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## 1. Introduction

Richard Bean is described as being one of the most interesting playwrights in London's theatrical landscape of the new century. His creative work extends over a period of 15 years and during his career he has established himself as a playwright who constantly challenges his audience. In 2012, the year in which this thesis was written, it seems that the theatrical landscape of London needs Bean to challenge theatregoers, critics, and most of all the orthodoxy.

For me, the most interesting aspect about the author is his mission to challenge. When interviewing the author in August 2011, there was one prominent incident that I remembered best. I asked about his motivation for writing, and after considering the question, he conclusively stated that the credo that was very important to him as a playwright was 'the challenging of the orthodoxy'.<sup>1</sup> I remember the precise moment because Bean repeatedly put his finger down on the table and said "Write it down like this: 'challenging the orthodoxy'." Thus, provocation is what the playwright Richard Bean aspires to achieve in his plays.

The work of this 55 year-old man, one of the most challenging forces in London's theatrical scene, appeared highly appealing and interesting. I decided to investigate the phenomenon of Richard Bean by exploring his original plays as well as analysing theatre reviews and interviews both by Bean himself and by theatre critics. Since there is no substantial written work on either Bean's biography or oeuvre, this thesis will be concerned with providing an integral survey of his achievements.

The aim of this thesis is to give an overview of Richard Bean's plays and to mark his development as a playwright. In order to achieve an idea of his writing career this paper provides a comparison of his early, later and more recent work. A total number of five plays, each representative of a specific phase of his career, will be used for analytical purposes. In a detailed analysis I will discuss and compare important categories such as themes, structures, genres, aspects of language and style, as well as characters and settings. In this thesis I will attempt to show how Bean emerged as one of London's most interesting playwrights of our time.

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<sup>1</sup> The personal interview took place on 23 August 2011 in London.

I have divided Bean's work into three different phases because only through such a division is a good basis for comparison provided. I will argue that Bean's writing underwent significant changes and show how Bean's development is reflected in his plays. His first play *Toast* (1999) was chosen for a closer analysis because it is the most illustrative example of Bean's initial plays. In its structure and content it is very straightforward and it contains elements which are typical of Bean's early phase. The examples of his later work are two plays from the period between 2003 and 2008, namely *Honeymoon Suite* (2004) and *Harvest* (2005). These two plays clearly mark a change in his work since they are broader in context, though still relatively conservative in comparison to his later plays. In his most recent phase, Bean has succeeded in selecting controversial themes for his plays and addressing them in an unusual manner. The chosen representative examples for this phase are *England People Very Nice* (2009) and *The Heretic* (2011). It is in this last phase that it appears as if Bean has found his voice as he continues to celebrate one success after the other.

Unlike other playwrights, who often refuse to discuss their intentions and methods, Bean chooses to talk about his work in public. He often enters into conversations and debates concerning his work and many are readily accessible. In writing about his plays it is necessary to consider the statements he makes about his writing and their realisation on stage. However, the essential materials that I make use of are Bean's plays in their published form. I will, however, add comments about performances that I have attended or about the video or voice recordings that I have been able to examine. In my analysis I will also refer to written material of performances. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the critical reviews presented refer to one specific performance of a play and might not be valid for another performance of the same play. This is said only to raise awareness of the difficulty of writing about theatre texts that have been performed recently, as one member of the audience might have gained a different impression of a performance from another. Integral to this thesis are also the reactions of the audience or the critics as far as they can be reconstructed. Some of Bean's plays received reviews ranging from highly critical to very good while others only received glowing reviews. It is essential to study the media resonance in order to establish whether Bean's credo of 'challenging the orthodoxy' gets the echo the playwright aspires to.

It is my aim to elaborate on Bean's work in an extensive manner. The format of this thesis only allows an analysis of a selection of plays and they are chosen carefully to illustrate the assertions that I make. I do not make any claim of completeness in this thesis. It offers a critical overview of the writer's creative output in the light of the theatre environment he is writing in. Among Bean's qualities are his aspirations to develop his writing style and his endeavour to apply different forms of structures and other theatrical devices in his plays as well as his steady desire to select controversial topics as the theme for his plays.

One last fact that I would like to draw attention to concerns the nature of production of Bean's plays. He writes works for immediate production. Some of his plays are commissioned work and written with a particular theatre or audience in mind. The critic Philip Fisher stated during a debate that he anticipates the plays of Bean with more enthusiasm than anyone else.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> theatrevoice debate, Controversial playwright Richard Bean: full career overview, minute: 0:00:01-0:00:11; <http://www.theatrevoice.com/3617/playwright-richard-bean-career-overview/>

## 2. Becoming Richard Bean – Some Biographical Observations

It is necessary to describe some relevant time periods in Bean's life before analysing his writing. Bean is not a man who hides information about his background and upbringing. It is often the case that he alludes to personal experiences in interviews and debates, and he explains their influence on his writings. It is certain that a better understanding of Bean's work is only possible if some facts of certain important periods of his life are provided. Therefore, I will dedicate this chapter to relevant biographical information by using the facts that are provided by him in his interviews. I do not claim that one can only understand Bean's entire work when one knows these biographical facts, but it is definitely easier to relate to his choice of topics with an understanding of his background.

Richard Bean was born in 1956 in the eastern part of Hull, a city in the North of England which is dominated by various industries. Bean must have become familiar with working environments in the course of his childhood and adolescence. Some of his experiences are featured in his plays. The most frequently mentioned example is his work experience in a bread plant in Hull, where he worked for a year. The knowledge he acquired while he laboured in the plant served as inspiration for his original play *Toast*. This information appears on his agent's folder, which then briefly mentions his studies at Loughborough University, from which he graduated in psychology.<sup>3</sup> The information given also includes his work as a psychologist, model and stand-up comedian. Bean mentioned his background as a stand-up comedian in many interviews in which he explains his affinity for comedy. After receiving his degree in psychology, Bean obtained a postgraduate diploma in industrial relations and management, which he finished in 1979. He worked as an occupational psychologist for a company that built telephone exchanges and later became self-employed in this profession (Sierz interview 353)<sup>4</sup>.

There are a number of different interviews in which Bean talks about his initial contact with the theatre. In an interview with Aleks Sierz he states that he had "no connection at all with the arts until I was 30 or so." (Sierz interview 352). This was the period of Bean's life in which he wrote and performed as a stand-up comedian. His

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<sup>3</sup> All the information and dates are taken from the portfolio of his agent, Rose Cobbe: last visit on the 10 February 2012; <http://unitedagents.co.uk/richard-bean>

<sup>4</sup> I will refer to the interview-transcript of Sierz' interview with Bean as 'Sierz interview' in order to avoid confusion with the other sources from Sierz that I quote.

career as a stand-up comedian lasted for six years. Bean describes this field as "easy to get into, but much harder to keep going." He also explains that he felt his "material was always better than his performance." (both Sierz interview 352). Bean never had the intention of earning his money by writing plays. He stresses that he wrote jokes for stand-up comedy but that he never thought of it as a money-earning occupation. When he decided to give up his well-paid job as a psychologist in order to pursue his writing career in London, he rented an office in Chancery Lane which he only used for writing (Sierz interview 353).

A lot will be said in this thesis about the stages of his writing career. At this point I would like to end this excursion into Bean's life by saying that his was an unlikely background for a playwright. In becoming a playwright at an advanced age, it is not surprising that his reflections on the themes he chooses are mature and critical. The various experiences he made in his life are decisive for his work as a playwright. His knowledge of writing and of performing as a comedian must have been of huge benefit for him as a playwright of modern drama.

In 2002 Bean co-founded the group of the Monsterists with numerous other playwrights. According to the homepage of the National Theatre this group of writers dedicate their work to

campaigning for bigger plays, on bigger stages and for more resources for living writers. It is a positive, forward-looking movement which aims to create opportunities for British theatre writers to move from studio spaces to main stage.<sup>5</sup>

Bean's participation in this group is another example of his involvement in shaping the current theatre scene in London.

Bean is considered to be writing in a tradition that is called new writing. This tradition is predominant in the contemporary theatre scene. New writers dedicate their work to national identity "by offering highly individual and distinctive visions of Englishness and Britishness."<sup>6</sup> Aleks Sierz published a book in 2011, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, in which he provides a survey of Britain's theatre scene of the last decades. Richard Bean is discussed in various chapters of this book, which demonstrates the importance of his participation in new writing. A comparison of Bean's plays in the light of the new writing genre is not the aim of this thesis.

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<sup>5</sup> see <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/19936/platforms/the-monsterists.html>

<sup>6</sup> see Sierz, Aleks. *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*. London: Methuen, 2011. p.1.

Altogether, Bean has written 16 original plays since the launching of his career as a playwright in 1997. Apart from his original plays, he has also worked on an adaptation of a screenplay by David Mamet, *House of Games* (2010), a libretto for an opera by Stephen McNeff, *Paradise of Fools* (1995), and a translation of a play by Serge Valetti, *Le Pub!* (2002) (Rose Cobbe).

I would like to conclude this chapter by saying that Bean writes his plays with the hope and often the prospect of them being staged in one of the numerous new writing venues that exist predominantly in London, but also in the rest of England and Scotland. His plays are produced with the immediate thought of the live experience that is achieved through a performance in a theatre.

### 3. Bean's Initial Phase as a Playwright (1996 - 2002)

#### 3.1. Linearity and Conventionality

Bean's initial phase as a playwright is characterised by a certain conventionality. This conventionality can be found in the simple structuring of the texts, the linear development of the plot and the one-dimensionality of settings. These observations are not intended to demean the plays in any way. In a comparison of the characteristics of these early texts one will be able to notice how they form a basis for later development. The plays that can be considered as having been written in that early period are *Of Rats and Men* (1996), *Toast* (1999), *Mr England* (2000) and *The Mentalists* (2002).

*Of Rats and Men* is Bean's only play that has been staged but which was also produced as a radio play by the BBC Radio in 1997. It was nominated for a Sony Award in the same year. The playtext of either stage or radio production has not been published to this date but as the radio play is an adaptation of the theatre version, I assume that the script of the latter is fairly similar to the script of the theatre play. *Of Rats and Men* is set in the United States of America around 1950, where an ambitious psychologist attempts an experiment testing the behaviour of some volunteers. The play displays a possible course of events of the famous Milgram experiment of the 1960s. Considering Bean's background as a psychologist the subject matter is not unusual. The play is serious and contains no humour, which is untypical for Bean. *Of Rats and Men* was performed at the Canal Cafe Theatre and at the Bedlam Theatre during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1996.<sup>7</sup> This play is the only one in which the majority of characters are not English and which is not preoccupied with some theme of Englishness or of England.

*Toast* is considered to be Bean's first major play. Bean wrote *Toast* in 1997, but it was not until two years later that it was staged in London. *Toast* will be analysed in detail in the next chapter. The play that followed *Toast* was *Mr England*. *Mr England* has two acts and features four characters. Stephen England is the eponymous protagonist and the plot is concerned with the dealings of his family and the dubious teenager Andy, who is tied to the family after a terrible accident in which he lost his whole family. Stephen emerged from this event as an honoured lifesaver. In the end it is discovered that instead of being a hero on that tragic day, he was acting like a coward

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<sup>7</sup> see <http://www.acetouch.plus.com/Of%20Rats%20and%20Men/Of%20Rats%20and%20Men.html>

and killed Andy's family in the course of events. The plot is simple and linear. The focus of this story lies on the narrative of past and present events, which is handled through various forms of speech such as the long monologues of Stephen in the therapist's chair, the series of short, fragmented sentences that constitute the narrative of the terrible accident in the end, or the long ramblings of the grandmother Irene. Bean usually inserts a major or unexpected moment in the latter half of his plays. In *Mr England* he does so by transforming the seemingly dull Andy into a clever boy who performs a perfect act of revenge and brings to light the truth about the false hero Stephen England. A major theme of the play is war. There are various references to war scenes and there is also the protagonist, who upholds the theme with his constantly displayed war fanaticism. Stephen is shown to lose everything to Andy in the finale. Jeremy Kingston mentions in his review that he was uncertain about Bean giving the protagonist the name England. He writes "for surely nobody gives a character this name without a purpose?" (*The Times* in TR 2000, 1452)<sup>8</sup> The revelation of the deceit is presented in an unexciting way. One's surprise at the ending is minimal as one was able to sense the falsehood of the protagonist continuously. It does not seem as if Bean follows a concrete aim in this play. His usual tool, humour, is not integrated into *Mr England*. The only comic scenes are provided by Stephen's mother Irene. She is simultaneously a tragic character because of her being maltreated by the family and by having been raped and deserted by her husband. Jack Bradley states that the set of *Mr England* is "minimalist [and] non-naturalistic" (Introduction 11) and that the "presence of a six-foot sculpture of a vagina does signify something of a stylistic leap" (Introduction 11). This sculpture of a vagina might seem a bit random in the play but since Richard Bean always had a provocative mind, one could regard it as an early feature of his urge to provoke. The "stylistic leap" mentioned refers to the discrepancies between this play and Bean's former naturalistic take on night shift workers in *Toast*.

In the collection of Bean's plays it is hardest to discern examples of Bean's style in *Mr England*. There are no obvious hints to Bean's personal background and it contains hardly any other usual feature, like the use of comedy as a stylistic device. If the play is criticising exaggerated war worship then this theme is not featured extensively enough. If it is primarily concerned with a dysfunctional family, then the

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<sup>8</sup> In the course of this thesis this kind of reference will be given on numerous occasions. 'TR' stands for Theatre Record, the following number gives the year of the publication and the number after the comma states the actual page number of the quoted article.

ending offers a solution that is not only unsatisfactory but also highly unlikely and confusing. Following a play like *Toast, Mr England* might have appeared as a surprise to the members of Bean's audience that were familiar with the naturalism of *Toast*. Leaving all the criticism aside, I would suggest that *Mr England* is typical of Bean in that it does not fulfil the audience's expectations. Richard Bean once said that he has voices in his head that he needs to work with in his plays (Sierz interview 354), and I would assume that Stephen England was one of them.

*The Mentalists* was the play that followed *Mr England* in 2002. It was Bean's first production at the National Theatre and was staged in the Lyttleton Loft, the experimental space in the National Theatre complex. The play was written to be featured in what is called the transformation season of 2002<sup>9</sup> and it was received very well by the critics. Richard Bean is not afraid to mention direct influences on his work and claims that *The Mentalists* is a "deliberate homage"<sup>10</sup> to Harold Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter*. *The Mentalists* is set in a hotel room and features the two male characters Ted and Morrie. The purpose of their meeting remains unclear at first, until it is revealed that Ted aspires to change the world with his vision of setting up a violent free community. The plot revolves around the production of a promotion video and in the course of the shooting Ted reveals himself to be aggressively obsessive.

In *The Mentalists* Bean uses a simple two-act structure and sets the entire plot in the small hotel room and an annexed bathroom. Paul Taylor observes in his review of the play for *The Independent* that hotel rooms have not been used as a play's setting since Sarah Kane's *Blasted* was staged in 1995 (TR 2002, 928). Bean will set another original play of his in a hotel room. In *The Mentalists* Bean uses his knowledge as a psychologist and presents Ted as a disciple of the psychologist B. F. Skinner and his theories of human behaviour. The second character in the play, Morrie, is Ted's calm counterpart who tells fantasy stories about his grand achievements, all of which are obviously invented. While Ted is aggressive and explosive, Morrie is the exact opposite of his friend in being lumbering and calm.

The reviews of this play show how difficult it is to tie Bean's play down to one genre. And ultimately there seems to be confusion surrounding the play's content. Charles Spencer from the *Daily Telegraph* detects "echoes of that most unfashionable of

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<sup>9</sup> The transformation season ran from 29.4.2002-21.9.2002 under Trevor Nunn, director of the National Theatre at that time. The plays shown in the season should celebrate and challenge English identity.

<sup>10</sup> Aleks Sierz states this in *What's On* (TR 2002, 929) Michael Billington recognises echoes of *Little Malcolm And His Struggle Against The Eunuchs* by David Halliwell in *The Mentalists* (TR 2002, 929)

genres, the Theatre of the Absurd" (TR 2002, 929) in the play, Paul Taylor regards it as "an on-the-run drama and a leisurely exploration of male friendship" (TR 2002, 929) and Aleks Sierz labels it as a "black comedy" (TR 2002, 929). Two observations are made in almost all the reviews: the first is that Bean uses his experience as a comedian in writing witty one-liners and the second is that it is mainly the coupling of the two different characters that makes the play work. Concerning his motivation for the play, Bean states that:

I saw the play as an argument between permissive and authoritarian values so, in a sense, Morrie represents community values and Ted authoritarian values. But he [Ted] also comes from my feelings of dismay about the breakdown of some social values. (Sierz interview 355)

Bean connects this play to an immediate feeling that he needed to express in some way. I would go so far as to say that there is a strong personal motivation for almost all the plays he writes. This observation also ties in with the comment on Bean exploring the voices that are in his head which often develop in consequence of a personal experience of his. The notion that Bean's plays and their tone are subliminally motivated by a certain rage that exists within the playwright is something that I noticed while talking to the author himself and which Aleks Sierz also mentioned to me in an interview.<sup>11</sup>

Having introduced Bean's initial writing I will now proceed with an analysis of the often mentioned *Toast*. Following the analysis will be a conclusive chapter which will provide a summarising statement about Bean's initial phase as a playwright.

### **3.2. *Toast* (1999)**

"The bread plant's a million miles up them fucking steps, and you're in here for the purpose of rest and recreation, refuelling, mediation, cogitation and fucking elevation." (33)

#### **3.2.1. Introduction and General Information**

Ian Shuttleworth referred to *Toast* as "a slice of life"<sup>12</sup>. The phrasing hints at the fact that a piece of the playwright's life has been processed in his writing. In the course

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<sup>11</sup> The personal interview with Aleks Sierz took place on 11 August 2011 in London.

<sup>12</sup> see <http://www.cix.co.uk/~shutters/reviews/99012.htm>

of his first interviews Bean continuously stressed the experience he gained while working in a bread factory. His motivation for writing the play has been his familiarity with hard labour, the working rituals and the numerous crises that he encountered while working shifts in the plant. As *Toast* is Bean's first original play it is not surprising that he chose this familiar topic and took it as the basis for a story. The play is set in a bread plant in Hull and it is not a coincidence that this city in the north of England has been selected as the place of action, since it was in Hull where Bean got his working experience.

Many playwrights in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century strove to establish themselves as new writers and many dedicated their writing to the in-her-face tradition which was established during these ten years. Bean chose a genre that was at that time probably unexpected and surprising: the work-play. *Toast* is a significant play in Richard Bean's career because it was his first attempt to write a major play for a stage in London and it was instantly appreciated. It was accepted by the audiences and received positive reviews from the critics. The story of Bean's emergence as a successful playwright in London's theatre scene is described by Jack Bradley in his 'Introduction' in *Richard Bean. Plays Two*. In this collection of four of Bean's plays, Bradley, who was the Literary Manager of the National Theatre from 1995 until 2006, accounts for Bean's late emergence and explains how Bean was forced to wait for two years for *Toast* to be staged although, according to Bradley's report, his writing was much admired and liked by the people who had had the chance to read it (9). In the 'Introduction', Bradley portrays the circumstances of the theatrical scene in London and states that:

Richard was undoubtedly swimming against the tide. *Toast* was not the familiar urban, contemporary dystopic vision that captures the barely articulated hopes and fears of millennial Britain, the subliminal zeitgeist that haunts the modern soul. (10)

The above description shows Bean in a rather unconventional place. The plays of many playwrights were occupied with English topics and many state-of-the-nation plays were produced. Richard Bean also wrote about an English topic in a rather conventional way and he proved this formula to be a success. Many playwrights were fighting for recognition at the bigger theatres. Bean's acceptance at the National Theatre shows that his story had something relevant to convey because otherwise it would not

have been produced. In Bean's case there was a vivid interest in *Toast* but the right time for staging only arrived two years after its completion. The manager explained this circumstance by saying that there was no option to put it on stage at an earlier date. This accounts for the year of the play's première being 1999 instead of 1997, which was the year in which Bean gave the finished play to Bradley's assistant during a Sunday afternoon cricket match. The instant success of *Toast* paved the way for Bean's career as a playwright.

### 3.2.2. Genre

Michael Billington writes in his review of *Toast* that the "the work-play used to be a staple of British drama" (*Guardian* in TR 1999, 207), thus recognising the importance of this genre as well as its relevance as a theatre tradition in Great Britain. Billington proceeds by stating that *Toast* is a return to this tradition, which suggests that the genre has not been very prominent in recent years. Throughout the reviews one can perceive a subliminal feeling of delight that a writer chose to revive this genre in his writing. The work-play usually depicts people in their working environment. In the case of *Toast* it is set in the pre-Thatcher times in 1975. If one considers the major theme of a work-play being a depiction of people at work, this play can be considered as a paramount example since its only concern is the representation of plant workers in their working environment. The whole plot is set in the canteen of a bread plant, which holds a specific importance in itself by constantly displaying the working rituals of the men. Benedict Nightingale observes a certain lack of plot in *Toast*. He mentions that the "action or inaction" (*The Times* in TR 1999, 208) occurs in the canteen, which suggests that the plot is very limited because the action consists mostly of the conversations of the characters. If one considers the omission of action then the core of the plot must be contained in some other aspect of the play. In *Toast* this core can be found in the various characters that have been labouring in the plant for years. It is their stories and their lives around which the plot revolves. In the finale the oven gets jammed in a supposed accident. The occurrence of this calamity seems to be necessary, otherwise no dramatic event would provide the tension for the second act. Sam Marlowe observes that "social rituals are unfailingly observed and secrets are shared as a result of shared work that none of the men enjoy, but that they rely on to such an extent that it has become integral to their lives." (*What's On* in TR 1999, 208). These few lines

summarise how this work-play functions. It is not the physical toil of the workers that is the main issue, but the psychological question of what the work comes to signify for the men. The catastrophe would not only mean that the workers would lose their jobs, it would also imply that they would lose their whole identity. If this is considered, *Toast* naturally has a very serious tone. Richard Bean states in an interview of 2011 that the artistic team, with Richard Wilson as the director, wanted the play to be realised in the genre of proper naturalism.<sup>13</sup> Generally said, it is the aim of naturalism to “offer[] an almost photographic representation of life and stresses how heredity and environment shape people’s lives.” (*Literary Terms and Criticism* 99). Considering this, one can categorise *Toast* as a naturalistic play. Due to the fact that Bean had personal experience of the working conditions, he is able to present them in an authentic way. One of the major features that make the play a naturalistic play is the manner in which the setting of the canteen is presented.

