:** Why did you set the play in Stratford?

**UB:** We chose the location because Stratford is a typical immigrant area in London. The play is set in an "Eastern European bar," which provides a forum to introduce the audience to a whole range of characters from all over Eastern Europe who have very different immigration experiences. The central character is a naïve student from Ukraine who paid to get documents and a job arranged for her in London and ended up getting involved with some shady people. She panics and calls the police, which brings the UK Border Agency to the bar. Individual stories of other characters are structured around this event.

**JK:** Where did the idea for the title come from?

**UB:** It's a phrase that one hears in the UK every so often, and sums up a prejudice that brings whole groups of quite different people under one umbrella. What we wanted to do was to challenge this idea that there is such a coherent, single group as "Eastern Europeans." Sure, they may share some experiences, face similar



challenges, and there may be some social, cultural or political similarities between countries. They sometimes work or socialize together in the UK, and they even share languages (e.g., Ukrainians, Russians and people from the Baltics may all be able to communicate in Russian). But in general, there are also huge differences. There is very little that really unites an Estonian and a Bulgarian, or a Pole and an Albanian. But for a lot of British people, they are all “Eastern Europeans”—poor, desperate and potentially dangerous.

**JK:** The play was staged in several places.

**UB:** The premiere was in the Ukrainian Institute in London. Then we performed it at the Ukrainian Club, at a small theatre in central London, Teatro Technis, in a community café in Glasgow that works with migrant women, and at Cambridge University. But our main goal was the Edinburgh Fringe where we did five shows in 2015 and were long-listed for Amnesty International’s Freedom of Expression Award.

**JK:** Was it difficult to get the funding?

**UB:** Early on we raised money by doing *vertep* performances (it’s traditional for *vertep* performers to pass a hat around after the show) and people were very generous. Then we did our shows for free but asked

for donations. In the end, we organized an online fundraising campaign to pay for our trip to Edinburgh. Also, Ukrainian community organizations in London and Edinburgh supported us in putting on shows, rehearsing, getting accommodation, and so on. Of course, we had to put our own money into it, too.

**JK:** What audience were you aiming *Bloody East Europeans* towards?

**UB:** I wrote the play with a British audience in mind. However, our initial audiences were mostly Ukrainian, and at first it was more interesting for our actors to talk to that audience because a lot of the jokes and Ukrainian cultural references we put in were aimed at them. But as it progressed, we got much more mixed audiences. A lot of non-Ukrainian Eastern Europeans came to see us and they gave us a lot of positive feedback. In Edinburgh, the audiences were mostly British. We could tell the viewers’ nationality because they reacted in completely different ways to jokes and different scenes in the play. Our main channel of communication and publicity was our Facebook page and Ukrainian community organizations, but we also used posters and flyers, especially in Edinburgh. All of our shows were sold out or nearly sold out. We got a great reception and lots of nice audience feedback online.

**JK:** Could you tell us a little bit about your new play, *Penetrating Europe, or Migrants Have Talent*?

**UB:** The new play is built around the format of a talent show, but most of the dialogue is based on interviews we did with Ukrainian migrants about their experiences of migrating to the UK. Some had had good experiences, and some very difficult ones. We then used the interview scripts *verbatim* to build the show—the judges listen to their stories and decide whether they are allowed to stay or whether they get deported. But there’s also a lot of singing and dancing, as you might expect—we’re trying to combine the serious and sad with the funny and ridiculous. The play is a platform for voicing migrant experience, but it is also a parody on British attitudes to migrants: British people are

often convinced that we are doing migrants a favour by letting them in to the UK, and one of the big elements of the current debate is this idea of “points-based” migration, where you judge how useful the migrants are to you. It’s a very cynical and self-satisfied attitude and completely forgets that these are human beings. But the play also has another level, it’s the intertwined stories of a young woman who comes from Ukraine to the UK and a young British man who travels to Ukraine from the UK, and how they meet: we tried to mirror and contrast the two experiences, which gives some interesting results.

**JK:** I’m really looking forward to seeing your new play this summer. Thank you for finding the time for this interview.

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