### 3.2.3. Characters

The characters consist of six long-established workers that have laboured at the bread plant for many years. This homogeneous unity is disrupted by the introduction of an impostor in the form of a student. Bean balances the action and conversations between all of his characters. Although some take smaller parts in the activities, in comparison to others, no distinguishable protagonist emerges in the story. The play is an "ensemble piece" (Introduction 10) in which the collectivity of the characters constitutes the major interest, rather than one single figure. All of them have their specific place and function in the plant and this is demonstrated by the description of the characters prior to Scene 1, in which the job description of each of the workers is listed next to the character's name. Generally, it can be said that no character develops in the course of the play. They are all static characters and the jamming of the oven is the only unexpected and challenging occurrence throughout the whole plot. When the catastrophe is averted in the end no one emerges as a hero. There is, however, one definite villain in the story, which is the saboteur Colin. Interestingly, Colin is the most political character in the play. He is introduced when he distributes strike pay from the union and is the least sympathetic character in the group.

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<sup>13</sup> The whole conversation can be listened to on [theatrevoice.com](http://theatrevoice.com). Bean states that Wilson called the artistic genre 'proper naturalism' because he claims that no one really did naturalism well at that time.

I have chosen two characters that will be described in greater detail. The characters are Nellie and Lance, both of whom are very different in character and their relation to the bread plant is very different. Nellie is a long-established worker who exemplifies the unholy number of working hours that the male workers have spent in the plant. Bean introduces an outsider with the student Lance. The significance of his appearance will be explained in the course of this chapter.

Nellie is mentioned prior to his first appearance. In the kitchen, when Blakey plans to take Nellie off the oven, he comments on his colleague:

BLAKEY: He's been going two hours without a break.

COLIN: He's been going forty fucking years without a break. (21)

Nellie's character is established with this description and in the course of the play this first impression is underlined by the information that is given about him. His co-worker Colin suggests that Nellie is hard working and that his attitude towards his work is unorthodox. Nellie's description in the play reads as follows:

He is a broken man of 59. He is wearing a sting vest covered in brown dough. The dough is stuck to the vest [...] He has a big, bony frame, built for endless physical labour. His speech is slow and slurred from fatigue. (24)

What is the most revealing aspect of this description is the fact that Nellie is covered with dough. Nellie's job in the plant is that of a mixer, so it is not very surprising that he is dirty. But it seems as if he has become one with the dough because it does not bother him in the least that he is dirty from it. Nellie's work ethic is one of a sort. His work equals his life and I would go so far as to suggest that he would not be able to survive without his work. Blakey suggests that Nellie would "[d]rop dead" (44) should the oven stop. It is mostly Nellie's unnaturally close connection to his work and the oven that makes his character so interesting. Every aspect of Nellie's life is in some way connected to the plant. Although working eighty hours every week, he has a wife whom he first met while she was working in another section of the plant. His first job Nellie "started at fourteen - delivering bread on a box bike." (44). This description reads almost comically because it seems that he has never done anything apart from working with bread. It is no coincidence that *Toast* features a character like Nellie. The parallels between his character and the essence of the bread plant are conspicuous. Concerning the dynamics of the group, it is his character that all the others seem to appreciate the

most. The care that all the colleagues bestow on Nellie is one of the only unifying tasks they seem to have during their shifts. If someone quarrels with him, somebody else is likely to defend him. This is true to such an extent that everybody covers for the serious mistakes he makes. At the end of Scene 1, it is Nellie's reaction to the jamming of the oven that is shown. While his colleague Colin does not understand at first, Nellie instantly knows what has happened. This small occurrence demonstrates once again that there is a strong connection between this character and the oven. After the accident, Nellie's colleagues discover that he has been missing for some time and it appears likely to them that he would go into the oven without a second thought. Paradoxically, the reader is almost disappointed when realising that he only went to the toilet. His intense emotional reactions to the happenings on this night shift indicate his frailty. After the jamming of the oven everyone suspects that Nellie made a mistake and he is shown to be completely beside himself. The desperation that his character radiates is very intense. The workers have suggested before that Nellie is likely to drop dead if the plant should stop and one almost suspects this to happen after the jamming. Nellie's inability to discuss mundane topics shows that the character has an almost otherworldly quality. Finally, one has to conclude by saying that, of all the workers, Nellie is the most central character of the group because of his position as the veteran. His character is so central that his fellow workers set aside their antagonism to be strong for him. In the end they are shown to act in unison in order to save the plant, thereby rescuing the otherwise doomed Nellie. In many respects Nellie shares features with the oven which he adapted in the course of the many years of hard labour. These common features make his character a metaphor for the results of inhuman working hours and labours.

Lance is fundamentally different from Nellie. An opinion on a student working in a bread plant is uttered by Blakey in the first few lines that are spoken in the play "I don't like students going on the ovens - their mothers complain..." (20). This statement provides an insight into Blakey's attitude towards students who he considers to be dependent individuals, but it also hints at the fact that the ovens are not to be toyed with. Of all the characters in the play, Lance is the only real outsider of the group. His role is essential in the dynamics of the play because he is not a member of the team. His mostly weird behaviour shows him to be absolutely crazy in comparison to the down-to-earth workers. Lance's function in the play is mainly to disrupt the dynamics of the group. He is the character who acts as 'the other' and, therefore, creates a division in the perception of the characters. This division can be observed in the unity of the regular

workers and Lance's counter position as the freshman of the group. His arrival creates a disturbance in the regular course of work. The introduction of a novice is also essential because through him explanations of the regular rituals in the plant are provided for the ignorant reader. The intelligence Lance gains seems to be equally directed at the reader as well as at the character himself. Through him a discourse about the conditions of the plant seems to happen. There is one example in which Blakey explains the shifts they are expected to work in the course of the week. Lance only replies "Is that legal?" (28) to Blakey's clarifications. The student is the second character who is presented as otherworldly in the play. Although his status as a student is not one that is highly unexpected, his presence in the plant is definitely misplaced. This is illustrated by the language he uses. His language use differs vastly from that of the other characters. As a student he is probably the only one among the characters with higher education. Another characteristic of Lance is the instability of his character. Blakey recognises wounds from a suicide attempt on his wrists. Later on, Lance is being shown as cornering various workers from time to time to explain to them that he is a 'messenger' from the other side (64). Lance's function is primarily to provide funny and disturbing intermezzi throughout the play.

In conclusion, it can be said that in the various actions and pieces of dialogue, a lot of sympathy for the characters is transferred, considering that this is a work-play. It is no coincidence that the more unsympathetic characters are the ones that are emotionally the most distant from the plant while the ones that are the most involved in the happenings of the plant appear to be the most sympathetic ones.

#### **3.2.4. Time-span and Structure**

The play is divided into two scenes. This division into two parts is very conventional and unsurprisingly there is a moment of high tension at the end of Scene 1. The major action begins at this point and it will dominate the happenings in Scene 2. There is another moment of tension in the second scene when the workers believe that their colleague Nellie has gone into the oven by himself.

The passage of time in the play is in accordance with real time. The events happen in chronological order and there is no disruption of the chronology. What is important to mention is the playwright's initial description of time. In the description of the setting, prior to the first dialogue, it is stated that "[t]here is a large clock above the

door - it shows ten to three. There is no way of knowing whether it is morning or afternoon. Similarly there is no clue as to the season." (19). It appears to be the author's intention to create confusion concerning the time. The exact time is, as has been shown, not defined at first and this produces two sentiments. First of all confusion, since the reader is not able to relate a time to the events that are taking place. Secondly, the notion of infinity regarding the shifts of the workers is created. It can be read as a suggestion that this is a shift like many others before and presumably like the ones that will follow this particular shift. The confusion about the time is solved in the course of Scene 1 when the workers talk about their work "tonight" (21), thus indicating that this is a night shift. Kate Stratton states that in the play the work rituals of the men can be followed minutely (*Time Out* in TR 1999, 208), thus referring to the sense of a real observation of these workers in a real bread plant which is made possible by the naturalistic devices Bean uses. The reader is continually reminded of the passing of time because of the references to the breaks and continuing shifts of the workers. Additionally, there is the presence of the clock, which is referred to on several occasions in the play, that also brings the aspect of time to the minds of the audience. Apart from some moments of tension and shock, *Toast* does not introduce any challenging or inventive elements concerning structure and time. But since the play aims at presenting the natural working environment in an industrial plant this concept fulfils all demands that are connected to a story such as this. It is through the simplicity of the structure and the passage of time that the play succeeds because it does not digress from its core theme. It is, after all, a play about hard-working men whose whole existence can be exhibited in one single evening that they spend at work.

Jack Bradley mentions that the conventionality of the time passing and the structure of the play as one of its strengths and not a reason for a demeaning of the play. He suggests that:

the nature of a work play lends itself to a satisfying dramatic structure. More often than not, the play is set in a single location [...] it occurs over a given time, a work shift, and is focused upon a single event, an action which singles out this particular shift from any other. (10)

This is an accurate description of *Toast*. The main conflict takes a definite form when the oven gets jammed at the end of Scene 1. The workers are confronted with a tough decision that will influence their immediate future. The decision is either to inform their management and, thereby, effect a closure of the plant, or to risk the life of

a fellow worker in order to correct the error and make the plant work again. They cannot risk a closing of the plant for reasons that are connected to their shared identity as workers. This identity is bound to their place of work, which will be illustrated in the next chapter.

### 3.2.5. Setting

The social condition of seven men revolves around their work and the short breaks in between the shifts which they are able to spend in the plant's canteen. By setting the play in the canteen Bean omits the actual presentation of the working processes in the play as he does not explicitly offer a visualisation of the hard labour of the workers. But the huge impact of the hard work on the identities of the characters is shown in their conversations. The canteen is, therefore, the only possible place of action in *Toast*. Throughout the whole play there is no change of setting, thereby underlining the significance of this place, not only for the plot, but most of all for the characters. The canteen seems to be the only place in the plant where actual life can be observed. It is, like the green room in the theatre, a place for the characters to relax in between their shifts, and in the case of the workers it is the only opportunity for them to be their common selves and not their working selves. The suggested division of the self is an issue that is at the core of the play. None of the characters is ever seen in another setting apart from the canteen. It is shown to be the only vibrant heart of the bread factory and it seems to be the reason why the workers survive the toils of their work. However, it soon becomes apparent, through many instances in the play, that the workers are not able to forget their work even if they are in the one spot that should allow them to lay aside all thoughts about work issues. Almost every discussion is connected to the bread factory and the actions happening there. But the reason is not lack of knowledge about the others' lives. They often try to start a conversation that is not concerned with an aspect of the bread plant. Almost involuntarily the talk returns to some work issue. One example which illustrates exactly this observation can be found in Scene 1. Nellie asks his colleague Peter a series of questions concerning the bread plant and the shifts of their other colleagues. Peter fiercely replies:

"Give it a rest will yer Walter?! Yer on a smoke! Read the fucking paper, do the crossword, go to sleep, eat, drink, smoke, fucking fuck!" (33)

Peter lists the most common leisure activities one might be expected to do in one's free time. Later he describes a huge spatial distance to the place of work in order to stress the discrepancy of work space and relaxation space. Peter is extremely frustrated with Nellie because he does not seem to be able to concentrate on anything other than his work. Subsequently, Peter tries to turn their conversation to some ordinary discussion on daily issues which Nellie is unable to participate in. Only later when Colin asks about the nature of Nellie's break, "smoke or half hour?" (34), does Nellie answer a question. This suggests that Nellie has become one with his work and that the world outside is more of an illusion to him. This observation ties in with the interpretation of Nellie's character in the chapter above. Through the omission of another setting, and by not showing the working process Bean seems to aim at the display of the mental state of the characters which is reflected in the description of the canteen. Bean offers a half-page description of the setting at the beginning of Scene 1. In this depiction the author uses humour for the first time in the play:

"An old joke notice, originally 'YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE MAD TO WORK HERE - BUT IT HELPS!', has been defaced and now reads simply 'HELP!'" (19)

The following description of a waste bin full of dead teabags and the splatter of used tea bag hits suggests a certain carelessness of the workers for order and cleanliness. What is important in the description is the notion that although the canteen seems to be a tedious and dirty place for spending time in, it is the place the workers have to spend their breaks. That fact, however, is obviously no reason why it should be kept clean. This attitude can be interpreted as an act of resignation on the part of the workers. The joking comment on the workers' condition, "HELP!" (19), is obviously meant as a jest but might also be seen as a real cry for help.

### **3.2.6. Language and Style**

Particularly noteworthy considering the aspect of style is Bean's use of comedy in *Toast*. In the story it seems to add a specific meaning to the play because without the integration of comedy, it could be considered as a tragedy. Every single character is a more or less tragic character. But through the use of comedy, a balance between tragedy and comedy is provided. It instantly becomes apparent that Bean tries to tell this tragic story with a great amount of humour. Bean referred to the two Greek masks in the personal interview and said that he essentially uses comedy to tell tragedy. In this play,

in which everything revolves around the characters, it is important to notice that despite the continuous toughness of their work "they almost all retain humour" (*Daily Telegraph* in TR 1999, 208). Humour is one of the elements that is untypical for the genre of the work-play and it is probably one of the major attractions of this particular play. Concerning the use of elements of both comedy and tragedy, it is interesting to note that Bean made this point in the interview while he was mostly referring to *England People Very Nice*, which was written many years after *Toast*.

Many of the reviewers mention the use of humour in the play and conclude that it is mainly a method to ease the otherwise rather depressing story. Probably it is this use of comedy that made *Toast* the success that it was. The comic elements that are used are one-liners, a device that is typical of stand-up comedians such as Bean. In the case of *Toast* the humour is not subtle but direct. The lines provoke short and aggressive laughter rather than a grin or smirk. One example for this can be found in a conversation between Cecil and Dezzie concerning Cecil's wife:

CECIL: [...] She's happy. Got the garden how she likes it.

DEZZIE: She likes gardening does she?

CECIL: Oh no, no. She's had it paved over. That's what she wanted. Did it mesen. Oh yes. Get it level. That's the trick.

DEZZIE: It that easy then?

CECIL: Oh no. Virtually impossible. (42)

The course of this conversation is unexpected, which enhances the amusement of the reader. Instead of inquiring after the wife's unusual disposition Dezzie only comments on the nature of the procedure and its difficulty.

Sometimes the humour is not verbal but physical. One example for this would be the ball grabbing game of Cecil and Peter. There, Bean added physical humour to the play. Concerning verbal humour, one of the funnier characters is Lance, who corners the others one by one and asks them intrusive questions. He talks nonsense and, thereby, evokes laughter in the audience.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the aspect of language, there are other observations that are worth mentioning. In the character description of Lance it has been already noted that the language he uses differs from the register of the workers. It is one of Bean's achievements in the play to produce a certain northern English flavour by adding words

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<sup>14</sup> The laughter can be heard in the recording of *Toast* to which I was able to listen to in the British Library/London.

in their pronounced version, i.e. 'mesen' instead of 'myself' (42). These words can be understood even by people who do not know the northern dialect. The language distinguishes the workers' tongue from commonly known speech, which assists with the creation of the atmosphere of the world of work. The introduction of Lance as a member of a different class is a convincing method of illustrating how alien the world of the workers is not only to the student but also to the audience. Some words that seem unfamiliar are technical terms that are probably used in existing bread plants. Language use is, in that respect, an efficient tool for the establishment of the characters as workers.

### 3.2.7. Summary of Themes

The 'HELP' joke of the chapter on the setting introduces one of the major themes in the play. I would suggest that *Toast* revolves around the issue of psychology and it is mostly concerned with the identity of the workers. Their attitude towards their work might appear abstruse for the reader but is perfectly normal for the characters. This observation is also valid for the second theme that is featured in the play: sex and the dependency on women.

Jack Bradley states that "the play is about identity and sense of self." (Introduction 10). The identity of the workers is an issue that is not only presented in a subliminal way but also reflected upon by some of the men in the course of a conversation. The identities of most of the men are split into two parts. There is the dominant self, the work self, which is shown in the course of the play. But also there exists a 'leisure self' which is part of the workers' identities but which is not the dominant one. The polarity of these two selves is displayed in the conversations of the characters. No character directly describes this issue but the mere observation of the characters suggests that there is a huge difference between the behaviour of the men at work and their behaviour at home with their wives. This is nothing unnatural. But the work requires the majority of the men's time and it does occupy them at unorthodox times. The information given on the working hours of one single shift in the plant is proof enough to realise that the men probably spend more time with their colleagues than with their families. This duality constitutes the main conflict that is addressed in the play. It is a natural consequence that the work place has a direct influence on their character. It has been established in the description of Nellie's character that the plant absorbs almost every other aspect of his life. He is not the only character in conflict

with himself. While Nellie's identity is tied to the plant, the question of identity and most of all the stability of the self is raised by Dezzie, Blakey and Lance. Dezzie tries to formulate the problem as such:

As a deckie, I felt like I were someone, I were me, Dezzie. I mean, I'm still me. I'm me! [...] You know what I'm on about. I'm still me, but working here, I'm not the same 'me', what I was before when I were a deckie. (43)

These are the words of a restless and unstable man. Instability seems to be particularly Dezzie's problem and these few phrases illustrate the reason for it. The other workers think of him as a trawler man (i.e. deckie) who belongs on a ship and this is also how he pictures himself. But the issue is not only that he is doing a job that he has no affinity with but is also doing a particular job with long, exhausting and lonely hours in the plant. His identity seems to have become lost in the nature of his current work. While work naturally constitutes a part of your identity, it is the nature of the tedious, dirty and hard work which disturbs the men so much. The addition to the workers, Lance, is another example of a lost soul. He repeats the words of his doctor, who described his condition as "an absence of self" (72). This condition might be reckoned as the reason why Lance is found in a place such as the plant. Despite the frustration of the workers, Lance is content with the fact that he has achieved something with his new-found work. The play shows an interesting scenario in which an educated man is content to do hard physical labour while the workers, who do not aspire to a position in a different working class, do not claim any particularity for their work. Generally, it is more likely to find this situation reversed.

Blakey makes a point of saying that he would be happy if he were to stop working in the plant. Dezzie argues with Blakey about this:

DEZZIE: You'd be crawling up the walls after a week.

BLAKEY: At least they'd be my fucking walls. (45)

But the alternative proposition of a life without the plant that Blakey presents seems unsatisfying. Through the establishment of the link between identity and work, it appears unconvincing to imagine Blakey spending the rest of his days at home playing guitar. The idea of switching jobs does not seem to be what the men aspire to and one is led to believe that they cannot do any other kind of work at all.

The other issue that seems to be omnipresent in the play is sex. None of the men have sex during the play and yet it is the theme of debate at various times. Jack Bradley goes so far as to say that the workers " [b]y and large [...] are consciously or unconsciously preoccupied with sex." (10). This notion can be illustrated by a short conversation between Blakey and Colin very early in Scene 1. After a short round of casual greetings, Colin says "D'you hear Beckett's shagging that lass on custards?" (20). The conversations of the workers in the course of the play will occasionally return to this story. It becomes apparent that conversations about sex constitute most of the talks the men hold during their shifts. Sex is, apart from their work, the only theme that unifies them on some level and which provides a basis for conversation and also jokes. Bradley states that "the play is infused with a sense of how unnatural it is for a company of men to find themselves together at night." (10). Generally, wives, sex and marriage should form a connected cluster in a relationship. But in this play it seems as if all of the elements are presented as disconnected entities. There are no female characters in the play, and as *Toast* is a work-play this is not surprising that there is no woman featured in the play. However, one cannot claim that women are not represented in the play at all because almost all the men talk about their wives on numerous occasions. At some point it also becomes clear that while their working selves are dominated by the bread plant, their everyday selves are dominated by their wives. Dezzie is dependent on the organisational skills of his wife because he seems to forget everything. There are numerous other occasions similar to this. The most prominent example of a submissive man is Nellie. He has been married for many years. It seems that the sole function of Nellie's wife is to control his behaviour, even when he is at his place of work by being in charge of his cigarettes or his food. One can interpret Nellie's motivation for working so many shifts as a way to escape his home. One can also assume that his inability to communicate is a result of his dysfunctional relationship. During one conversation it is mentioned that Nellie had to live in the garden shed for a while because he could not, or would not, stay in his house. Throughout the play, he is obsessed with his pack of cigarettes which should suffice for one week of work. Since his wife is in charge of the finances in the family, she is also the one who determines how many cigarettes Nellie is allowed to smoke or what kind of sandwich he eats. One does not need to have extensive insight into the relationships of the workers to reach the conclusion that most of the men are in a constant relationship in which they are dependent on their wives.

### 3.3. Conclusion

Bean proves that the success of a play is not dependent on a plot that is dominated by action. With devices like language, humour and a thorough understanding of his characters he is able to create a modern work-play. *Toast* is set in the mid-1970s and portrays events that could easily have happened during this politically and economically difficult time in England. One should not ignore the political background this play has and even though there are only a handful of references made to the workers' union and other political vocabulary, their importance in the play cannot be denied. While the political subtext is not heavily featured in the play, Bean nevertheless chose to set his play in this political environment. But in reducing the political elements he allows the characters to become the substance of this microcosmic world (Marlowe, TR 1999, 208) instead of putting the focus of the play on politics.

If one compares all the plays of Bean's first phase it becomes apparent that in all of them the characters are always more important than the action. To a great extent, the plays feature male characters and only *Mr. England* offers a balanced proportion of two men and two women. The protagonists are, nevertheless, always men. There is a one-dimensionality of space observable in the plays as they happen in closed spaces like a canteen or a small hotel room. *Mr. England* is, in that respect, different because the setting remains undefined. The setting descriptions suggest that the scenes happen either in the living room of Stephen's house, a therapist's room or Andy's home. The three plays have a simple twofold structure. At the end of the first part there is always a moment of tension which should create enough suspense for the audience to be interested in the second part. Towards the end there is always another moment of heightened emotion. In *Mr. England* it is the moment of revelation when the truth is uncovered about Stephen England. Concerning their themes, the plays differ vastly, but sex is an issue that can be found in every one of them. Sex is discussed or shown in different manners. Richard Bean once stated: "I tend to be a naturalistic writer and people do have sex, I mean, you know, it's something that they do."<sup>15</sup> Obsession is another theme that is featured into all the plays. There is always a character who is shown to be an eccentric who is obsessive over a significant element of the play. It is debatable whether they are eccentrics or only extremely odd characters, but in the world

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<sup>15</sup>The transcript of this interview is found under <http://www.theatrevoice.com/1891/the-theatrevoice-debate-new-writing-12-playwrights-richa/>

of the plays they simply appear out of the norm in contrast to the characters with which the audiences can more easily identify themselves.

What becomes apparent while discussing Bean's initial plays is that he has the ability to create colourful character and imbed them into simple-structured plays. The stories usually contain some reference to the author's personal experience, for example, to his former profession as a psychologist. Later, the domination of male characters in his plays persists, although women will eventually gain a bigger part in his stories. The plays of his initial phase are in some way a discussion of society and he focuses on English characters. Bean displays an understanding of important matters not only in England's past but also present and integrates them into his work. He will continue writing about issues that are of broader significance. The next chapter will show how Bean develops in terms of subject matter but how he still uses devices typical for his initial phase.

In conclusion I would like to return to *Toast* once more. Despite the fact that the impending catastrophe has been averted in the plant, the play still has a tragic ending. The workers will be able to continue their work for some time but the plant is a lost cause. The same is true of the workers because they know that their fate has been sealed and that their time in the plant will expire soon. The play's ending is ambiguous because even though it is superficially a good outcome of events, the story's finale implies that its character nevertheless are doomed to stop working at the plant in the future.

## 4. Bean's Plays of the Second Phase (2003-2008)

"At first, his theatre hallmark was work plays, but gradually, as his subject matter has broadened, it's become black comedy."<sup>16</sup>

### 4.1. Development from the old form

The statement above made by Aleks Sierz draws attention to various important observations that can be made regarding Bean's development as a playwright. I would like to suggest that the second phase of his work began in 2003. Leaving behind his previous more conventional style, Bean still occupies himself with themes that are concerned with Englishness and which revolve around Hull. But in this second phase he still covers mundane but also more daring topics. In the following pages I would like to describe the work of his second phase and continue with the analysis of two of his major successes in the subsequent chapters.

Richard Bean has been praised for his achievement of writing five new plays over a period of 18 months starting in 2002 (Sierz, *The Telegraph* online source). These plays are *The Mentalists* (2002), *The God Botherers* (2003), *Under the Whaleback* (2003), *Smack Family Robinson* (2003) and *Honeymoon Suite* (2004). The plays that followed were *Harvest* (2005), *The Hypochondriac* (2005)<sup>17</sup>, *Up on Roof* (2006), *In the Club* (2007) and *The English Game* (2008). This shows the playwright to be very productive. The years between 2003 and 2008 can be considered as his most productive phase and it can be assumed that Bean had a very high profile in London's theatre scene at that time.

In this second phase Bean can be considered to expand his forms. He experiments with new time formats and new structures. He develops new character constellations and while there is still a male dominance observable in his plays, Bean, nevertheless, includes female characters and enhances their significance in the stories. Especially in the two plays that I have chosen to discuss this is noticeable. Bean's humour consists of one-liners but the humour becomes more important for his characters, especially for the eccentric characters that he creates, two of which are Witchell in *Honeymoon Suite* or William in *Harvest*. The plays in the first phase were

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<sup>16</sup> Aleks Sierz wrote this in the article for *The Telegraph* in 2004, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3609666/Its-never-too-late-to-wow-an-audience.html>

<sup>17</sup> *The Hypochondriac* is a new version of *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière. Since I widely omit adaptations in this thesis, this play is only listed.

ensemble pieces or plays in which the collectivity of the characters constituted the most important component of the play. In *Toast* it was clearly the interplay of the characters that was its most prominent aspect, in the second phase the plays also have more distinct protagonists. The most important observation is that the plays become more political. Bean connects the personal, from which he does not diverge, and the political. This can be noticed in both, *Honeymoon Suite* and *Harvest*. The economic as well as ecological developments in England are addressed in the plays. Sometimes Bean occupies himself with even broader issues like globalisation and world religions (*The God Botherers*) or European Union policies (*In the Club*). Bean mostly focuses on themes that revolve around England which is also reflected in my choice of representative plays. The following paragraphs will be concerned with the description of the plays of his second phase.

*Under the Whaleback* had its première at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 10 April 2003. It won the George Devine Award 2002 and can be regarded as one of Bean's greatest successes. The play is in some respects similar to *Toast* as it depicts the fate of a group of working men, though this time they are trawler men and not bread plant workers. Bean expands his methods by spanning the plot over a period of thirty-seven years. He divides the plot into three different parts. Every part of the play is set in a different place, twice on a ship and once in a museum. The museum represents a place where memories are restored and it is necessary to represent the formerly flourishing business. The museum in the play is the only place that reminds of the dangerous circumstances of this particular work after the trawler business and its dangers have ceased to exist. Bean explores many themes in *Under the Whaleback*, including the relationship between fathers and their sons as well as the brutality of the work at sea and the demise of a once flourishing business. Particularly noteworthy in the play is the character of Cassidy, an eccentric who, according to Eckart Voigts-Virchow, is the embodiment of "male pride and tradition of seamanship, of forcefully and tragically fighting the elements." (6). Cassidy is the most controversial character in the play and with his telling of fascinating and mythical tales, he may be considered as a kind of incarnation of the whole business.

Bean declared in his interview with me that this is his favourite piece. I was also able to see that this play is of high sentimental value for Bean. It is not surprising that the playwright decided to revert to a Hull-specific work-play after the success of *Toast*. It has received almost exclusively good reviews, and so has become one more success

for the playwright. I have mentioned that one can detect many similarities to *Toast*, but more importantly one is able to observe some kind of expansion of Bean's methods or a development in almost every aspect. The story is more complex and some of the characters are more multifaceted in comparison to *Toast*. The generational conflict is embedded tightly in various instances in the plot and the tragedy of the trawler business is perfectly epitomised by the characters. Bean uses the same section of a ship, 'under the whaleback', to display various stages of the life of one man. But although the setting appears to be the same, there is still a change in location because the men find themselves twice on a ship while the setting of the last part is in fact a museum which only resembles an actual 'whaleback'. He centres the play around one individual, Darrel. This feature is a novelty in Bean's work because he usually divides the action between numerous characters. There are two characters, Darrel and Cassidy, around whom the plot revolves. The other characters do not receive equal attention. Bean integrates a moment of tension, or rather shock, at the end of the third part when the young Pat rams a nail into Darrel's thumb. There are many forms of brutality in the play and this scene provides one moment of shock. It is characteristic of Bean to deal with a rather unexpected theme, the trawler business, in a modern manner. There are many other features that can be found in *Under the Whaleback* which might be expected from Bean. One example is that the majority of the characters are male. But even if the play might seem like a sequel to *Toast*, Bean has clearly developed his form and style and so *Under the Whaleback* is in many respects different from the plays he has written before.

*The God Botherers* had its première on 21 November 2003. The play is concerned with broad and sensitive topics. Bean employs one of his trademarks, black humour, in a way that makes the reader uncomfortable. This play is noteworthy because it marks an important development in that it departs from the familiar English environment and settles for something entirely new. The play is set in Tambia, a fictional place in Africa and revolves around the NGO workers Keith and Laura, who are presented as having their own sense of political correctness. The play is full of comedy and has been praised for being "seriously hilarious and hilariously serious" (*Sunday Times* in TR 2003, 1595). In this respect the play is typical of Bean, as comedy plays an integral role in his writing. Bean addresses questions about religion and faith but also about foreign aid workers dealing with cultures they ultimately cannot understand. The play also reflects on the influence of western culture in developing countries and shows the difficult situation of Muslim women. Michael Billington is just

one of the critics emphasising the character Ibrahima, a local woman who "suffers under the patriarchy, [...] sips Diet Pepsi under her burka and picks up sex tips from the latest issue of *Cosmo*." (*Guardian* in TR 2003, 1596). The setting of the play in a fictional place is a good means for commenting on the situation of foreign workers without singling out a specific country. The parallels to the difficulties of this particularly dangerous work can be shown without referring to an existing country. But that is only one point of criticism. A critic questioned whether this play ultimately has much to say or not. (*Time Out* in TR 2003, 1596). The play offers an unusual approach to discuss this serious topic and it is again Bean's characteristic tool of comedy which makes this play worthy of discussion. Ultimately the story is a confrontation between the western values and the prevailing religious doctrines in Tambia which are embodied in Bean's main characters. Bean stated in an interview in 2009:

Just talking personally, I would say *The God Botherers* was my 9/11 play and I'm not going to write another one like that. We can certainly expect 9/11 to change the way that people relate to each other, and that's going to infuse all of new writing. Since 11 September, we have to stop writing plays about people's little personal problems. [...] What I want to see in the theatre is something bigger. (Sierz interview 356)

In terms of the fictional character of the setting and also the topic matter, Bean was right when stating that he would not write another play like this, although he wrote another play that touched upon the incidents of 9/11. What makes *The God Botherers* particularly noteworthy in relation to Bean's prior work is that it deals with issues like religion and globalisation.<sup>18</sup> Bean may not offer any answers in *The God Botherers* but he presents an unusual vision of NGO workers in a developing country. The play marks a venture for Bean which proved to be successful. In the same interview in 2009 Bean said:

I think it's difficult to be noisy at the moment; in the 1990s it was easy to be a brat. Now it's much harder to be provocative: in *The God Botherers*, there's a criticism of Islam, there's a severe deconstruction of Christianity in Africa. [...] I was expecting protests. But all the play got was nice reviews and a full house, which only proves that you can't excite anybody really. (Sierz interview 356)

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<sup>18</sup> Claudia Georgi wrote an article on "Cross-Cultural Similarities and Intra-Cultural Hybridity in Richard Bean's *The God Botherers*" which discusses Bean's use of stereotypes as well as cultural similarities and differences in the play.

One could suggest that the success of this play, even if it was not received well by all the critics, lay in the fact that Bean managed to write about issues that were not rooted in England. From this point onwards, Bean could not be claimed to be a naturalistic writer of plays about England any more. Regarding this play one can already speak of Bean's 'challenging the orthodoxy' as his depiction of the foreign aid workers is unconventional and provocative. This unconventionality is mostly created through his use of comedy.

While it seemed tempting to discuss *The God Botherers* in greater detail, I decided to concentrate on a different play instead because the play is not one of Bean's greater successes and, more importantly, it is a play seemingly detached from the rest of Bean's work. *The God Botherers* must be seen as one of Bean's experiments in which he not only tests his ability as a writer but also the reaction of his audience to a more serious subject. What this play lacks spirit which one is able to notice in the more personal plays by Bean. This feeling derives from the fact that Bean usually works with the credo 'write about what you know'. This has probably contributed to the success of the previously mentioned *Under the Whaleback*. *The God Botherers* meant a whole new form of playwriting for Bean and was ultimately a motivation for a play like *England People Very Nice*, in which Bean got everything he wanted: the protests and the excitement from the audience.

*Smack Family Robinson* was firstly staged at Newcastle's Live Theatre on 20 May 2003. It revolves around the murder of the junkie Tammy, the wife of Robert Robinson. The Robinson family of the title are all gangsters with a confused sense of morality. There are five characters, of which Catherine, the mother, is killed by Robert. The young, bright Cora can be considered the grain of hope in the family, and she takes charge in the end. The play has a straightforward two-act structure and is linear in its content. Bean applies a lot of his black humour in this play, for which he is praised by the critics. Jack Bradley describes the strength of the play as such:

He makes them seem ordinary to us; but then, to distance them, makes them grotesquely funny, larger than life, and in doing so renders them harmless. Unconsciously, we think they are simple caricatures. (12)

As in most of his other plays, Bean's forte lies in his depiction of characters. Paired with the dark humour of his one-liners his caricatures work because they are portrayed in a grossly exaggerated way. The critics praised the comedy as brilliant

(*Guardian* in TR 2003, 772), but Bean was also criticised for his abundance of gags. "But great gags do not a good play make, and too often they seem cheaply exploitative of the characters" (*Daily Telegraph* in TR 2003, 772). Bean stated in his interview with Aleks Sierz that he was worried about not being taken seriously anymore because of the large number of jokes in his plays. This concern of his might have arisen with a play like *Smack Family Robinson*, where there is an absence of seriousness as the comedy dominates every aspect of the play. I will comment on the issue of credibility again at a later point in this thesis. *Smack Family Robinson* is another display of Bean's ability to write jokes and create colourful characters. The play is very much centred on the characters and it is the lack of a clear theme that prevents the play from being a more prominent example of Bean's work.

*Up on Roof* had its première on 3 March 2006 at the Hull Truck Theatre. The play is a fictional account of a prison riot that happened in 1976 in the prison of Hull. *Up on Roof* features a cast of six characters, of which only one is a woman. It is another play by Bean that is preoccupied with male characters and, raises questions about the male psyche (*Daily Telegraph* in TR 2006, 279). The similarities of *Up on Roof* to other plays by Bean are so striking that it will not be elaborated on it in an extensive manner. It is a play which focuses on a real life event whose plot is driven by the humorous comments of the characters. Michael Billington and Jeremy Kingston criticise the play for relying too heavily on the comic factors and for neglecting the actual historical events. I have to agree with the two reviewers. As with all of Bean's plays, his forte lies in his use of comedy. In this play it seems as if the serious content that is observable in most of his other plays is very limited and that the jokes are too dominant. The play is composed of a variation of many of Bean's regular elements: the omission of female characters, thematic closeness to Hull and thus to the personal background of the playwright, the extensive use of humour, the parade of unusual characters and the setting in a single location. What is worth mentioning about *Up on Roof* is an incident that involved the changing of some parts of the play. Bean recounted the occurrences in an interview:

There's a lot of pressure now about anything to do with faith and belief. So my play, *Up on Roof* [...] has suddenly become controversial. In it, a guy pretends to be a Muslim because it means he doesn't have to cut his hair. [...] In the original text, this character says the word "Mohammed" occasionally [...] Hull Truck theatre management got a bit nervous about that so I had to cut any mention of Mohammed. (Sierz 359)

This incident reflects the difficulty that playwrights who write about controversial topics are confronted with. Bean had to make the cuts in order for his play to be staged. The sensitivity concerning religious and also political questions seems to be very high, otherwise such cuts would not be necessary. For a provocative and challenging author it is a difficult environment to work in. But Bean will not cease to write in a provocative way but rather enhances the controversial elements in his plays. It is a distinctive feature of Bean's work that there has been no decline in provocative topics.

His next play *In the Club* is a political farce which had its première on 25 July 2007 at Hampstead Theatre in London. Christopher Campbell states that it was a commissioned play intended to aim at adopting attitude "against the setting of the politics of the European Union." (8). Bean has produced a number of plays that were commissioned. The great achievement of this play is that the farce works because it seems that "questions of national politics and questions of sexual relations have more in common than generally acknowledged" (8) as Campbell summarises appropriately. However, this farce has not been appreciated by most of the critics. The play touches on serious topics, which is not unexpected from Bean. The play features some eccentric characters including a Yorkshireman, who seems to be completely misplaced in a Strasbourg hotel room. He is the character providing many one-liners and he joins Bean's various eccentric Yorkshiremen who will play an important part in the two analysed plays of his second phase. Bean's preoccupation with sex is once again underlined in this play. Bean has been criticised for propagating a negative attitude towards the European Union in the play. (Nightingale in TR 2007, 925). I would not go so far as to see the author's actual opinion in every joke that is made against the EU. But clearly there is an emotion behind the comedy that Bean employs, as this is his main tool in his writing. *In the Club* is clearly written to provoke and as it is Bean's mission to challenge the orthodoxy this play contains nothing unexpected but rather fulfils the expectation of the audience. In terms of genre, this is a play that can be categorised as a farce and it is unusual for the genre of a Bean play to be so easily describable.

*The English Game* is one of Bean's greater successes and a highly multifaceted play. It was first performed at the Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre on 7 May 2008 and got mostly good reviews. Bean's play revolves around the players of an amateur cricket team playing a match on a Sunday afternoon. The playwright talked about his

passion for this game in various interviews<sup>19</sup> and it is thus not surprising that he chose it as a topic for one of his plays. The play's main interest lies in the characters, who are a mixed group of men that are very different in character but unified by the game. *The English Game* has an all-male cast and women are only mentioned as crazy wives or in connection with sex. The play is described as a "state-of-the-nation drama" (*Daily Telegraph* in TR 2008, 574). The state of the nation is reflected in the desolate state of the pitch and most of all the emphasised diversity of the characters. *The English Game* gets political at some points and there is one incident in particular for which Bean earned criticism from the reviewers. Charles Spencer describes in his review how a sympathetic character turns into a radical anti-Islamist and wonders whether the author's voice can be found in the radical character. The issue of 'political correctness'<sup>20</sup> will become important again in *England People Very Nice*. It is interesting, however, that *The English Game* sparked off the first controversy concerning the political attitude of the author. The play contains a number of elements that are expected from Bean: a single set which reflects the theme of the play, an all-male cast, one-liners and a comment on Englishness. But the play also adds new aspects to the work of the playwright: the topics as well as its setting in London represent leaps for the author. Even though Bean is inclined to write all male pieces, he varies his characters in this play, especially since his characters usually portray one kind of Englishness, namely the one in Yorkshire.

One can conclude these observations by saying that in this second phase there are some unifying elements: Bean usually returns to subjects that he is familiar with and they mostly revolve around the place of his upbringing. In some of his plays, and this will become relevant in the two representative plays of this phase, he experiments with time and setting and he connects these aspects with his themes to a greater extent than in his initial phase. Bean also develops new character constellations and he does not depend on male domination in the plays any more. The following analysis of the two plays *Honeymoon Suite* and *Harvest* will show how Bean's concerns broaden.

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<sup>19</sup> An exclusive interview on cricket and *The English Game* is with David Cavendish <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3673273/Richard-Bean-blurred-boundaries.html>

<sup>20</sup> I put the term in inverted commas, as I am well aware that the term 'political correctness' is a political slogan which is debatable. It is a concept that Bean is challenging and which is often mentioned in connection with his work.

## 4.2. *Honeymoon Suite* (2004)

It's basically about the deep, awful  
tragedies of love and relationships. [...]  
People expect a work-play from me,  
but it is a play about love.  
(Sierz interview 357)

### 4.2.1. Introduction and General Information

In relation to Bean's prior work, Voigts-Virchow refers to *Honeymoon Suite* as "another departure" (9). With regard to Bean's creative output this play deserves special attention as it is, on the one hand, in many respects typical of Bean but, on the other hand, it is very different in its form and content from what he has produced so far. Bean's statement quoted above illustrates the play's major theme: love. In his previous writing love is never a quintessential aspect of the plays. While love is one of the most significant universal themes in literature, it never seemed to be of special importance in Bean's writing. *Honeymoon Suite* is in this respect an unconventional play for Bean because it revolves around a theme that had been widely omitted in Bean's work until then. His plays usually feature sex or have a romantic subplot. But this play's major theme is the deep and unusual love of the protagonists. Naturally, there are other important aspects which make *Honeymoon Suite* worthy of analysis. My analysis of the play will show the difficulty of tying the play down to one of the two major dramatic genres, comedy or tragedy. A substantial part of the analysis will be concerned with the passage of time and the structure of the play. These two features are of major interest because they are presented in an unconventional way. The content of the play can be easily described in one sentence: the play depicts a married couple at three pivotal points in their relationship. The trick of the play is that there are three couples on one stage simultaneously. Each of the three couples represent one stage of the marriage of Eddie and Irene. The three couples interrupt and continue the conversations of the other pairs. Six actors are needed to portray one couple and they occupy the stage at the same time. As the story goes on, it becomes apparent that the youngest version of the couple, who started out as happy lovers, becomes more and more estranged until they finally separate.

*Honeymoon Suite* had its première on 8 January 2004 at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs which marked a huge success for Bean as a playwright since it meant a

production of his work on one of the big stages that promote 'new writing'. The reactions to the play can be found in various reviews and vary from praise to disappointment.

#### 4.2.2. Genre

Labelling *Honeymoon Suite* down to one genre is difficult and this is due to Bean's use of comedy in the play. The overall tone of the story is tragic although it is the humour that takes central part in the play. As with many other Bean plays a genre description is not straightforward. In the reviews the terms 'tragic' and 'comedy' are used with equal share which leads to the conclusion that this play can be considered to be a tragicomedy.

Before continuing this thought I would like to interpose another observation. Generally, the title evokes the impression that this is a romantic play. But although a romantic plot is featured in the story it is not the only important element. Love might be the major theme in the play but this does not make it a romantic narrative. What is certain, however, is that tragic instances are as frequent as romantic ones. In *Literary Terms and Criticism* the genre of tragedy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is described as depicting "the breakdown of a family" (107). Similarly, *Honeymoon Suite* displays the destruction of the relationship of Eddie and Irene. Considering this, the play could be labelled a tragedy because the development and ultimate breakup of the couple is depicted at three different stages. Eddie's suicide is suggested but the ending is left open nevertheless. If the play ended with the death of one of the protagonists, one would be justified to refer to it as a tragedy. But the outcome is uncertain and so is the definite fate of the couple. The two characters are shown to be conciliatory in the end and through the departure of the old Irene a closure to the main conflict, the one of the lovers, is suggested. Even if the ending is tragic because the old Eddie is left alone, it also shows how their love has endured despite all the obstacles in their lives. It is indicated that the two characters will not meet again after this reunion because their relationship has come to a halt from which no development is possible. The last depiction of the old Eddie dousing the whole room with petrol including his younger self and his young wife is illustrative of the final breakup of the couple. The suicide might happen but it is also possible that the old Eddie wants to destroy this place of memories in order to leave Irene behind at last. This ending depicts the outcome of the relationship in a tragic tone. The finale of the

romantic plot is thus highly dramatic, suggesting that *Honeymoon Suite* is mainly focused on the tragic elements.

Having said this I would like to proceed with the consideration of the comic elements. I have stated before that it is the humorous tone in the play that is prevalent in some scenes while it is the tragic elements that dominate other parts of the play. Considering this I would conclude this discussion on genre by saying that in *Honeymoon Suite* a balance between tragic and comic elements is aspired and in my opinion achieved which makes this play a tragicomedy as a labelling of it as a pure comedy or tragedy would not be accurate.

#### 4.2.3. Characters<sup>21</sup>

The plot of *Honeymoon Suite* is driven by the characters rather than by action, which places the focus once again on the particular characters and their development rather than on the events in the story. The trick concerning the characters has been explained before. It is difficult to decide whether there are two rather than six characters in the story. The character list contains the names of six characters and, therefore, six actors are needed to portray two people. I would suggest that there are three embodiments of one couple in the play, each of them representing one specific stage in the relationship. Unlike some people I would say that these are not the same characters but always different ones, each of them representing a huge change in the personalities of Eddie and Irene. The characters are fragments rather than fully-developed characters. Together with the other characters they constitute one whole character. Bean makes them act in one room next to each other, thus also connecting them on a spatial level. The presence of all of them unifies the fragments into a whole. In the next paragraphs I will provide a description of the characters by outlining their development in the course of the stories.

The first pair that is shown together is Eddie and Irene and they are the classic depiction of a young and hopeful couple at the beginning of their marriage. The first dialogue occurring between them already provides the basis for many points of conflict:

IRENE: Is it real champagne, or just fizzy wine?

EDDIE: How do I know? You're the doctor.

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<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to write about the characters as there are three names for one couple. I have decided to use the names Eddie and Irene in order to talk about the couple generally. If a specific character is meant I will use the characters name, i.e. Eddie/Tits/Witchell or Irene/Izzy/Marfleet.

*(He hands the bottle over)*

IRENE: It's real! Oh, Eddie how much did this cost me dad?

EDDIE: Aye, he's done us proud. How do you open 'em?

*(He puts the champagne back in the bucket.)*

IRENE: Oh, I would know wunt I. Spent my whole life opening champagne bottles. (198-199)

It becomes apparent in this short conversation that the couple finds itself in an unusual place. Irene's exclamations are an expression of her overwhelmed feelings regarding the splendour of the suite that has been provided by her father. In the course of the events it will be shown how his decision to earn money in order to pay for this room will have an effect on Irene's development. The ironic remark made by Irene concerning her inexperience with opening champagne can be interpreted as a social marker, because apparently she never had the chance to drink champagne before. In their honeymoon suite they get the opportunity to be who they are not. Eddie calls his wife 'the doctor', thus referring to an intellectual difference between him and her. Irene is depicted as a clever and bookish character while Eddie is eager to climb the social ladder. He craves economic success more than anything else. This urge to become financially independent marks one point of his character that will aid the distancing process between him and his wife.

Both of the characters develop in the course of the story and this development happens in a contrary way. The second version of the couple is called Tits and Izzy and they are considerably different from their younger selves. The characters' development is reflected in their names. The first couple has relatively normal and unexciting names: Eddie and Irene. The second couple's names, Tits and Izzy, are nicknames that are not necessarily flattering, while the names Witchell and Marfleet denote a kind of dignity or at least experience. Irene develops from clever but uncertain to being the embodiment of self-confidence and success. In the middle stage of her development she is shown as an adulteress who has decided to pursue an academic career. Eddie appears to be a very promising character as his younger self. But he develops from being self-assured to being corrupt and in the end he is shown to be utterly desperate to the point that he wants to kill himself. Izzy and Tits are the characters that are morally the most questionable in comparison to the other versions of their selves. But this does not mean that they are portrayed in a more unsympathetic way. Spencer states in his review that "there is also a beguiling tenderness and lack of cynicism in Bean's writing. He never sits in judgement on his characters." (*Daily Telegraph* in TR 2004, 48). I agree with this

observation. In the play there is no apparent display of cruelty or abuse, at least none regarding the way the couples behave towards each other. While Izzy and Marfleet try to snap the tie to their husband, they do not want to destroy him by doing so. The one reason for this is love. It is the one trait that unifies all six characters. As I have mentioned before, there is a noticeable development in the personalities of the characters taking place. But this development is not parallel as it should be for a married couple. The major problem of the pair is that they develop in different directions. They want different things from life and this discrepancy is displayed in various situations. It is a particular strength of the play that conflicts are shown or hinted at which will eventually be returned to or resolved by another couple at another stage in their marriage. There is no special emphasis on any of the three couples. Witchell and Marfleet might be considered as the ultimate couple because they are the oldest but without their younger versions their attitudes and their story could not be understood.

Even if there is no couple that is particularly distinguished there is one character who is slightly more accentuated than the others: Witchell. He is the one who appears first on stage and he is the character that ends the last scene. Thus, he is the character who is likely to make the biggest impression on an audience. Witchell is also the most eccentric character of them all. Marfleet is also portrayed as a rather unconventional character. This impression is evoked by the presentation of her development as a woman. Witchell's situation is different. In the end he is shown to be an eccentric with unique manners and habits. He begins and ends the plot with unnecessary calls to freephones stating his dismay about certain subjects which are of no particular use to the called party. Witchell is also the only character who gets extensive time alone in the room, while the other characters usually appear in pairs. There is one instance in which Witchell describes his state of living:

WITCHELL: I don't go to bed. You die in bed. I sleep on the balcony. I'm an ascetic. Apparently. I eat hummus. Chick peas. Pythagoras said you can purify your soul if you eat enough beans. I keep the windows open. (216)

Witchell is an unreliable character because his narrations often appear to be invented. I have referred to the fact before that Bean likes to include eccentric characters in his plays. Witchell is the eccentric in *Honeymoon Suite*. Within the range of all the characters he is the most likely to appear in a Bean play.

Another important observation concerns Bean's treatment of women in the play. I have alluded to the fact that in Bean's work female roles are never of the same importance as their male counterparts. Sometimes women do not feature in the plays at all. However, the claim that Bean writes only male plays has been refuted with *Honeymoon Suite*. Even though the male characters, especially Witchell, might be slightly more accentuated than the others, it is a fact that the female roles are equally important in the play. It is the balance between the couples but also between the characters that constitutes the distinctiveness of the play.

Victoria Segal from the *Sunday Times* observes:

For a playwright obsessed by a world of honest work and manly sweat, he is surprisingly good at writing women, and even though he bestows a foolishly grand fate upon Irene, her three stages of development are credibly captured. (in TR 2004, 51)

This review is worth considering because it is written from a female perspective. Most of Bean's regular reviewers write from a male perspective.<sup>22</sup> I agree with Segal's opinion that Bean's attempt to portray a female character is successful in the play and I also consider Marfleet's development slightly exaggerated. At the same time I am certain that a balance between the characters is only achieved because of this exaggeration. While Witchell has to be an eccentric in order to portray the desperate version of Eddie, Marfleet also needs a satisfying method of demonstrating her superior status, which is, in her case, her Baroness title. Her extraordinary development might not be perceived as credible otherwise. *Honeymoon Suite* is Bean's first play in which a woman receives equal attention to a man. This seems to be made possible by the exclusive pairing of the characters. It needs to be mentioned at this point that it is interesting that Bean's female roles are once again tied to their male partners. Even if Marfleet appears to be emancipated she is still bound to her husband after so many years. It is only in the last scene when Marfleet finally leaves Witchell that her emancipation process is fulfilled.

The play's characters can be considered to be its most important elements. But without the trick with structure and time the story might not appeal in the way

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<sup>22</sup> The regular male reviewers are Charles Spencer from *Daily Telegraph*, Nicholas de Jongh from *Evening Standard*, Paul Taylor from *Independent*, Michael Billington from *Guardian* Benedict Nightingale from *The Times* and Aleks Sierz from *What's On*.

*Honeymoon Suite* does. The next chapter will be concerned with elements of time and structure.

#### 4.2.4. Time-span and Structure

Concerning its structuring, *Honeymoon Suite* can be regarded as a departure for Bean as well. Generally speaking, *Honeymoon Suite* is a single-act play. There are no apparent subdivisions in the layout of the text. The divisions in Bean's plays are usually acts or scenes. I have described Bean as being an experimental playwright who uses new forms in his second phase. *Honeymoon Suite* appears to be a simple-structured play although the structure is in fact highly complex. This complexity is reflected in the number three, which seems to be the key to *Honeymoon Suite*. Three is the number of couples as well as the number of female and male characters. In the play there are three stories condensed into one. Bean said that it "satisfies the three-act structure" (Sierz interview 357) because of the conventional division of the development of action into setup, confrontation and resolution. The number of time levels in the play is also three. The first level is the one happening in 1955, the second twenty-five years later in 1980. The last time level is 2004, which is the year that the play had its premiere on a stage. Thus, the play covers a time-span of almost fifty years. Each version of the couple is the embodiment of a time level. The structuring in the play is, therefore, accomplished by Bean's deconstruction of this couple rather than by a division into separate parts.

The aspects of time and structure are impossible to separate in the play. This can be exemplified by this quote:

WITCHELL: Yeah, but she din't know about the...you know...the nature of the accident did she?

MARFLEET: No, they hadn't told anyone about that. I was the first to see the –

WITCHELL: - I know that.

TITS: Did they have him laid out on the ice? Love?

IZZY: I'm never gonna tell yer.

MARFLEET: They'd tried to sort of put his head on the end of the body, like put him back together again, but the ice melted and there was a gap, you know, at the neck.

TITS: He weren't the first man to lose his head in the winch [...] (234)

This dialogue depicts the circumstances around the tragic death of Irene's father, which is shown to be one of the major instances of disagreement between the couple. While the older couple is able to talk about the accident, it is Izzy who pledges never to

speak about the events of that day. The structure allows two time levels to correlate. Izzy is shown to be resistant of sharing her knowledge while Marfleet appears to talk about the traumatic experiences of the accident in a normal manner. It is an effective trick to allow two versions of the same character to complete the narration about one of the most shocking events in their lives. Through the juxtaposition of the two characters the development of Irene is well presented in the play. One can only assume how much she must have changed over the years in order to become the superior, intellectual woman that she is at the age of sixty-seven. The dialogue presented above is one of the parts in the play which makes the most effective use of this structural and temporal trick.

Although all of the time levels are of equal importance for telling the story, it is, nevertheless, the present time which dominates the interest of the audience because there is space for the development of the characters on this level. The first two couples are like shadows of the old couple. The young pair can be seen as continuously haunting the older selves. They appear like ghosts who are essentially creatures that once lived but who are dead now. In this sense their presence signifies the importance they have for the people that are still alive.

I have commented on the fact that there is not much action in *Honeymoon Suite*. Alastair Macaulay considers the play to combine “plot and plotlessness” (*Financial Times* in TR 2004, 48), a trait which the reviewer regards as characteristic of Bean’s writing. It is true that there is almost no action happening on-stage in the play. The scenery never changes and the play depends on its main deceit. The development of the characters is shown through the dialogue. This observation marks a parallel to *Toast* but also to most of the other Bean plays.

Despite the fact that the structure marks an innovation compared to Bean’s prior work, it is not a new invention by the playwright. The critics refer to various role models for Bean’s deceit. Alan Ayckbourn is mentioned by Alistair Macaulay as a role model for the triple structure (in TR 2004, 48), Nicholas de Jongh names Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* as a forerunner to Bean's main trick (in TR 2004, 49), while Paul Taylor recognises parallels to Caryl Churchill's *Hotel* in the trick (in TR 2004, 49). Despite the fact that such structural experiments are nothing new, I believe that the processing of the stories in this complex form is a great achievement for a playwright. The structure demands high concentration from the audience, both for a theatre audience or for readers, and presents a challenge.

#### 4.2.5. Setting

The title *Honeymoon Suite* suggests the setting of the play, which is a suite of a seaside hotel in Bridlington. Using a single set for a story with three different plots is a good means of creating a visual link between the present and the past, especially if the embodiments of the story, the characters, inhabit the set simultaneously. Georgina Brown observes that the suite is a “room which has borne witness to so many significant beginnings and endings” (*Mail on Sunday* in TR 2004, 52), and this is exactly the significance this room holds in the play. One could say that the trick of the play only works because of the spatial link of the three couples. It is most efficient to describe the space Bean created in a direct comparison with one of his former plays. *The Mentalists* of 2002 also featured a hotel room but it is in *Honeymoon Suite* that Bean develops this setting into a multi-dimensional space. The plot of *The Mentalists* revolves around two characters spending some hours in one single room. Similarly, the two characters in *Honeymoon Suite* spend their time in a suite. The main trick of the play has been discussed well enough so far, but it is important to underline how the hotel room in *Honeymoon Suite* adds a layer of meaning to the play. First of all, it signifies a place of love for the couple and especially for Irene, as she will lose her virginity in that room. For the second couple it is the space for revelations as Izzy confesses her adultery in what is probably the most important place of her relationship with Eddie. Marfleet has developed so far that she wants to cut all the bonds that tie her to her past. She aspires to do this in the hotel room that signifies both the highest and the lowest points of her marriage with Eddie. The setting adds a complexity on a psychological level, which cannot be said about the hotel room in *The Mentalists*. The hotel room in *The Mentalists* signifies a neutral space for Ted and Morrie. In *Honeymoon Suite* it is intended that the room should hold a special significance for the characters. Bean thus uses one type of setting in two different plays and is shown to develop in complexity in doing so.

The suite is commented on in various instances in *Honeymoon Suite*. It becomes almost a character itself in the course of the play. The couples are fully aware of the significance of the room. Witchell has decided to buy the hotel in order to own this special place. He says he did it in order to honour Irene’s father but it is apparent that the room is his only means of clinging to his desolate relationship with Marfleet. She refers to it as one reason for not having seen her husband in twenty-five years:

MARFLEET: I would have seen you before, I tried, many times.

WITCHELL: But you wouldn't come here!

MARFLEET: No, can you blame me? Not to this room, no.

WITCHELL: I live here! (216)

This dialogue shows how Irene has moved on in her life while Eddie is apparently stuck in the past. He decided to inhabit the single space which reminds him of his failed relationship. More importantly, this piece of dialogue shows Irene's long reluctance to visit this room, thus admitting her emotional attachment to this space. She uses a negation three times in order to express her sentiments concerning this place of memories. In the playtext it is only through the reader's imagination that the trick concerning the setting is achieved. On a stage the purpose of the trick is realised to the utmost.

There is one last observation regarding the setting that I will elaborate on. I have mentioned that the younger presences of Witchell and Marfleet can be interpreted as ghosts. Generally speaking, there are no occurrences of the supernatural in Richard Bean's work. The presences in *Honeymoon Suite*, therefore, can be considered to signify the only excursion into the sphere of the preternatural for Bean. I would suggest that this notion of the supernatural is not factored into the play intentionally, but that the structural device inevitably creates this impression. Macaulay states in his review that "[o]stensibly, no couple is aware of the other couple's presence; but there are wordless passages when older individuals seem to be gazing at their younger selves across the room" (*Financial Times* in TR 2004, 48). I would argue that it is in these situations as they are realised by actors on stage that the play unfolds its complex potential.

#### 4.2.6. Language and Style

Richard Bean once said about the characters of *Honeymoon Suite* that "[t]heir voices are Hull voices." (Sierz interview 357). One sign for this is that his characters speak a language that is used in the north-east of England, the region around Hull. This is where Bean's roots are. Regarding language and style, this play is fairly similar to the previously discussed *Toast*. Bean makes use of the pronunciation of the northern regions in order to create the atmosphere of this harsher area. In *Honeymoon Suite* all the characters speak dialect although the language of the two younger couples is more distinctively northern than the speech of the oldest couple. This distinction is credible, because Marfleet has to dispose of her dialect in order to be accepted as a convincing

politician. In the play it seems as if the old Witchell adapts his own language use in order to impress his wife, which is something that neither Eddie nor Tits does. It is necessary to develop Irene's speech in order to accentuate the character's development. Her language has to be different in order for her character to portray credibly the change that she has undergone in the course of twenty-five years. In this respect she is the only character who appears not to be a 'voice of Hull' anymore, which is another means used by Bean to display the development of her character. Language in *Honeymoon Suite* is used as a device to distinguish Marfleet from the others, just as Bean needed the elaborate language of the student Lance in *Toast* to distinguish him from the other characters.

Another aspect that is noteworthy in the play is its humour. The humorous dialogue is another similarity to the previously analysed *Toast*. There are some dialogues in which the characters laugh which the reader might not perceive as funny. But the shared humour and the insider jokes are mainly used in order to create a special bond between the couples. It is most of all their mutual understanding of each other which makes them laugh at a shared memory such as this one:

WITCHELL: [...] Do you remember down Strickie Ave you could leave your back door open. Nothing ever got stolen.

MARFLEET: We had bugger all worth nicking.

*(They laugh together)* (214)

But *Honeymoon Suite* would not be a Richard Bean play if it did not contain one-liners about which the audience can laugh. In the play the funny lines are mainly delivered by the old Witchell but occasionally also by the other characters. A good example of this is a short piece of dialogue which revolves around the estranged daughter of the couple. Witchell asks his wife:

WITCHELL: What does a forty three old lesbian with two sociology degrees do in this modern world?

MARFLEET: She runs a dry ski slope in Kettering.

*(They laugh and fall onto the bed.)* (220)

Without its humour, this play would have to be considered a tragedy. It is again characteristic of Bean to add a funny tone to an otherwise serious and tragic story. The one-liners provide comic relief in order to entertain the audience, most humorous are the comments of the old Witchell. With his portrayal of an eccentric Yorkshireman and his one-liners, Bean applies two devices in *Honeymoon Suite* that have been successfully

applied in his earlier *Toast* and which will constitute his formula for writing successful plays. It is important to note that no irony is used in the play. The humour of the old couple is honest and neither mean nor sarcastic. This aids the audience to feel empathy with the two characters, despite their morally questionable actions at some points. This moral ambiguity is connected to the big theme of the play: love.

#### 4.2.7. Summary of Themes

*Honeymoon Suite's* main concern is indisputably love. It is love that keeps the three couples together on some level when every other aspect of their lives diverges. But it would not be a Richard Bean play if there was no political or social aspect integrated into the play as well. The discussion of this other theme will constitute the second part of this chapter.

Concerning love, there is one piece of dialogue in which they address the topic. It is Tits who starts:

TITS: Well I love you, I know I do, I always have, and I always will. I don't care what you do or what you've done.

IZZY: Love. The word has no mystery for you, does it?

TITS: (*Angry.*) No it dunt. You love someone, you can feel it, like a lump, summat you carry around with yer. Bloody hell, it's either there or it int, like a hat. You read too much bloody poetry that's your trouble. I've never loved no one else. I don't think I'm capable.

IZZY: I'm not as uncomplicated as you Eddie. I'm complicated. (211)

Eddie's love is very straightforward, while Irene's love is more complicated. This clarification is relevant because their characters are exactly like the manner in which they love. There is never a situation in which Eddie does not say something that he does not mean. Likewise, there are many occasions in which Irene does not know what she wants. Her character is far more ambiguous, which will ultimately cause their separation. Eddie would be satisfied with any kind of love from Irene while her ambition is prone to cause trouble in their marriage. Whatever kind of love Irene feels for Eddie, she does so throughout all the changes she goes through. She is the one who suggests having sex at their last meeting. Sex takes a central place in the play because it is featured on many occasions. Sex between the youngest and the oldest couple is shown during the plot while the middle couple only talk about it. Eddie denotes it as an indicator for the change of their relationship at one point.

The three couples can be regarded as the embodiment of three stages in a marriage. They begin as idealised lovers and develop into a couple who soberly faces reality. Love is the matter that has the most effect on the morality of the characters. Eddie is willing to do anything, legal but mostly illegal, in order to be financially successful so that he can provide a home for Irene. Izzy also compromises morally when she helps Tits after he becomes responsible for a murder. Jack Bradley is right when he states that “[t]hese are not good people, but they did not set out to be evil. Sometimes ill is done for what is perceived by them as good reason: self-improvement, success in business and, believe it or not, love.” (12). Love is definitely the thread that holds this play together. Some reviewers have criticised the play for not presenting anything new or original. But if one considers the second big theme, the social conditions of past eras that are presented, one is able to notice a parallel development of social issues and the relationship.

Bean embeds the play into a social background which is commented on at various occasions in the play. He links the couple to various happenings that are concerned with the fishing industry. This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the couple’s fate is inevitably tied to the fishing industry and their misfortunes start when Irene’s father gets killed in a fishing accident. Irene’s character changes when she has to identify her father after the accident. She sees her father’s mutilated body and stops being the naïve and unblemished teenager that she used to be. Meanwhile, Eddie sees his fortune in the fishing industry, which should help him prosper. This plan fails when the extinction of cod causes a financial disaster and Eddie has to take illegal steps in order to survive. The social context in the play is central and cannot be overlooked. I argued that it had less importance in *Toast*, where social context was also an issue but never as significant as in *Honeymoon Suite*. The play marks an important difference in Bean’s handling of social issues. Jane Edwardes comments that “[i]mprobably, the play fizzles into life whenever the couple discusses any aspect of the fishing trade.” (*Time Out London* in TR 2004, 53). Rather than criticising Bean for using this theme as a thread in the story, I would consider the theme a benefit for the play because it provides a credible background story for the couple. Their characters are tied to their social background and without a parallel social development the story might not be as convincing as it is.

Bean chose to integrate the fishing industry and its doomed fate into the play although he had already used it as a main theme in the previously mentioned *Under the*

*Whaleback*. *Under the Whaleback* is considered to be a work-play in the tradition of *Toast*. In *Honeymoon Suite* Bean reuses the theme but in doing so he does not stick to familiar patterns but rather develops. *Honeymoon Suite* is not a work-play but it has historic relevance as it depicts the political situation of the 50s, 80s and today. Aleks Sierz refers to the play as a “commentary on British history” (*What’s On* in TR 2004, 53) and this indeed seems to be one of Bean’s aspirations in the play. It is interesting that many reviewers did not comment on this aspect, although it is dominant in the play.

A parallel to other Bean plays would be *Honeymoon Suite*’s preoccupation with the past. Many of Bean’s plays have at least a slight connection with past events or they happen in the past, like *Honeymoon Suite*. But in the play the present constitutes the most important level, as I have argued before. The past holds significance because of its juxtaposition with the present. Through this device the past seems to have a direct influence on the present. The theme, love, will never be so extensively featured again in any of the following plays by Richard Bean. In his controversial play *England People Very Nice*, however, love will signify a wholly different function and serve as a suggested solution to the play’s difficult theme.

### 4.3. *Harvest* (2005)

“*Harvest* finds an already fine dramatist extending his range and writing at the peak of his powers.”<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.3.1. Introduction and General Information

Bean wrote *Harvest* for the main stage of the Royal Court Theatre. *Harvest* had its première on 2 September 2005 and it was the play that followed *Honeymoon Suite*. It received mixed reviews, which is nothing unusual for a Bean play. Generally speaking, *Harvest* revolves around the topic of pig farming. Bean embeds his theme into a play that has an innovative form and unusual characters. The play is important as it shows Bean’s concern with Englishness, which is a regular preoccupation of his. It also demonstrates Bean’s innovative processing of structure and time-span. The play features his usual preoccupation with eccentric characters and is a challenge of the orthodoxy concerning the depiction of rural England. *Harvest* is worth considering in

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<sup>23</sup> see Charles Spencer in TR 2005, 1124.

the course of Bean's development because beyond marking a departure like *Honeymoon Suite*, it functions as a precursor for his following work in some respects. There are political and societal components that are responsible for many of the misfortunes that happen to the Harrison family and they are embodied by Lord Agar or the Vet. It becomes apparent that Bean is not ready to abandon the homely environment of Hull in Yorkshire which is of major importance in the play once again.

*Harvest* has been referred to as his "mid-career masterpiece" (7) by Christopher Campbell and marks the middle stage in his career. His plays before and after are different from this type of play. This is interesting because 2005 marks the year that is in the middle between the beginning of his career in 1999 and the year 2012. I will investigate the play for Bean's usual features and try to explain his usage of them. *Harvest* is a very ambitious play in various aspects, as will be shown, and it combines Bean's characteristics with a certain amount of innovation.

What is interesting to mention about this play is its relation to the priority mentioned group of 'monsterists'. *Harvest* can be considered to be one of the plays that fulfils the expectations of this group as it was staged at a main stage with a large cast and has an innovative and ambitious form. *Harvest* in many respects a role model for the second phase of the playwright's work.

#### **4.3.2. Genre**

In the play's reviews the terms that are most often used in order to describe *Harvest* are "comic", "epic" and "family saga" (reviews in TR 2005). The play is mostly depicted as a comedy but it does not become clear in the reviews why the play is a representative of this genre. Naturally, it contains comic elements because it is a Richard Bean play and one does not expect otherwise. But similarly to *Honeymoon Suite*, it is difficult to tie this play down to one genre. The broad time-span and the contents suggest that it is a saga or epic. *Harvest* is concerned with the numerous events of the owners of a farm and depicts around ninety years of William Harrison's life and his struggles with farming. However, the play does not start with the protagonist's birth nor does it conclude with his death. The focus is divided between the characters and the place of action on the farm, which is the kitchen. The term 'epic' refers to the broad quality of the play. *Harvest* is an epic because of its serial depiction of events in one single place that is concerned with one topic: farming. It also displays the changes of

the place, which is suggested by minor alterations in the setting although it is always the same location that is shown. Since four generations of one family are featured in the play, the term saga is appropriate because it includes the notion of the generational overlap of one family.

The term that appears to be more problematic in the context of this play is comedy. Although it contains comic elements, do not constitute the overall tone of the play. The ending in particular provides a rather negative view of the central theme and it is doubtful whether a comedy is what Bean wanted the play to be perceived as. Bean, however, does mention the term comedy in an interview about *Harvest* and this aspect will be taken up again in the discussion of language and style. Nicholas de Jongh, whose review is critical of the play, states that “Bean has crashed his play in the realms of farcical comedy and family melodrama.” (TR 2005, 1123). The farcical elements are probably best discerned while watching a performance of the play on a stage. When reading the text it is hard to imagine the buzz of activity between all the characters. *Harvest* features a large cast that is present on the stage at the same time and it is intended that farcical and physical humour add to the comedy of the play.

The reviews often mention one specific funny scene in which William hears the theme song of the famous British TV series *The Archers* and switches it off. This joke is specifically directed at an English audience as they are familiar with this melodramatic series that is based on the melodramatic depictions of the events happening on a farm similar to the one in *Harvest*. British audiences are familiar with the series. The turning off the tune suggests that this play is not in the tradition of a melodrama. A play written in this tradition can generally be described as “a sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions” (Oxford Dictionary 1095). Even without Bean’s joke it is obvious that his play is no melodrama. A good example that creates a distance between the notion of melodrama and *Harvest* is the ending. The events in the finale are shocking and brutal and far from being sensationalist or melodramatic. The ending will be discussed in the course of the structural analysis but at this point it seems useful to note John Nathan’s review from the *Jewish Chronicle* in which he says that “in the final scene, Bean veers his drama towards state-of-the-nation territory.” (TR 2005, 1127). The ending seems to be a breach from the rest of the other scenes as it is set in the present and shows two urban burglars breaking into the farmer’s kitchen and threatening the female protagonist Laura. The finale suggests that the serious tone is more relevant than the comic intermezzi in

the play and even if elements of various genres of comedy are used (farce, melodrama, physical comedy), the overall impression is that this is a tragic epic with comic elements in it. Once again, Bean draws from various genres in order to discuss a topic that is highly unexpected and might be considered rather unattractive for an urban audience.

### 4.3.3. Characters

*Harvest* features sixteen characters altogether. Some of the characters only appear in one scene and are sometimes only mentioned again in another instance in the play. The protagonist is William Harrison, who is the only character appearing in every scene. He can be considered to be one of the two recurring elements in the play. Every character surrounding William has either lived for some time at the farm or only functions as an intruder in his life. His character is introduced at the age of nineteen as a young and healthy man. In the final scene William is one hundred and ten years old and in his wheelchair. Apart from his time as a soldier in the First World War, William has never left the farm. The first scene '1914 The Stallion Man' shows him as an ambitious and energetic man. His aspiration is to leave the farm for some time in order to discover the world. When he loses both of his legs in the course of the war, he is forced to stay at the farm. But his character seems not to be bothered with this incident. As a war victim who returns as a cripple, he is not only tied to a wheelchair but subsequently also to the farm. The war has made him immobile to the point where he cannot just get up and leave. In the first scene his ambition is his most prominent characteristic. It seems that through his eagerness to go to war he is being punished for leaving the place while his brother Albert, who also wanted to fight as a soldier, is left behind. The dynamic between the siblings is very interesting. William and Albert are brothers that always want the same things but in a slightly different way. This is the reason why they are in each other's way in many respects. They both win and lose in the course of their lives but both of their fates are ultimately tied to the farm. Albert is shot in 1944 in his own kitchen after losing his nerve when arguing with another officer who wants to take advantage of his land. He is equally obsessive over the land as his brother William. But William's obsession concerns his pig project rather than the land. At the moment of his brother's death he does not even react to the murder:

MAUDIE: He's dead.

WILLIAM: Aye. He is that.

MAUDIE: What we gonna do now?

WILLIAM: Pigs. (48)

In terms of brotherly affection William does not show a lot of sentiments. His feelings are all tied to his project, the pigs, and the events on his farm. Even though the state of his body does not allow him to run the farm on his own, he nevertheless decisively influences the fortune of Kilham Wold Farm. A notable feature of his is the unnatural length of his life. One might ask if it is necessary to have this character reach this unusual age. But as William's fate is strongly connected to the farm he probably is made to survive because he is bound to endure what the farm has to endure over the years. He could have easily been killed in the war but he survives and subsequently returns in a state that allows him no mobility. Through the death of his brother he is finally able to follow his obsession but obviously he is never allowed to leave it behind. Of all obsessive characters that Bean created in his writing, William Harrison is the most prominent example because his obsession is depicted as running so deep that he does not dismiss his ideas even when everything around him dissolves, as is suggested by the ending.

Another observation concerning the protagonist has been made by Toby Young. Young says about William that "he remains undefeated, thanks to his proud independence, sardonic wit and unsentimental attitude to life. In other words, he's a Yorkshireman through and through." (*Spectator* in TR 2005, 1126). This description of an archetypal Yorkshireman strongly resembles the character of Eddie/Tits/Witchell from *Honeymoon Suite*. In both plays stages of the characters' lives are shown. Both characters share some characteristics but they are nevertheless very different. William is never desperate while Witchell is suicidal at the end. Bean varies his Yorkshiremen and even though William's final appearance creates a more positive impression than Witchell's, both characters radiate the sense of failure.

The depiction of women in *Harvest* is very interesting. There are two important female roles, Maudie and Laura, in the cast of sixteen, which makes them the minority in comparison to the male roles. But the development of the female characters is more prominent than that of the male ones. In particular, Laura, the niece of William, develops significantly in the course of the play. She is introduced as a young and impressionable female who is passionately in love but she becomes a hard-working, uncompromising and politicised woman. In the depiction of women, Bean has an impressive tool to show the harshness of the labour with pigs. Maudie and Laura are

both shown with tools for handling the animals on the farm. This is an unusual portrayal of a female character because they are doing dirty, disgusting work. Similarly to William, Laura is not able to let go of the idea of pig farming. Her character develops like Irene/Izzy/Marfleet in *Honeymoon Suite*. It is interesting that it is a woman again who becomes politicised, which reflects her intellectual development. While the men appear to be the dominant characters, they are stuck in their development while the females evolve. In this respect the play rebuts early reproaches on the critics' side, when they claimed that Bean did not create interesting female roles. It might appear at first sight that he is only concerned with maleness in the plays. But this does not appear to be true at this point of Bean's career.

Among the male cast are two characters that have to be mentioned in this chapter: Stefan and Titch. In the scene of 1944 Stefan is introduced as Laura's lover and it becomes apparent that he is a good German rather than a stereotypical depiction of a Nazi. Sierz praises Bean for never being obvious (*Rewriting the Nation* 138) and in the character of Stefan this skill is reflected, as German soldiers in the Second World War are usually portrayed as villains. Bean challenges this orthodoxy by introducing a German as a warm-hearted and sympathetic character. Stefan stays on the farm and adapts to Yorkshire values. He is an example of a foreigner becoming a typically English character. The issue of Englishness is a topic that will recur in the work of Richard Bean. Titch is the character that received the most praise in the reviews. There is no role in Bean's writing that sticks out as much as Titch, who applies for the post of the pigman. Titch has been referred to as a "honesty bomb" by Bean, who renders him as a dangerous character (Sierz interview 358) because his bluntness might be considered as threatening for the other characters. He is a noteworthy character because of his simple-mindedness and his brutal honesty. When he applies for the job of pigman he is asked by William if he has relevant qualifications. Titch replies:

TITCH: Fuck off! I like pigs.

STEFAN: What exactly is it that you like about working with pigs?

TITCH: They're intelligent animals. They're clever but not that clever. Just enough to mek it interesting but not enough to get yer worried. (61)

Humorous lines such as these are delivered by Titch in both scenes that feature him. His character might be considered to be only a sketch rather than a fully developed character. But Titch is an honest and simple man who replies in such a straightforward manner that one is convinced that he tells the truth. The course of events that shows the

fatality of this character is the suicide, which is only referred to in a later scene. Titch tries to hang himself at the end of '1995 Suffragette', one is led to believe that he will commit suicide at some point. And he does so shortly after. His death is tragic because he is apparently unable to bear the diminishing state of affairs on the farm. Titch is more than a sketch because it seems as if one knows the most important trait of this character after only one short dialogue. One could say that his short appearance fulfils the function he has in the play, which is to represent the simple workingman who gets broken in the course of economic changes.

It is not only the characters such as William or Titch that are often mentioned in the theatre reviews but also Bean's processing of time. William's life-span as well as the time-span of the play are both very long. The next chapter will elaborate on the innovative aspect of time in *Harvest* in greater detail.

#### **4.3.4. Time-span and Structure**

In terms of time-span and structure, this play has as much innovation to offer as *Honeymoon Suite*. One might suggest that Bean wanted to extend his experiments with time in this play. Generally speaking, *Harvest* has seven scenes that are presented in chronological order. The passing of time, therefore, is sequential. Each of the scenes is titled and the headings refer to the year that the scene is set in and they also hint at an event that occurs in the scene. It has been mentioned that the play covers the time-span of ninety-four years from 1914 until 2008. A depiction of almost one hundred years might not appear unusual, but it is in *Harvest* because the linking element between the scenes is the protagonist William, who is already nineteen years old in the first scene of the play. It is only possible to present such a time-span by employing temporal ellipses in between the scenes, which Bean does. The ellipses are differently arranged in comparison to *Honeymoon Suite*. Rather than interlinking the various temporal periods by placing various versions of two persons in one setting, Bean uses one character as a linking device between his periods. The protagonist ages considerably but there is still only one actor used in the performance, thus enhancing the credibility that the protagonist is only one person despite his enormous aging in the play.<sup>24</sup> Although each scene portrays one specific event and offers a kind of closure to a certain issue, the scenes could not be left isolated. John Nathan states that "Bean's considerable

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<sup>24</sup> At the première in 2005 William was portrayed by Matthew Dunster. Naturally there might be more than one actor used in another production.

achievement is in giving each of his play's seven periods the sense of a distinct era." (*Jewish Chronicle* in TR 2005, 1127). This observation is worth considering. Since Bean only uses two constant elements, William and the farming of pigs, to hold the story together he achieves the impression of fragmentation in the play. In every scene, different characters are introduced, who are mostly not featured in the other scenes. Thereby, no sense of wholeness is created. The constant changes, which are obviously motivated by the passage of time, dominate and underline the presence of the two linking devices. The fragmentation works because the thematic link is strong enough and because the setting remains the same.

Temporal ellipsis is a technique which works perfectly in the play. In '1995 Suffragette', the sixth scene in *Harvest*, Titch comes into the kitchen and puts a noose around his neck. He wants to kill himself because of the dismal situation of pig farming. He is persuaded to abandon the thought of suicide. In the following and last scene of the play, 'A Song in your Heart', Laura tells the two burglars that Titch hanged himself and, thereby, comments on the happenings of the prior scene:

LAURA: Titch. That's where he hung hissen. He threatened a few times, which was always funny, and then one time he did it. Daft bugger. (81)

No explanations about the reason or the time of the suicide are given. *Harvest* is full of examples like this. There are references made which become relevant in subsequent scenes. Unlike *Honeymoon Suite*, in which temporal overlaps are used to answer questions concerning the characters, *Harvest* shows that references to various happenings can constitute a major part of the action.

One could refer to the scenes as a series of family portraits. The titling of the scenes and the fragmentary characters might evoke the notion that the scenes are like snap-shots of one specific period rather than fully developed stories. The same is true of the characters, who are like fragmentary versions of a character and appear to be incomplete. These observations suggest that the process of completion lies in the responsibility of the reader or the theatre audience. This also means that the audience is challenged by Bean's use of ellipses and fragmentation. These concepts must appeal best when the play is performed on a stage as only then is the effect of fragmentation fully perceivable.

#### 4.3.5. Setting

The setting of *Harvest* is the kitchen of Kilham Wold Farm. In the course of the play the setting stays the same and yet it does not remain entirely unchanged. It is a fact that each of the seven scenes takes place in the farmer's kitchen. But minimal changes to the room are included for each new scene. Kate Kellaway describes her impression of the setting after watching a performance of *Harvest* as such: "the details of the room change with the years like a spot-the-difference picture." (*Observer* in TR 2005, 1124). This description accounts for the alterations in the kitchen which are so small that they do not draw the audience's attention. One can interpret this monotonic setting in different ways. One is that it suggests that the farming, as well as the farmers, remain unchanged. The characters that live in the house and occupy the kitchen hold on to their lives as farmers. This becomes apparent in the finale when against all odds the unnaturally old William and the seemingly exhausted Laura reveal their plan to continue farming even though the idea seems hopeless. It does not become clear whether they only want to scare the surviving burglar with their account of farming or whether they want to proceed with their pig projects.

Another reason for the importance of this monotonic setting is that it creates a stable point in contrast to the constant time-laps. The setting provides stability in a play that subsists by its fragmentary character. It is necessary to have one stable constituent in *Harvest* because otherwise the plot might become too confusing. One could argue that the consistency in the chronology of time is a stable constituent in the play as well, but the temporal ellipses and the introduction of various minor characters add to the impression that there are not many recurring elements in the play. Having said this, it appears only natural that a single set is used *Harvest*.

Similarly to *Toast*, the setting has an importance that is attached to the identity of the farmers. In *Toast* the canteen was a place of identity for the workers of the bread plant. In *Harvest* it appears as if the kitchen is once again the central space in the lives of the main characters. It is suggested that many major incidents happened in the kitchen and that many important decisions have been made in this place. Two examples of this are the hanging of Titch in the kitchen but also the important conversation in which Stefan has to confess his illness to Laura and their son Alan. Both events are only described or suggested. They are not shown on stage. This correlates with my analysis of time and structure. If one considers the kitchen to be a holy space for the Harrison

family then it is exactly that place which is constantly penetrated by intruders. The people who arrive usually lay a claim of some sort on the family. Only the intrusion of Titch marks a positive occurrence for the family. The numerous intrusions into the Harrisons' sanctuary heighten the impression of the harshness of farming because the farmers are shown to be attacked in their place of gathering and relaxation.

One can argue that the plot is continuously credible because the occurrences that are described could easily happen in a farmer's kitchen. Bean includes one feature in the setting that is the object of change: the table. The table in the kitchen is often discussed and described as changing its place. Maybe it is through this object that Bean introduces change in the setting of *Harvest*. It needs to be mentioned that an 'upstairs' is also referred to on various occasions. However, this additional space has a similarly small significance, like the annexed bathroom in *Honeymoon Suite*, to name only one other example.

To conclude the discussion of the place of action, one has to mention that there seems to be an interaction between the setting and the aspect of time in the play. While the one is constant, the other is subject to alteration. He could have easily included an additional setting but he chose a single one. The same holds true for *Honeymoon Suite* in which the correlation between both aspects is even more interlinked than in *Harvest*. In *Toast* Bean used chronology and a stable setting for telling his story but the plays of the second phase suggest that a development of both aspects was necessary in order to tell his stories.

#### **4.3.6. Language and Style**

In the play, Bean's strongest tool for creating the world of the farmers is language. Language in Bean's plays has always had a great importance as it provides a specific kind of flavour in the plays. Most of the times his characters speak in dialect which also helps to identify them as members of a respective class. I have made this observation concerning *Toast* and *Honeymoon Suite*, and Bean's language use is no different in *Harvest*, except that in this play, it appears that the playwright adds even more significance to the speech of the characters. The actual work with the pigs is only described by the characters but is never shown on stage. It is through the constant references to their work and the language that the atmosphere of a Yorkshire farm is created. As they speak in a Northern dialect, their status as farmers is credible. What is

particularly noteworthy is that the characters swear frequently and are scolded for their bad language. This happens most often in the first few scenes. The men swear while the female characters either urge them to use better language or assimilate to the men's behaviour. The harshness of their language is a reflection on the harshness of their work. It conveys the impression that roughness and rigour are necessary to do the job. Farming pigs is a dirty and hard business and this is shown through the language of the characters. Voigts-Virchow states about *Harvest*:

Bean sets out to take the more conventional 'in-yer-face' staging of a crime ridden and morally corrupt country from its conventional urban settings to the countryside – particularly in the last scene. (10)

Voigts-Virchow refers to the phenomenon of 'in-yer-face' theatre, which is a form of drama that flourished predominantly in London in the 1990s. It promotes work that is provocative, brutal and innovative in form, language and theme. The heyday of 'in-yer-face' theatre has passed. Voigts-Virchow connects this tradition to *Harvest* by indicating that the staging reminds one of the in-yer-face tradition, which means that it must contain shocking and provocative elements. Indeed two shootings are featured in the play and also eccentric characters are introduced, to name just a few examples. I would like to make another link to the 'in-yer-face' tradition. There is bad language used by the characters in *Harvest* and there are various references to the swearing and the bad language made by various characters, especially the women. All this creates the impression that this might be Bean's closest attempt at writing an 'in-yer-face' play. While it is obvious that the staging and the language never get disturbing enough to be fully 'in-yer-face', one cannot ignore the parallels to this tradition. I agree with Voigts-Virchow when he says that particularly the last scene has an underlying extreme brutality. This brutality is unusual for Bean. The violence is exhibited through the breaking of the burglars into the kitchen and Danny's violation of the old Laura. It is interesting that most critics disliked the ending and criticised it in their reviews. Although it seems a bit odd in the play and unusual for Bean, it nevertheless adds to the complexity of the play. Without the serious tone of the ending, the play might not have had such a strong impact. This changing of the tone is a much discussed aspect in the reviews. The play is referred to as having a 'humorous tone' (*The Times* in TR 2005, 1123). The humour is mentioned in almost all the reviews and can be considered as a noteworthy element. But clearly Bean did not want to end his play with a happy ending

leaving his audience in a good mood. In my opinion the ending signifies Bean's desire for this play to be taken seriously. He made a comment in 2009 in which he said:

I get criticised for having too many jokes in my plays. It's something I've had to look at. I don't want to give people an excuse not to take me seriously. (Sierz 360)

This statement shows Bean's great concern with respectability which is hard to achieve when writing comedies. Bean's characteristic is his use of comedy and he makes no claim otherwise.<sup>25</sup> But the ending of *Harvest* is proof that Bean wants to address serious issues by using comedy. This is also what Jeff Shantz states in his entry in the *Columbia Encyclopaedia of Modern Drama*:

In his fight against prevailing orthodoxy that would smother dissent, Bean effectively deploys black COMEDY to say serious things about society [...] Indeed, this humor in times of distress reflects the "gallows humor" often expressed by working-class people struggling with the difficulties and anxieties that accompany job loss and economic uncertainty. (126)

Shantz underlines the link between Bean's comedy and his treatment of themes in his plays. 'Gallows humour' seems to be the term that describes the humour in *Harvest* appropriately. This kind of humour can also be found in the other plays that have been discussed so far. Concerning *Harvest*, one has to conclude that the tone of the play might be merry at times but never so much that one is able to ignore the sobriety behind the jokes.

#### 4.3.7. Summary of Themes

The major theme of *Harvest* can be connected to the difficulties and changes relating to a Yorkshire farm over the time-span between 1914 and 2008. The plot revolves around a pig farmer and the events happen in a farmer's kitchen. The farming of pigs only begins after the third scene. However, pigs are talked about in every scene. Issues concerning the farm constitutes the content of almost every conversation and also the minor characters are concerned with it. This goes so far that Laura's son Alan, who displays a lack of interest in farming, is reproached by his mother for his indifferent attitude towards her way of life:

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<sup>25</sup> This is what he said in the interview with me in 2011. He refers to comedy as being his one tool in the box.

ALAN: I think it's a good idea.

LAURA: Shurrup you. If you had any interest in this place then yer can have a say, but you ain't, you never had, so put a biscuit in it. (66)

This short piece of dialogue is a clear indicator for the troubled relationship between mother and son. It illustrates the generational conflict that prevails in every parent-child relationship, but more importantly, it underlines the discrepancy between the new generation's attitude towards farming and that of the old generation. The question of inheritance is addressed on numerous occasions in the play and it is made apparent that neither of Laura's children is going to take on the duties on the farm. The generational conflict has been included in various plays by Bean, the most prominent example being *Under the Whaleback*. *Harvest* is a play that is preoccupied with the past as it shows the decline of a way of life. The reviews show a special interest in the humour of the play but they do not often underline the play's serious content.

The claims I have made in my interpretation so far suggest that the play is not a "richly exotic celebration of God's country, or at least those acres of it occupied in Yorkshire [...]" (*Express* in TR 2005, 1126). A celebration of the world of farmers would not end in such a disputable manner and it would not display the hardship of the farmer's labour as being so unattractive as it is done in *Harvest*. Bean stated his intentions regarding this play:

I really wanted to show how all the social values of the countryside, which had been put under such strain during the play, had finally collapsed and that the image of rural England as a place of bliss was false. In theatre we tend to show the city as a place of horror, but the countryside is actually just as bad. That myth that rural England is a green and pleasant land - it's not. (Sierz interview 358)

This statement can be connected to the state-of-the-nation tradition, which is often concerned with "urban, dystopic visions" (Bradley 10), except that Bean does not use the city but rather the countryside as the setting for his play. He is challenging the orthodoxy which claims that the countryside is the joyful and relaxing counterpart to the disturbing city. The vision of rural England being a safe haven for people from the city and a place to escape the urban threats is generally accepted. In *Harvest* Bean addresses this cliché and keeps his promise of 'challenging the orthodoxy'. It is a noteworthy achievement that a play with the main theme of pig farming should get as many positive reviews as *Harvest* did. This is particularly true regarding the fact that the audience of

the Royal Court Theatre is more used to "inner-city dysfunctional dramas" (*Independent* in TR 2005, 1125) than to plays about the decline of pig farming in England. That farming is no laughing matter can be beheld in instances such as Titch's suicide and the desperation of Laura over the constant regulations that the farmers are confronted with as the plot continues. The play becomes political mostly in the last scenes. I have argued that there are various instances of intrusion into the kitchen of Kilham Wold Farm. These intrusions also come in the form of directives that force the farmers to change their accustomed manner of farming. The Harrisons' situation deteriorates towards the finale. It has been made apparent that the situation for the farmers has become unbearable because of regulations from the European Community. This criticism is not only hinted at but described in a straightforward way:

LAURA: Yer could open yer post from Brussels, could yer?

WILLIAM: Aye, that's a good un. Open it, read it, read it again, read it a third time, and still not understand it.

LAURA: Tek it to your solicitor, pay him to read, and explain it yer.

WILLIAM: And still you don't understand it.

LAURA: And he don't understand it either! (86)

These are words from simple people driven to desperation by changes over which they do not possess any power. Because of the political and economic rapprochement in Europe, the Harrisons' way of farming has become obsolete.

Conflicts with the authorities are not the only dispute that is described in the play. The Harrisons came into the possession of the farm almost by accident. The old Harrison won a bet against Lord Agar in the course of a drunken night. The Agars tried to regain their former possession by unfair means, thus creating another set of conflicts for the Harrisons. The wager was a moment in the past that extends its influence into the present in the play. Personal vengeance and political regulations drive the farmers to desperation. But more shocking is the ending with the two burglars, who show another kind of brutality. Sierz states that "in the final scene, the class antagonism of Danny and Blue is shown in an uglier light: these have-nots misbehave in a vicious way, a sure sign of social decay." (*Rewriting the Nation* 139). While all the other opponents are displayed in a comic way, there is no comic relief in the portrayal of the two thieves. This is another indicator that Bean deliberately chose to reduce the humour in the last scene. 'A Song in your Heart' appears to be a clash of contrasts: values of city and country, youth and elders, honest labourers and thieves, life and death. Bean

deliberately shows his main characters in their desperate state but they still adhere to their principles and they do not lose their pride. One can argue about the ending. But I still suggest that despite the predominant comic tone, the issues discussed in *Harvest* give a serious impression rather than a funny one.

One last aspect that needs to be commented on regarding this play is the featuring of Englishness. This theme will become important with regard to Bean's following work. Englishness in *Harvest* is connected to the representation of Yorkshire folks. The identities of the farmers are reflected in their speech but also in their way of life and their values. Toby Young describes the play as a "celebration of Englishness" (*Spectator* in TR 2005, 1126), and I agree that it is a celebration regarding the imperturbability of the farmers beliefs which makes them typical Yorkshire people. In conclusion, I would like to quote Sierz once again:

one of the play's messages is that Britain's countryside is neglected and oppressed by foreign powers, whether in Whitehall or in Brussels. And this failure to protect the countryside compromises national identity. If the traditional English breakfast is bacon and eggs, Bean shows how pig farmers have been betrayed by market forces and government indifference. (*Rewriting the Nation* 139)

All of Bean's plays are concerned with national identity in some way. I agree with Sierz about the play's depiction of a threat to the national identity. Bean portrays this threat in various forms it is a great achievement to do so in a comedy. *Harvest* is a successful blend of comic style and serious content. The criticism of the last scene may be due to a wish of the audience to see a comedy rather than another state-of-the-nation piece. But without the addressing of the current orthodoxy this would not be a Bean play.

In the following conclusion regarding Bean's second writing phase I will comment on *Harvest's* place in Bean's writing and summarise the most important steps of development of this experimental phase. This will happen in a manner that includes some aspects of Bean's other plays of this phase.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

It cannot be denied that a development occurred in the second phase of Bean's writing. The interpretations of the two representative plays have shown that Bean developed in many directions and that he experimented with the format of his plays.

Regarding the content, Bean continues to be occupied with themes revolving around England and Englishness. Many reviewers mentioned that Bean seems to write exclusively about the people he knows and it appears as if therein lie his great success and the key to the audience's appreciation. But the plays also become more political. There is no play in the second phase that is not concerned in some way with a political issue. Bean does not place a political issue in the foreground. It seems as if his plays are rich enough regarding characters and form for the issues that are addressed to constitute only a part and not the substantial component in the plays. The seriousness he aspires to create in his plays is balanced by the humour which he is highly appreciated for. But in this humour, it appears, lies his forte and also a point for criticism on the audience's part. Bean still employs one-liners in every play and the laughter of the audience appears to be his main target. I have shown how he reacted to the criticism that he was confronted with. His great desire for respectability becomes more important which is why I chose to discuss the two plays.

*Harvest* and *Honeymoon Suite* are not among the plays for which the reproach of 'too many jokes' applies. Both plays are too serious in content in order to be considered as pure comedies. I have commented on the importance of form in the plays that have been analysed. The two plays selected show that the importance of character, theme, and form is fairly balanced. While in *Toast* and the early plays form had no significance, Bean dedicated some of his middle plays to restructuring a conventional form. The audience's applause shows that he succeeded. But it seems equally important that he never forsakes some issues that appear most important to him. These issues are concerned with Englishness. Bean either chooses past events and gives a fictional account of them (*Up on Roof*, *Under the Whaleback*) or he sets his play in a certain period and describes characters who have to fight for survival in these economically difficult times (*Honeymoon Suite*, *Harvest*, *Toast*). I have mentioned before that none of the plays are overly political. *In the Club* is a political farce but the humour, physical and verbal, takes the gravity away.

I do not argue that the plays of the second phase are entirely different or that they all mark a development. But especially the plays that I picked for analyses embody Bean's need of enthralling the audience and of provocation. The reason why I did not choose a play which is concerned with a broader concern is because I feel that the plays I discussed contained all the elements that are particularly noteworthy. The following

phase of Bean's writing will show how this second period paved the way for Bean to become a more political writer.

In this second phase Bean's achievement is his development from the writer about the familiar to a playwright that experiments with different formats and themes. It is best to describe this phase as a mixture between his concern with the personal as well as the political. This second phase clearly sets the way for the subsequent work that Bean will write. It marks a clear development from the conventional first phase. Having discussed Bean's initial work as well as his development, I will proceed by elaborating on his most recent work in the next chapters.

## 5. Bean's Most Recent Phase (2009-2011)

“Currently, he is formally and socially versatile in his comic epics, with clever verbal structural designs, with aspirations towards larger themes and audiences”<sup>26</sup>

### 5.1. Challenging the Orthodoxy

In my thesis I have outlined various instances which prove Bean to be a provocative and challenging playwright. This is reflected not only in his topic choice but also in the manner in which he portrays these issues. The controversy surrounding his work has increased massively in recent years, which is why I chose to label the years 2009-2011 as an autonomous phase.

It has been established in my 'Introduction' that Bean declared the challenging of the orthodoxy to be among his prime aims as a playwright.<sup>27</sup> I have hinted at the fact that Bean underwent a development during the first two phases of his productive period. His current phase contains his most controversial work and Bean's attempts to stir his audience are successful, as I will show. By saying this I do not imply that his previous plays were never debated or regarded as challenging. On the contrary, my analysis has shown that in the critics' reviews discussions about his plays were frequently taking place. Moreover, the number of interviews with the playwright has increased and Bean's presence as an acclaimed playwright in the theatrical landscape of London has manifested itself over the years. Philip Fisher, an acclaimed reviewer, stated in his introduction of a recorded talk with Bean in 2011, "I think I look forward to new plays by Richard Bean with more enthusiasm than those of anyone else."<sup>28</sup> Naturally, this comment only reflects the opinion of one reviewer but Fisher is bound to be familiar with the creative output of London's playwrights and this powerful statement places Bean in a particularly favourable light.

Bean wrote his most controversial play to this date, *England People Very Nice*, in 2009. It was the play that followed *The English Game*, which partly dealt with multiculturalism and the state of the nation. *England People Very Nice* will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. After the furore surrounding this play in London, Bean wrote *Pub Quiz is Life* which was staged in the Hull Truck Theatre in 2009. *Pub*

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<sup>26</sup> see Voigts-Virchow, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> His other claim is that it's a playwright's vocation to enthral the audience as he stated in the personal interview.

<sup>28</sup> see <http://www.theatrevoice.com/3617/playwright-richard-bean-career-overview/>

*Quiz is Life* is not a play that has been talked about a lot. Surprisingly, it is not featured on the list in the folder of Bean's agent. On the book's back cover it states: "A murderous black comedy, set in Hull's black economy." Hull's economy clearly seemed to be among the issues that Bean wanted to address. I would suggest that this play is mostly motivated by personal reasons on the part of the author. Similarities to other plays can be seen: it is situated in Hull, men are featured in the dominant roles and humour is at the core of the play. The play is not very venturesome, which is usually Bean's forte. Having said this, one should not conclude that this play does not feature any kind of innovation for Bean. By setting the play in the present and by featuring the current situation of Hull, Bean leaves his preoccupation with the past aside. On one occasion the protagonist Lee talks to another character about Hull. He refers to the city's past in connection to the decline of the fishing industry. I have elaborated on this topic in the course of this thesis and it seems as if Bean provides an additional statement on it in *Pub Quiz is Life*:

MELISSA: Fishing is a very dangerous way to make a living.

LEE: It's better to die with dignity fishing, knowing who you are, than to die on welfare, on drugs, on a dry ski slope. (27)

Lee's statement is concerned with identity, a theme constantly recurring in Bean's work. The play is in this respect similar to *Under the Whaleback* and *Toast*. It is interesting how Bean reuses this topic and connects it with the present, thus adding concerns about the state of the nation. This time, however, he is not dealing with the situation in metropolitan London but in the city of Hull. Kevin Berry remarks: "Bean's play is not so much a state-of-the-nation piece, as a state of Lee's neighbourhood piece."<sup>29</sup> I do not agree with this claim, however humorously it might have been meant. The play sets out to discuss the fate of one particular man, Lee, who is undoubtedly behaving in a morally questionable way and who is pushed towards corruption by the National Health Service. The play offers new perspectives on Hull and has a contemporary context as Lee is a soldier returning from fighting in Afghanistan. The passage of time happens in chronological order and the structuring into five acts is very conventional.

*Pub Quiz is Life* seems like a retreat for Bean after the furore of *England People Very Nice*. The play might be interpreted as a return to familiar subjects for Bean, but

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<sup>29</sup> see <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/25544/pub-quiz-is-life>

one has to highlight its concern with the state of the nation. The issues of the play might not be as broad and ambitious as expected but it nevertheless provides interesting perspectives on England as sentimental views concerning the North are omitted. Regarding all of Bean's Hull plays I am not surprised that he decided to return to this subject once again. It will be, however, the only play of the third phase that offers so many similarities to his prior work.

The next play that I will briefly discuss is *The Big Fella* from 2010. Although Bean once stated that he had already written his 9/11 play, *The Big Fella* seems to be another attempt to comment on this world-changing event. Bean refers to this incident in a way that is characteristic for him. He sets the play in New York and bases the play around IRA supporters in a safe house in Bronx. In this world of terrorism the characters are partly sympathetic and partly psychotic. Bean provides a manifold parade of characters on which much of the focus of the play lies. *The Big Fella* is not only dependent on the characters but also on the dominant issue of the play: IRA terrorism. The play is rooted in events that have occurred in the course of history. An introduction is provided in the form of a four-page timeline of the 'Troubles'. The plot is embedded in the context of actual events. This is something new for Bean who, while he usually chooses to discuss real incidents, has seldom linked his plays to real life events as explicitly as in *The Big Fella*. I have previously described how sensitively the public and also theatre directors reacted to serious and controversial issues. After a play like *England People Very Nice*, *The Big Fella* did not cause nearly as much controversy. But it did stir the critics and the audience, which is reflected in the reviews that were written. The reviews show mixed attitudes towards the play and display a similarity to *England People Very Nice* in the mixed reactions. One of the most prominent statements, which in my opinion reflects on the agenda of the play, is made by Sam Marlowe: "one moment you're exploding with mirth at its sly, abrasive wit, the next it's choking the laughter out of your throat." (*Time Out London* in TR 2010, 1097). This is exactly the kind of humour that is also employed in *England People Very Nice*. Two important observations need to be highlighted at this point. Firstly, Bean gets criticised for comparing "Irish terrorism and Muslim fanaticism" in the play (Sierz in TR 2010, 1097). Sierz furthermore states that "it feels as if Bean is determined to offend liberal sensibilities by equating Irish republicanism with al Qaida." (Sierz in TR 2010, 1097). Indeed, the challenging of liberal attitudes appears to be an aim of Bean's recent

writing.<sup>30</sup> The second observation that I want to stress concerns the ending of *The Big Fella*. The IRA supporter Michael is a fire-fighter and the last impression of the play is him in his uniform. Since the play ends in 2001, it is suggested that he will be involved in the events of the attack of the World Trade Center, thus linking one terrorist group to another. The damage caused by terrorism does not halt before other terrorist groups, who can fall victim to the doings of another terrorist organisation. The irony behind the solution of the play has not been received well by all the critics.

*The Big Fella* represents a leap for Bean. He chose to write about themes that were not rooted in Englishness or featured some other connection to England. Bean makes no secret of the fact that his writing is often dedicated to Englishness and he has stressed this in many interviews. It is a venture for him to omit his usual theme in order to write about something entirely different. The IRA supporters that are featured in *The Big Fella* are shown to be involved in some of the most brutal and bloody attacks initiated by the radical group and yet they are presented in a sympathetic way. The time-span in the play is three decades, which are presented in chronological order. Bean includes two female characters that are only featured briefly in the play. The focus, therefore, lies on the male characters and the dynamics and interactions between them. The setting does not change in the course of the action. The room itself, however, changes over the years, a device that Bean has often used in his plays before. The humour has been described in the comment above. It is the kind of humour that is mostly referred to as 'black humour' which prevails in most of his plays. What is important to underline is that the play does not aspire to be a comedy, which is obvious from the background of the story and its finale. The aforementioned reaction to the humour of the play is what Bean seemingly wants to achieve in his more controversial and challenging plays and it shows that he fulfils his promise to challenge the orthodoxy. His take on the IRA supporters is very unusual and most of the ambiguity concerning the play derives from the sympathetic portrayal of the characters. That Bean's treatment of the topic would not be didactical is unsurprising. With his relying on the characters and the discussion of the main issue through them, *The Big Fella* can be considered

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<sup>30</sup> In an interview John Nathan states that "[h]e also perhaps the only prominent British playwright who is prepared to challenge left-wing orthodoxy." In the same interview Bean describes himself as a "liberal hawk". One result of his statements is that his political attitude reflected in his plays are questioned. This needs to be considered especially regarding *England People Very Nice*. see: <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/interview-richard-bean>

not only a typical Bean play but also a success for the playwright because he succeeds in stirring his audience.

In this last phase it becomes apparent that Bean clearly wants to emerge from being an England-focused writer to become a challenging presence in London's theatrical scene. While the England-based *Pub Quiz is Life* is different in comparison to the other plays of this phase, *The Big Fella* upholds the promise of challenging the orthodoxy. The two plays that I will discuss from now on are good examples of the new direction Richard Bean takes as a playwright.

## 5.2. *England People Very Nice* (2009)

*England People Very Nice* is Bean's most ambitious, most successful and at the same time his most controversial play to date.<sup>31</sup>

### 5.2.1. Introduction and General Information

It is no exaggeration to say that *England People Very Nice* is Richard Bean's most important play to this date. The significance of the play lies in the fact that Bean chose one of the most sensitive topics relating to England: its history of immigration. A tagline used on the back cover of the playtext states the central issue of the play: "A riotous journey through four waves of immigration from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to today." As a linking device between the various acts a pair of young lovers is inserted into the plot. The couple is featured in every act though coming from different ethnical backgrounds. Bean chose to make use of a framing device by writing his main plot as a theatre performance of the asylum seekers of Pocklington Immigration Centre. The action of the four acts is, therefore, a rehearsal of a theatre play written by a group of immigrants of different ethnical backgrounds who want to make England their home.

*England People Very Nice* was first performed at the Olivier Theatre; National Theatre on 4 February 2009. The attention that the play got prior to its first staging was remarkable. In a stage debate featuring the playwright, a small number of activists interrupted Richard Bean's talk, jumped onto the stage and called him a racist. It was the first onstage protest in the history of the National Theatre.<sup>32</sup> Further protest actions

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<sup>31</sup> see Voigts-Virchow, p.11.

<sup>32</sup> see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7918669.stm>

took place in front of the National Theatre, aiming to brand the play as a racist play.<sup>33</sup> What is particularly noteworthy regarding the incidents is that there has not been such a furore surrounding a play in London for many years. Bean's play, therefore, stirred emotions and this is exactly what he tries to achieve, particularly in the last set of plays that he has written. It is an unusual take on the sensitive topics of immigration and multiculturalism and Bean earned praise as well as harsh criticism from the reviewers.

*England People Very Nice* is the play that is mostly referred to when talking about Richard Bean. Like the playwright, who was both praised and criticised for writing a play about such a prominent topic in the provocative way he did, the National Theatre got an equal amount of approval and disapproval for staging such a controversial play. The play is in many respects a cooperative work of Nicholas Hytner, the artistic director of the National Theatre who acted as director of the play and the playwright himself. It becomes apparent while reading articles surrounding the première of the play that both of them tried to defend and explain their intentions with *England People Very Nice*.<sup>34</sup> The reception of the play and the discussions that were initiated in the course of its run at the National Theatre compile a lot of material. Although I cannot dwell on details about all the occurrences regarding the furore surrounding the play in this thesis, I find it essential to highlight the significance of the uproar that can be connected to Bean's play. John Bull provides a first-hand description of the occurrences in the National Theatre in his article on *England People Very Nice*.<sup>35</sup> He appropriately comments on the significance of the events in stating that it is unusual for a play in London to affect the audience in such a spirited manner. The content of the play appeared to be relevant enough for people to debate it not only in the theatre itself but also in the media. The articles written on *England People Very Nice* outnumber those about Bean's other plays by far. Judging the play from this observation only, it becomes apparent that Bean has hit a nerve with his play about immigration and multiculturalism. It goes without saying that the reception of the play was highly diverse. A discussion about the political opinion of the author and his 'true' intention behind the play will be omitted. I highlight this because in some articles, the political attitude of the author appears to be the most important aspect about the play. The main aim of my analysis is

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<sup>33</sup> read John Bull's article "*England People Very Nice: Intercultural Confusions at the National Theatre*" for a first-hand account.

<sup>34</sup> see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7918669.stm> and <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/interview-richard-bean>

<sup>35</sup> John Bull "*England People Very Nice: Intercultural Confusions at the National Theatre*"

to provide an interpretation of the play as I have done with its predecessors and to describe the development it signifies regarding his prior work. What is most important for me to elaborate on is the place *England People Very Nice* takes in the range of Bean's work.

### 5.2.2. Genre

The description of genre in this play is difficult. *England People Very Nice* is a comedy due to its numerous jokes that are a linking element not only between the various acts but also between the different time-spans. The four acts are embedded into a time frame which provides a contemporary context, the immigration centre that has been mentioned before, and it is the humour that constitutes a constant in the play.

A means of labelling a play is usually its ending but it is difficult to use the two endings in order to establish the genre of *England People Very Nice*. An interpretation of the final scene of the play-within-the-play is complex. Similarly, the outcome of the events in the time frame is also uncertain as they can be interpreted as either good or bad. Of the four acts in the play there are two which are directly linked to the preceding act. These acts end in a very dramatic and brutal way. The third act concludes with the realisation that the two lovers, Ruth and Aaron, are separated and the 'girl lover' is left behind alone. Act 4 depicts the final stage of the couple and, thereby, provides a kind of happy ending for the fictional plot. But even this happy ending can be interpreted in various ways as the lovers, Deborah and Mushi, are forced to flee from Deborah's violent husband and move to another district of London, namely Redbridge. The ending of the action of the time frame shows the asylum seekers who are provided with the envelopes that carry the information whether they are allowed to stay or forced to leave. The contents are never shown, thus the fate of the people is uncertain. In the personal interview, I talked with Bean about *England People Very Nice* and he provided a definition of the genre of his play. He stated that he employs comedy in order to tell a tragedy. His play is therefore a tragedy told with jokes. Considering the content and the style of his play, I agree with Bean in his genre description. I have mentioned frequently that the labelling of the plays is never straightforward. In that sense, the author's statement is very useful as it explains Bean's intentions. The tragic elements outnumber the humorous ones and the jokes are a tool of telling the story but they should stir thoughts rather than be regarded as pure entertainment.

A term that is often used in connection with this play is epic. If the expression is referring to the format of time, *England People Very Nice* is an epic indeed, as it covers an enormous time-span that is interlinked by various devices. There is an apparent similarity to *Harvest* in the description of the genre. Although the structure of *Harvest* is seemingly different, there are some striking similarities. Voigts-Virchow refers to the mode of the play as “comic epic” and he links this description to *Under the Whaleback* and *Harvest*. Bean opts for a large scale in order to present the issues of *England People Very Nice* which supports the notion that Bean developed as a playwright. In the complexity of genre, *England People Very Nice* is undisputedly more complex than the previously mentioned plays.

Regarding the genre there is also the tradition of the state-of-the-nation plays, to which the play is frequently connected. I have mentioned this tradition on various occasions in this thesis. Richard Bean referred to *England People Very Nice* as one of his state-of-the-nation plays. The state of the nation is illustrated particularly in the second part. Bean explained in the personal interview that state-of-the-nation plays are concerned with contemporary subject matters. That Act 4 clearly comments on the state of the nation is reflected in its last part, which appears to be happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The happenings in the time frame can be regarded as a version of the current situation of immigrants in England. Considering everything that has been stated and using Bean's words, *England People Very Nice* should be labelled a state-of-the-nation tragedy told with jokes.

### **5.2.3. Characters**

Regarding the analysis of the characters there are some observations that need to be stated in advance. First of all, there are two sets of characters. The first set is the one of the time frame, who represent the ‘contemporary’ immigrants who could be found in an immigration centre. The second set of characters is constituted by the roles of the theatre play for which the immigrants are rehearsing. The mixture of characters that the original group of people in the time frame portray is manifold and they are of various nationalities. The analysis of the characters must be separated because the different sets of characters require individual consideration.

The immigrants of the time frame are featured in the prologue, the epilogue and before the fourth act. Considering the length of the play their parts are the shortest.

However, since they are supposedly the most contemporary characters, their significance must not be underestimated. I have argued in the various other play interpretations that Bean almost always includes a connection to the present, with the exception of *Toast*. I have outlined the significance that these connections to the present constitute. In *Harvest* it was the final part which dominated the overall tone of the play. In *Honeymoon Suite* it was the ultimate couple that was slightly more accentuated and, thereby, received somewhat more attention than the other pairs. In *England People Very Nice* the plot involving the asylum seekers provides a reason for the play-within-the-play to be staged. The characters of the frame are a mixture of British characters (English, Ulster) and immigrants from Africa, Asia and East Europe (Kosovan, Nigerian, etc.). Due to the shortness of scenes in which the asylum seekers are featured their characters are presented in a very sketchy way. There is no development observable in these characters as they are featured only briefly. I exclude a closer description of the characters from the time frame because the ones from the play-within-the-play are more relevant. Their function appears to be to provide the contemporary context and to comment and to explain the events of the play-within-the-play.

The characters from the rehearsed play are so numerous that it is only possible to describe a small number of them in this chapter. Among the characters that stand out the most are the recurring roles of the girl lover and the boy lover. They are featured in every act of the play-within-the-play and are always named differently. An important feature of them is that they are always of different nationalities. The boy lover appears as Norfolk Danny, Carlo, Aaron and Mushi and the girl lover is Camille, Mary, Ruth and Deborah. The description of them as lovers makes them appear like stock characters. In fact they can be considered as four versions of the famous Shakespearian lovers Romeo and Juliet, reborn in different nationalities and confronted with numerous obstacles. With the exception of the most recent of the four pairs of lovers, Deborah and Mushi, the love plots end disastrously. The parallel to Shakespeare's lovers is mentioned in the frame by the Palestinian Taher (The play is like four Romeo and Juliets" (69)) but this comparison does not necessarily stand up to closer inspection. While the famous Shakespearian couple marry and ultimately commit suicide in order to escape the insurmountable obstacles represented by their rivalling families, the final couple Mushi and Deborah are depicted as fleeing from the impending threat in order to settle in another part of London. The story of the lovers is also predicted in Act 1 when Camille says to the threatened Danny "I'll find you. If it takes a four hundred years, I'll

find you." (28). The subsequent versions of this couple as an "interracial love affair across centuries" (*Daily Express* in TR 2009, 141) can be regarded as reincarnations of Camille and Danny. However, there is a complication with the romantic plot. Due to the numerous versions of characters, the importance of the love plot is reduced because there is not enough time in which the lovers can develop. This issue has been commented on by Quentin Letts, who states that the play "is not a show for theatregoers seeking deep emotional attachment to an individual's journey." (*Daily Mail* in TR 2009, 141). In the play it is hard to discern any of the individuals as main carriers of the plot. One could describe the characters as fragments because mostly they are featured so briefly that the audience cannot deeply engage with them or feel empathy for them. In *Honeymoon Suite* Bean also split a couple into various versions but the plot was dedicated to the development and the fates of the characters. The result of the fragmented presentation in *England People Very Nice* has various effects which will be commented on in various chapters. The play does not rely on any individual characters. This is a novelty for Bean because usually it is his portrayal of individuals that is characteristic for him. The objective of this play is very different because its focus does not lie on the characters.

Similarly to other Bean plays, *England People Very Nice* is an ensemble piece. The ensemble is constituted by French, Irish, English, Jewish and Bangladeshi characters. The presentation of the multiple nationalities supports a sense of fragmentation in the play. The sketchiness, due to the small amount of time that is dedicated to the individual characters, is an important feature of the characters and prevents the identification of the audience with them. The theme of multiculturalism is embodied in the characters. Multiculturalism stands for the multiplicity of nationalities in one single place and the fragmented depiction of the various ethnical groups can be interpreted as an echo of the separate yet parallel existence of the immigrants and the locals.

Bean usually introduces some kind of stability in his plays<sup>36</sup> and even though the characters are portrayed like fragments, there are some recurring characters that function as a link between the time-spans. These regulars are the inhabitants of the pub, namely Ida, Rennie and Laurie. Ida is particularly accentuated because she is the character that is most often featured. She is "an archetypal Cockney barmaid" (*Daily*

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<sup>36</sup> By this I mean recurring characters or a steady setting.

*Telegraph* in TR 2009, 141) and the character that comments on the various newcomers in the same dismissive manner: "Fucking Frogs" (17), "Fucking Micks" (33), "Fucking Yids" (53) and "Fucking Yanks" (74). But she is also presented in a sympathetic way because some details of her background are explained, for example the tragic love story with her husband. In comparison to the other characters, it is Ida who gets the most mention in the reviews. The pub patrons function as representatives of English people. Whether they fulfil the role of authentic English spokesmen remains undecided but since they are joking about their kinsmen as well as the immigrants I assume their function to the one of commentators and embodiments of their own difficult and multicultural background.

One noticeable aspect concerning the production of *England People Very Nice* at the National Theatre is appropriately described by Voigts-Virchow:

The fact that a professional multi-ethnic cast plays a multi-ethnic amateur cast playing a set of multi-ethnic characters results in a palimpsestic 'colourdiverse' array of multiple subjectivities. This gesture towards instable, performative subject positions contributes to the play's essential point, namely that ethnic and cultural identities are subject to permanent change and prone to being used for politically unsavoury reasons. (12)

The point that Voigts-Virchow makes about the use of a colour-blind cast is significant. Like the characters of the immigration centre, who have to portray people from cultures they know only little about, there are a number of actors of the play at the National Theatre who essentially embody the main issue of the play. The kind of casting is cross-ethnic. To illustrate this one can refer to the actor of the 'boy lover', Sacha Dhawan, who is born in England. His skin colour is darker which is unsurprising because he has Indian origins. In the play portrays an English, an Italian, a Jew and a Bangladeshi. There are more examples in the cast of *England People Very Nice* such as this. The display of ethnical diversity can be observed merely from looking at the cast of the play *England People Very Nice*.

Since the characters of the play-within-the-play are so numerous and the storylines so manifold, the play can be confusing not only for the actual theatre audience but also for readers of the play. Bean's aspirations are high and it appears that he attempts too much at once. The recurrent characters and the reappearance of the lovers do not provide much stability. This does not mean that the play is too confusing

to follow, but it is very challenging and great amount of characters needs consideration because so many small roles are featured.

#### 5.2.4. Time-span and Structure

In terms of structure this play offers many points of interest. The most noteworthy aspect to discuss appears to be the time frame. The integration of the frame means that multiple discussions are necessary in order for the various plots to be understood. The frame story is a device that Bean has made use of here for the first time in his work. Rather than choosing a simple structure, which the playwright often applied in his plays, as I have shown, Bean engages with a new form altogether. By setting the plot of the frame into an unidentified but contemporary time, the relevance of the events of the immigration centre is enhanced. The action of the other acts is set almost exclusively in the past and additionally it is explained that the plots of the acts are developed by the people of the immigration centre. This becomes significant regarding the reproaches against the playwright which condemned him as racist. Voigts-Virchow commented on the structural device as in the following way:

The play has a framing device [...] therefore its crude humour can easily be laid at the feet of popular perceptions of immigration rather than being equated with the playwright's humour. (12)

In a footnote to the same article, a quote from a personal interview with Bean is presented, in which the playwright underlines the significance of the framing device as “it allows for extreme stereotypes because these guys know nothing about the Irish, the Jewish, or indeed, the English.” (20) This statement presents an attitude that could easily present an acceptable justification of his presentation of immigrants. But a counter opinion suggests that the time frame was merely a device in order to avoid the real argument. I would suggest that the play could not have been staged without the framing device because then it would have caused serious offence with its black humour. With the help of the frame the words and jokes cannot be put into the author's mouth easily. Bean might have found a way of limiting real offense with this device because he must have anticipated the reaction to *England People Very Nice*, especially since his aim was to seek ways of challenging the orthodoxy. The orthodoxy of the liberals, one of whom he considers himself to be, and who are also his targets, would be to embrace multiculturalism. In the play there are scenes that question the results of

multiculturalism. I will comment on this issue in the last chapter concerning the themes of the play. The time frame appears to be a means of avoiding argumentation and without it the play could not be as easily justified.<sup>37</sup> It seems to be the general opinion that in order for such a bold project to be staged, those responsible need to be able to defend it, especially if the staging venue is the subsidised National Theatre.

Returning to the issue of structure it can be said that the play is divided in one additional way. There is not only the separation in time frame and play-within-a-play but also into the various acts. Each of the four acts is like a portrait, each depiction illustrating the story of one wave of immigrants. Bean used this episodic structure in *Harvest*, which he titled with headings that indicated the main theme of the various parts. In *England People Very Nice* the separation into different acts indicates a clear structuring of time. Because of these methods, the otherwise fragmented and mixed format of the play appears more stable. The multiple structures, however, could also be seen as a metaphor for the lack of clarity and the disunity of the English nationality, seemingly brought about by the recurring waves of new immigrants. That is not to say, however, that there ever was a unity in the British or English identity or that a culture needs to have a homogenous structure.

It is one of the play's achievements that there is a depiction of the assimilation process of one group of immigrants who are in a later act shown to be prejudiced against the new wave of immigrants. This happens in a threefold structure in the first half. Within the acts there is also the recurrent plot of the lovers. Michael Billington argues that "the format becomes repetitive" after the audience realises the concept of the various acts (in TR 2009, 140). Bean provides a twist in the format by using a time frame surrounding the rest of the plot and also by prolonging the fourth act in comparison to the other three acts. By inserting a prologue and an epilogue before and after the last act the importance of this part is enhanced. It is especially Act 4 that is worth considering, for various reasons. It is longer and it links the past events to the present, thus enhancing the notion of contemporary relevance in the play. This is clearly achieved by the framing device which is set in an unknown time, but it is the omission of a specific year that leads to the idea that the happenings in the immigration centre could occur in any present year. While the first three acts constitute the first half of the play, Act 4 is long enough to make up the second half. The time-span of the first half

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<sup>37</sup> That is not to say that a play needs justification. But since the topic is so sensitive it would be possible to stage it without explaining the intentions of those responsible.

stretches from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until 1888, while the second half covers the years from 1941 until the present. The events of the second half are closest to the present and its structure is different from the other acts. It can be considered to be more complex because Act 4 is in itself is more disrupted because it covers more time and has many episodes. John Bull remarks that he considers the imbalance of the acts as problematic (133).

Another aspect that needs to be commented on is the songs that are featured in the play. It is the first play of Bean that features music. The songs are parodies of folk songs, as is also mentioned by Charles Spencer (TR 2009, 141), and are another instance of the diversity of the play's structure. The songs function as comments on the various cultures because they are folksongs that represent these different cultures. The music on an additional level adds to the disrupted structure of the play.

The discussion of the structure has shown how singular this play is regarding Bean's prior work. Like *Harvest* and *Honeymoon Suite*, in which the structure added to the complexity of the plays, this is also the case with *England People Very Nice*.

### 5.2.5. Setting

A twofold distinction is necessary in order to describe the setting of the play. First of all, there is the Pocklington Immigration Centre, which is the setting of the frame plot. No exact description of the immigration centre is provided, which might be an indication that its actual appearance is of no importance. While the immigration centre is the constant setting of the frame, there are numerous settings in the acts of the play-within-the-play. However, even in the rehearsed play the pub recurs in each of the four acts. This places importance on this specific location. The pub signifies a place of gathering and encounters. It also holds a special importance for the English as it is a signpost for English culture. The pub in the play is a place for the three recurring English characters in which they comment on the circumstances surrounding them, particularly regarding the changes that accompany the arrivals of the immigrants. Bean highlights the distinction between the setting of the immigration centre and the other places of action in the staging instructions prior to the text as such:

The play requires a large stage with the facility to fly in flats, or use still, or video projections, to establish locations as required. This process should be playful and non-naturalistic. The only constant location is the pub, which can be naturalistic. (7)

Bean referred to himself as a naturalistic writer. The fact that the pub in the play is allowed to be staged in a naturalistic way in contrast to the other settings is worth considering. One way of interpreting it is that the pub is supposed to be a depiction of reality rather than the fictional other places which are presented as non-naturalistic.

I have argued before that Bean includes devices of stability in his plays and I suggested that the pub is an example of this in *England People Very Nice*. Most of the recurring characters, namely the English ones, are usually found in this exact location, which contributes to the fact that the pub signifies a centre in the otherwise quickly-changing world. This contributes to the impression that the pub is a place of clear identity while the other ethnic groups have to fight for a stable place. In this fact lies another imbalance, or, according to Bull 'difficulty' in the play. One has to realise that in the play a balance is not aspired to, on the contrary imbalance or instability are aspired to. Every place of events is situated in Bethnal Green, a district of London which holds a special significance in itself. There are numerous references to existing areas in London, like Brick Lane or Spitalfields. Bethnal Green is the place where Bean rented an office in order to write plays. He stressed on numerous occasions that some of the occurrences from the play happened to him in Bethnal Green. In this sense, the setting bears personal significance for the author. Bethnal Green is the place of arrival for the immigrants. In the play, various characters repeatedly comment on this exact place. One example from Act 1 is the following:

DANNY: There is no hell! Nor heaven! This is the only paradise any of you will ever know.

IDA: What? Bethnal Green?

DANNY: Yes! (30)

There are two other occasions which feature such a dialogue in a slightly changed wording (63, 85). On both occasions there is a different temporal and, therefore, also ethnically diverse context. Bean uses an existing place known for its multicultural diversity for the setting of his play-within-the-play. Thus, the story of *England People Very Nice* receives a background that is known among British audiences, who are familiar with the multi-ethnic situation in London. John Bull comments on the location of the play as follows:

it is this connection between a national vision of societal change and its specific location in Bethnal Green that is both central to the structuring of the play and to the mixed reactions it has had, particularly outside of the theatre. This is because, as the narrative of the play affirms, London's East End has been, and continues to be, a contested area in racial terms. (133)

Bull claims that the connection between the existing Bethnal Green and the fictional place in the play is problematic. Bean mixes reality and fiction by setting his play in this 'contested area'. One other specific setting is worth considering which is featured continuously but is always slightly different: a Huguenot church, which is shown to change its religious congregation. The building is adapted to the various faiths that are predominant in Bethnal Green in the particular era because of a dominating ethnical group. The same building later on shows a Star of David on its top. In the last act a crescent moon appears as the indication that the Muslim praying practices are conducted in the former church. Bean was inspired by a real building in Bethnal Green. This religious building changes according to the predominant faiths and it is an efficient device of illustrating the religious changes that occur in Bethnal Green. A single building is a church, a synagogue and a mosque. This example shows once again that Bean mixes fact with fiction in referring to actual places in the fictional world. One could argue that the creative team from the immigration centre integrated their knowledge and experience in their play. But it is impossible to ignore the fact that while Bean presents the content of the play-within-the-play as purely fiction, this is confusing because of his references to real locations.

Considering everything that has been said about the setting, the difficulty of an interpretation becomes apparent. In comparison to Bean's prior settings, the one in *England People Very Nice* deserves specific mentioning. There is no doubt that Bean employs this diversity of location in order to add to the sense of disunity in the play and also to remain as diverse as possible in his depiction of the different ethnical groups.

### **5.2.6. Language and Style**

About Bean's language use in *England People Very Nice* much can be said. Part of the controversy about the play was that Bean used his tool, comedy, in order to discuss the sensitive topics of multiculturalism and immigration. Usually it is Bean's use of humour which constitutes the most important aspect of his style. It is the one feature

that unifies all of his plays and it is especially in this particular play that his style affected the audience.

The humour that is employed is once again 'black humour' and I suggest it is intended for the creation of controversy. Bean writes jokes that make fun of the stereotypical depictions of people from various ethnical backgrounds. The key to understanding the humour of the play is to recognise the fact that every nationality as well as every religion is the object of this offensive humour. That means that jokes about the French, the Irish, the Jews, the Bangladeshis and also the English are equally integrated into the play. Jane Edwards says about the play that “[e]veryone is bound to feel offended at some point, intentionally so” (*Time Out London* in TR 2009, 143). If we acknowledge that the jokes are aimed at everyone equally, the play becomes understandable in the way that Nicholas Hytner has hoped the play to be perceived. In this context Hytner stated that:

[t]he play lampoons all forms of stereotyping: it is a boisterous satire of stereotypes of French, Irish, Jews, Bangladeshis, white East End cockneys, Hampstead liberals and many others. Every stereotype is placed in the context of its opposite and it clearly sets out to demonstrate that all forms of racism are equally ridiculous.<sup>38</sup>

In the play the lampooning can be observed in the regular pattern with which stereotypical jokes are employed. Not only does the newly assimilated group of each act react verbally in an aggressive way to the new arrivals, it is also that the regular English pub members mock every new nationality that arrives with equal harshness. Obviously the jokes about the most recent immigrants that arrived in England are most likely to cause offence because they are given the attention of the whole second part. This can also be observed in the protest actions that were taken against Bean and *England People Very Nice*. While I acknowledged the fact that Bean creates an imbalance by dedicating the entire second part to the Bangladeshi Muslims, I also want to stress that the humour in this last part does not change. The jokes are problematic because, as Voigts-Virchow describes it,

audience reaction to the 'single story' of ethnic stereotypes is clearly a measure of the confidence and vulnerability of the ethnic group at the receiving end of the joke - and some Muslim communities continue to be sensitive. (12)

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<sup>38</sup> see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/feb/14/national-theatre-racism-row>

With *England People Very Nice* the protestors were especially critical of Bean's treatment of the Bangladeshis, which demonstrates the above mentioned 'sensitivity' of an ethnic group. Bean stressed that he got a positive review from a Bangladeshi weekly, *Bangla Times*, which shows that his play was not exclusively regarded as offensive by all Bangladeshis.<sup>39</sup> Similarly to this, on an audience reaction video from the National Theatre people from different ethnical backgrounds are shown to be enthusiastic about the play.<sup>40</sup> The video is obviously a promotion video which aims at presenting the play in the best possible light. This does not mean, however, that the reactions cannot be considered authentic.<sup>41</sup> Returning to the nature of the jokes in the play one can say that they are one-liners again. One representative example of a stereotyped joke can be found in the second act, which revolves around the arrival of the Irish in Bethnal Green:

GASKIN: Your room is this way. Far from the common Irish. Where's your pig?  
 JOHN: I'm a publisher of Philosophical pamphlets.  
 GASKIN: Forgive me. I thought it was a cultural thing, most of the Irish –  
 ANNE: - Sir! We don't have a pig. (37)

The pig joke relates to the stereotypical assumption that the Irish always have pigs. *England People Very Nice* is full of jokes like this. The humour is constituted through the realisation that the jokes are rooted in superficial cultural concepts that are simply not true. Bhargava defines a stereotype as a "one-sided description generated when complex difficulties are reduced [...]. Different attributes are condensed into one, crudely exaggerated and then suffixed to an individual, group or culture." (14 qtd. in Bull). This definition serves as an explanation of the type of humour used in the play. The pig joke is an example of how the stereotypical humour works. But this humour is not the only one that is employed.

In the frame there are a number of instances that refer to the use of humour from the play-within-the-play. These short dialogues appear to be explanatory for the theatre audience of *England People Very Nice*. In the Prologue prior to Act 1 Taher, a male Palestinian, argues with the artistic director about a joke:

PHILIPPA: Yes, the wagon joke is back in.  
 TAHER: We are putting a joke back in which is not funny.

<sup>39</sup> Personal Interview referred to in Voigts-Virchow, p.12.

<sup>40</sup> The video was put online on the National Theatre homepage until autumn last year on <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/42665/productions/england-people-very-nice.html>

<sup>41</sup> It becomes apparent while watching the clip that the audience reaction are filmed directly after a performance in the foyer of the National Theatre.

PHILIPPA: Taher, if we let you stay in this country, and after thirty years working as a driving instructor in Kettering you develop a drink problem – a) you'll understand the joke, and b) you'll find it funny! (14)

Philippa's two conclusions are significant. She refers to a scenario in which Taher has adapted to the English culture. This becomes apparent because otherwise she could not assume that Taher knows about Kettering, a place in the middle of England. The first point she makes concerns a cultural understanding that Taher will adopt after living for some time in England. The second point is that Taher will also be able to laugh at the jokes that are directed at the English, which is supposedly his adopted culture. So it is not only that he will be able to understand the theme of the joke but also that he will have adopted a sense of humour that is similar to that of the English. Naturally, humour is integral to a culture and indicating that Taher will be able to laugh at an English joke can be regarded as a form of acknowledgement. Culture is also connected to identity and this will become important when considering the themes of the play.

The humour is among the central issues that are discussed in the reviews. The play's most disputed aspects are the black humour and the serious tone of the second half. *England People Very Nice* is concerned with the concepts of stereotyping and prejudice. Voigts-Virchow states in his article that "unlike Bean himself, I would argue that his 'black' or 'gallows' humour is the very core of his aesthetics, as it acts as corrosive to political orthodoxy and social consensus." (17). It is true that it is Bean's use of humour which operates as the most challenging aspect of his work. Obviously, Bean also uses sensitive topics for his plays but it is mostly his use of humour which constitutes the provocation that he opts for. This becomes most apparent in *England People Very Nice*. The humorous depiction of stereotypes and the laughter of the audience are among the aspects that make the play worthy of discussion.

One last aspect that needs to be mentioned is the extensive usage of foreign words in the play. It provides a tool for establishing the various nationalities of the immigrants. As language is among the most important aspects that constitute the identity of a person, the identity of the characters, however fragmented they might appear, is established in their choice of words. The audience is likely to understand some of the inserted foreign terms but not necessarily all of them. Since so many actors as well as characters from various ethnical backgrounds are featured in the play, it is the

use of words from these different languages which enhances the impression of multiculturalism.

### **5.2.7. Summary of Themes**

As with so many other aspects concerning *England People Very Nice*, a summary of themes cannot be not straightforward because in the play the themes are interwoven and it is difficult to describe them separately. The play is mainly concerned with immigration, love, Englishness, multiculturalism and ultimately identity. The enumeration of these themes shows once more that the play is very ambitious and complex.

The play's title offers a good starting point for interpretation. The phrase is used by the Bangladeshi Mushi, who refers to his experience with native people by saying "England people very nice!" (74). His phrase is a grammatically incorrect expression and reflects on the themes of the play in many respects. Firstly, the play is concerned with Englishness and, therefore, naturally with the English people. Secondly, the play serves as a depiction of immigration and its difficulties. Mushi will in the course of Act 4 become aware of the fact not all English people are very nice. The question one can ask concerning the title is: are English people very nice? The play-within-the-play gives very diverse impressions of the English people. The Constable's prompt answer to Mushi's phrase is "There is good and bad in all." (74) which is reflected in the play where good and bad happens side by side.

*England People Very Nice* is mainly concerned with aspects that can be connected to immigration. Immigration is a phenomenon that describes "the movement of non-native people into a country in order to settle there." (Collins Dictionary 815). This migration process naturally causes complications. Immigration as the unifying topic can be singled out regarding the two different plots, namely the frame and the play-within-the-play. The actual plot of the frame takes place in the Pocklington Immigration Centre depicting immigrants waiting for notification about their future. Each of the four acts starts with the arrival of members of a different nationality, thereby demonstrating that the first moments of immigrants after their arrival at their new home are always the same. The reasons for the migration of the various people are described in every act and the reactions of the locals to the newly arrived people are presented for every new nationality that arrives. There is one dominant pattern that is

employed in every act: first the arrival of the foreigners and the declared suspicion of the natives, followed by troubles concerning housing and employment. The difficulties are dissolved at the moment in which a new wave of immigrants from a different nationality arrives in Bethnal Green. By this time the old 'outsiders' are already integrated into English society.

There is one topic which deserves specific consideration: multiculturalism. Multiculturalism needs to be discussed in the light of the play because it is initiated by immigration and it can therefore be regarded to be strongly connected to the central issue. John Bull has concerned himself with *England People Very Nice* and multiculturalism and he defines it as "a model of parallel but possibly separate social identities within a community/nation" (125). The concept consists of the idea that multiple cultures are living side by side in one place but that there is not necessarily a mixture of social identities. This is important with regard to Act 4 because in this last part of the play the sense of separate social identities of the immigrants is emphasised. This parallel treatment of the various nationalities is also reflected in the fragmented form that Bean uses in his play. There is never a sense of unity in *England People Very Nice* and I suggest that this is a deliberate choice of the author. A reflection of the disunity can be found in the manner in which Bean presents the various events in the acts. The actions are described in a short and sketchy way. In a play which covers such an enormous time-span this is not surprising. Bull interprets Bean's treatment of immigration and multiculturalism as such:

the further Bean gets away from the present the easier it is for him to impose a simplistic pattern of immigration and integration onto his narrative [...] in Act IV, Bean's particular version of interculturalism [...] comes increasingly up against its counterpart, multiculturalism in its most separatist form: that is to say, a refusal to integrate. (136-137)

Bull observes a duality of interculturalism and multiculturalism in the fourth act of Bean's play. I agree with Bull about the difficulty concerning this last act. The overall tone of Act 4 is not as light and humorous as the tone of the other three acts. Problems of multiculturalism are shown, and there are many situations that can be considered to be disturbing. Obviously, positive features of interculturalism are depicted, for example the invention of the dish chicken tikka masala which has become very popular in Britain. Nevertheless, the last act is "polemic" (Letts in TR 2009, 141) and raises questions that affect the present and it is difficult to ignore the pressing feeling

that the stories hint at the existing issues connected to immigration and multiculturalism. This is also one of the points of criticism that Bean was confronted with.

Love is a theme which might not be as prevalent as the previously mentioned ones but it does constitute an important aspect of the play especially since I have also treated this theme in the other play interpretations. Whenever the lovers from different ethnical backgrounds meet in *England People Very Nice*, the same romantic tune is featured. Love is a unifying emotion which serves as a red thread in the play-within-the-play plot. It is also deliberately emphasised in the frame, when the play is described as a *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation. This is only partly true because the various plots are only slightly concerned with the two lovers. I have commented on the aspect of love in *Honeymoon Suite*, in which the characters are tied together by their shared feelings for each other. The love in *England People Very Nice* is very different. The manner of love in the play is of a superficial kind because the pair of lovers, with the exception of Deborah and Mushi, only see each other for a brief moment before they are separated by a tragic event. In the case of the last couple the fact is also hinted at that the boy of their twins could save the world and thereby their love is fate. This is made apparent in the scene in Act 1 when French Camille and Norfolk Danny meet for the first time. Camille declares that she will find him in the next four hundred years. This promise is made true by characters that are naturally entirely different from the other couples. Only in the last act are the two lovers able to engage over a longer period. It is also the last couple which receives more attention than the others. In the frame plot the English Philippa and the Palestinian Taher discuss the love plot of their play.

PHILIPPA: We discussed this during the research. The truest measure of racial and cultural integration in any society is the rate of inter-marriage, and you yourself -

TAHER: - I am agreeing with you! Working on this play I have come to savour the music when the lovers meet. It is the music of hope, humanity.

PHILIPPA: I'm amazed. At last we agree. (69)

Philippa refers to inter(racial) marriage as the most efficient and true means of integration. In the play, however, no such marriage is featured. It is true that Deborah conceives twins but it is questionable whether Deborah and Mushi's love overcomes all the obstacles that are presented. Whether the relocation to Redbrick is the best solution to the problem or not is debatable. Love in the play is once again strongly connected to sex. Regarding Bean's previous treatment of love and sex it can be argued that one

includes the other and they are not separable. In this regard it is possible to accept that love and sex do not stand as separate entities. Love offers a favourable solution to the sensitive topic of multiculturalism and Bean clearly opts to end his play on a positive note.

Englishness is a theme which needs to be explored because it offers interesting observations also in comparison to Bean's previous work. I have argued that many of Bean's plays are in some way concerned with Englishness and the English characters are often portrayed as down-to-earth people who are closely connected to the English way of life. In *Harvest* and *Honeymoon Suite* I have shown how a specific kind of Englishman, namely a Yorkshire man, is portrayed. In *England People Very Nice* such a sentimental depiction does not prevail. The characters are often presented in such a fragmented way that they do not offer a good opportunity for analysis. But there is one recurrent character, Ida, who provides an interesting model of Englishness. Ida is presented as a stereotypical Cockney female<sup>42</sup>, thus representing Englishness in the play. As the barmaid of the one stable setting, the recurring pub, she is one of the characters that are most frequently featured. Ida has Irish and French ancestors, marries the Jew Harvey and will finally be grandmother to half-Bangladeshi twins. In *Ida*, Bean conveys a picture of Englishness in his play that is versatile and very different from his previous depictions. I agree with Voigts-Virchow when he states that Englishness as presented above is neither "sentimental [n]or idealised." (14). One can argue that especially his portrayals of Yorkshiremen were sentimental, as were his depictions of the working men in his plays. In his new play, this is how Bean makes his English characters reflect on Englishness:

LAURIE: How's a Muslim woman gonna integrate round here?

IDA: Get your arse tattooed, a crack habit and seven kids by seven dads! (94)

This quote shows that the playwright reflects on every nationality equally critically. Bean proves to be sensitive enough to provide an unconventional picture of the people from this particular part of England that is juxtaposed to a set of new English people who have a different ethnic background. Bean once stated that "I consider them [the immigrants in his play] to be English. I'm English, they're English. If I can't write

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<sup>42</sup> Benedict Nightingale refers to her character as one that could be featured in the famous British series *EastEnders*, a long-running series which revolves around the melodramatically depicted events of people from East London (in TR 2009, 140).

about my fellow Englishmen I might as well pack up and go home.”<sup>43</sup> His statement is noteworthy for various reasons. Firstly, it shows the attitude of the author towards the immigrants who are already integrated into British society. But also he claims that his characters are to be taken seriously and I presume that he is mostly referring to the characters of Act 4. This does not correlate with Bean’s presentation of his characters as stereotypes. John Bull makes the same claim when he refers to a statement by Bean in which he said that his characters should be treated critically (131). I have to agree with Bull's interpretation of the play as being ideologically unclear. Bean's depiction of Englishness becomes confused in *England People Very Nice*. Bull says that:

ideologically *England People [Very Nice]* is a very confused play, unclear in its intentions and by no means consensual in its reception. I want to argue that, whatever its merits as a piece of theatre, it is precisely this lack of ideological clarity that makes it such an important event in England’s National Theatre. (130)

The statement above is the most important aspect that Bull can extract out of *England People Very Nice*. It is difficult to reject the argument that Bull makes. I would not go as far as to attribute statements made by characters into the author himself<sup>44</sup> but as Bean usually writes about what he knows, one can be almost certain that there are reflections of his opinions in the play. The most difficult aspect of the play is its division in style. If the first three acts and the last act were more similar, it would be easier to discuss the play. But on the whole, every aspect of the play, so I have shown in the analysis, is dominated by the sense of imbalance and disunity.

This leads to a final observation that needs to be explained. Considering the above mentioned disunity in the play one can find a parallel to another theme that is addressed in a subtle manner: the question of identity. Even if there might not be a direct discussion of the identity of the various characters, there is the prevalent notion that the play is ultimately concerned with the English identity. I argue that *England People Very Nice* is a play about identity because identity is linked to culture and the cultural diversity of the characters is predominant in the narrative. The question after the identity of the various characters is difficult to answer for the people from a migration background because they have left their native countries behind. Even if they have fled from difficulties there, their language and memories are bound to a place from which they have gone away. Therefore, their sense of identity might be confused. But also for

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<sup>43</sup> quoted in <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/interview-richard-bean>

<sup>44</sup> Bull compares the character of St John as a "sardonic representation of the play's author." (132)

the native people identity is an issue that is not straightforward. Ultimately it can be said that “[t]he work of Bean [...] emphasise[s] that the idea of national identity denotes a work in progress, a state of flux, and that identity formation in an absolute sense is doomed to fail.” (xvii). According to Sierz, it is the national identity of the English people that is a disunited construct. Similarly disunited is the format of the play as are its characters. It becomes apparent that there is not a single English identity. And this constitutes some of the controversy of the play.

### 5.3. *The Heretic* (2011)

His own play about climate change,  
*The Heretic*, proves an absolute corker, funny,  
provocative and touching, and absolutely  
resolute in its refusal to lapse into the  
apocalyptic gloom that usually attends this subject.<sup>45</sup>

#### 5.3.1. Introduction and General Information

The first performance of *The Heretic* was in the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 4 February 2011. When *The Heretic* had its première, there was another play about the topic of climate change being staged at the National Theatre. Many critics drew comparisons to the National Theatre’s *Greenland* at the beginning of *The Heretic’s* reviews. The play was dismissed because it included obvious didactic statements and was considered to be a mere “climate change drama” (*Observer* in TR 2011, 124).

The manner in which Bean dealt with the much discussed, globally affecting and controversial topic of global warming is unconventional, which is unsurprising considering the prior work of the playwright. The issue of the play is portrayed by the protagonist, who “argues that Anthropogenic Global Warming is our era’s dubious orthodoxy.” (*Independent on Sunday* in TR 2011, 124). Bean’s mission is to challenge the orthodoxy so he participates in the discussion in a manner that offers an unexpected view on the subject. He achieves a debate by laying the focus of his play on a global warming sceptic, the eponymous heretic Dr Diane Cassell, who is the heroine of the play. The question whether climate change is anthropogenic or not is discussed by the

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<sup>45</sup>see Charles Spencer in TR 2011, 124.

characters. The plot revolves around Diane and shows her struggles in her working life as well as in her private life. Rather than stating didactic clauses, the debating of the issue is achieved through the various characters. Every important character takes a certain stance in the discussion about climate change. The most attention is given to the heretical Diane. She is shown as receiving death threats by a militant activist group who do not agree with her dissenting attitude towards climate change. Bean also includes a generational conflict between mother and daughter and shows two young characters, Phoebe and Ben, who are struggling with their lives.

The importance of this play is constituted by the fact that the theme is very contemporary and affects everyone. The play blends a love plot and a generational conflict and embeds them into present-day environmental discussions. The prevailing awareness of the issue that is given through media reports or documentaries makes the play's major concern interesting for the audience. In *The Heretic* Bean includes various references to religion and draws comparisons to the unquestioned belief in anthropogenic global warming. What is noteworthy about the play regarding Bean's prior work is that he uses a female protagonist. His depiction of a strong woman is particularly interesting. Having said all this it becomes apparent that *The Heretic* is a play worthy of analysis.

In conclusion to this introduction I would like to say that *The Heretic* is not a commissioned work for a specific theatre. In an interview director Jeremy Herrin states that Bean has been interested in the issue for a couple of years and that it was a personal concern of his to produce a play that engaged with the subject of anthropogenic global warming. Bean explained in the personal interview that he is a sceptic when it comes to established beliefs surrounding global warming. *The Heretic* must be seen as a new departure for the playwright because it discusses a Bean concern which is not specifically connected to England or Englishness.

### 5.3.2. Genre

This play's genre is comedy. No matter how serious the subject matter is or how many traits of other genres Bean includes in *The Heretic*, it never ceases to be predominantly humorous. It is worth commenting on the relationship between humour and the subject matter. Charles Spencer uses the term "apocalyptic gloom" (TR 2011, 124) to describe the prevailing way of writing about the issue of global warming. And it

is a fact that theatre productions as well as media contributions add to the terrifying views on impending global warming. Obviously, it is a serious issue but Bean offers an approach to the topic that is non-gloomy. The play can be considered a comedy for various reasons. First of all, the jokes and the humour provide a thread in the story. But there is also the happy ending which is generally required for a play to be considered a comedy. A marriage can be regarded as the most desirable conclusion to a story. But this observation also shows a difficulty of labelling this play. There are a number of storylines which are condensed into one plot. And it is exactly this multitude of plotlines which makes *The Heretic* a very ambitious but also ambiguous play. While the ending suggests the ultimate romantic union between Ben and Phoebe, this offers no conclusion for the heroine.

In the reviews the overriding opinion seems to be that *The Heretic* is a comedy. Especially the second part that is generically heterogeneous. There are some generic features of other genres found in the play. The love plot suggests that the play is a romance, the suspense created by the intruder in the house is reminiscent of a thriller, while Phoebe's breakdown is depicted melodramatically. One genre description by a reviewer that I would like to quote is Henry Hitchings'. He states that "it's at heart a romantic comedy, larded with excellent jokes and peppery satire" (in TR 2011, 123). It is true that in the second part the focus shifts onto the love plot between Phoebe and Ben and that the relationship between Diane and Kevin is further explored.

Although there is the integration of tragic and suspenseful elements in the latter half of *The Heretic*, the play is straightforward in its discussion of the major theme. The humorous tone which prevails throughout the acts. Diane's struggle with orthodox beliefs is presented once more in a final dialogue, in which she prepares for her wedding speech:

The stars are dead, burning rocks. Barren, lifeless. [...] Stars don't consider your feelings, they never write, they never phone, they forget your birthday. The stars know nothing of love. [...] Which star came up with the idea of using energy stored in a lump of fossilized swamp to power the internet? Which star split the atom? The stars are God's mistakes. We are the miracle. Life. Human intelligence. Human innovation, creativity, invention. That is why every night the stars gaze down on us in awe. (115)

Her conclusion is that the people of the world are miracles and this presents a very optimistic world view on the part of the heroine. Because of this optimistic note I

argue that, despite some tragic events and the seriousness of the main issue, this play is intended to be a comedy in which elements of other genres are included.

### 5.3.3. Characters

As important as the topic matter might appear in *The Heretic*, the focus lies on the characters and the characters' interactions with each other. The characters serve the discussion of the main issue with their specific character traits. Altogether, there are six characters, four of which form the most important group. This group consists of Diane and her anorexic daughter Phoebe, the student Ben and Professor Kevin Maloney. Diane is the undisputed heroine of the play and can be said to be responsible for inducing most of the events because of her challenging views. She is the centre of attention and the other characters revolve around her. Generally, there is no character development observable in the play, since, for example, none of the characters change their attitudes. Since they are all very different, their interplay results in the clash of varying opinions, which makes the play highly enjoyable.

Dr Diane Cassell is the sceptical protagonist. Hers is the character that serves as the link between the others. Diane is very sharp in her replies and one never doubts that she is a specialist in her field. Her ability to question the general beliefs makes her struggle with the authorities credible. Diane's scepticism concerning anthropogenic climate change is initiated by her findings in the Maldives. Against all established claims she finds that the sea level surrounding the islands is not necessarily rising. With this example she continuously argues her case. Her strong personality is her strength but also the cause of the struggle with her daughter. Diane is a good example of an eccentric character because of her unusual behaviour. Naturally, this does not imply that she is abnormal. Her handling of Phoebe illustrates this very clearly. She struggles to accept her daughter's dangerous condition and uses humour in order to hide from the horrible truth that her daughter has a severe illness. A short dialogue depicts their troubled relationship:

DIANE: Are you joining Greenpeace to save the world or as part of your ongoing project to destroy your mother?

PHOEBE: Can I let you know tomorrow?

DIANE: Come on! I need to eat and you need to eat and throw up, which takes longer. (25-26)

Diane's last statement might be considered as cruel. There is a sense of cruelty observable in the dynamics between mother and daughter. A conversation without a sense of provocation is seldom found in the play. It is only in Act Four that Diane displays her tenderness and concern for her daughter and it becomes apparent then that most of the relaxed attitude she shows towards her daughter is only to cover her anxiety. Her character shows a wide range of emotions which spans from academic rigour to motherly affection.

In the collection of Bean's protagonists, Diane takes a special place. *The Heretic* features a heroine rather than a hero, which is a first in Bean's plays. His depiction of a character combining femininity and scientific stubbornness is a successful innovation. Diane's character is obviously troubled and discordant at times. The diversity of her character is reflected in the structure of the play and its setting, as I will show in the later chapters. I asked the playwright for the reason of his choice of a female protagonist. Bean answered that one of the reasons was that the relationship between mother and daughter was more suitable for the plot than the one between father and daughter or father and son. Additionally, he explained that the character of Diane was modelled on an existing global warming sceptic, Nils-Axel Mörner, a leading figure in the measuring of sea levels. Since Mörner is a man, Bean stated that it was the obvious choice to make his protagonist female. Diane's femininity is interestingly presented because she is a character who continuously tries to subdue her emotional side. She is a woman who constantly tries to push her feelings aside. This she usually does with the same words "I never cry. Never." (115). Her romantic, or rather sexual, background with Kevin Maloney is mentioned occasionally. He is her love interest, and the only man in her life, while Phoebe's father is never mentioned in the play.

Although Diane is without any doubt the strongest of all the characters, not only academically but also personally, humanity is deeply rooted in her character. In Act 3 the troubled student Ben confesses his suicidal predisposition to Diane. Her attempt to console him in the following manner:

DIANE: There's something dodgy going on. And that excites me and excites you, since it's your assignment.

BEN: Is that your best shot? To get my mind off this?

DIANE: I'm not your therapist. I'm a fossil basher. You're lucky I'm not using a hammer.

*(BEN runs the knife along the skin. A little blood shows.)*

Ben! Please, just, please don't do that.

*(Beat.)* Phoebe asked after you. I think she likes you. (60)

Ben is clearly trying to retrieve some emotion from Diane. At first she relies on her scientific argumentation but she has to realise that it is a display of feelings which finally calms Ben. It is her emotional side that ultimately wins over her professional one. Diane is also the initiator of the love plot between her daughter and her student. This shows once again that her personal interest in her daughter is very serious.

In the play Phoebe is mostly shown alongside her mother. The relationship between the two female characters is of great importance. Phoebe's most striking trait is her severe illness, anorexia. It is an eating disorder which causes people suffering from it to reduce their food intake to a minimum. The illness is subject of various discussions in the play. Phoebe suffers from a heart-attack at the end of Act Four and, for a time, it is unclear whether she will survive. With her instability she provides emotional moments. In many ways she shares characters traits with her lover Ben. They are both dysfunctional people who are seeking stability and love. This is one reason why their falling in love is not unexpected. I have mentioned already that it is mostly her relationship with her mother through which she is defined. The special treatment that Diane has bestowed on her daughter can be seen in the fact that she is home-taught. Of course it would be too simple to trace Phoebe's character back to the fact that she has not been to school. With a sceptical, yet affectionate mother, it is nevertheless not unexpected that she is similarly challenging. One important trait is Phoebe's outspokenness. In her an example of the disturbed youth is presented. This serves as another connection with Ben.

Ben is a teenager of 19 years whose mother has died in childbirth and whose father lives according to orthodoxies with which Ben cannot agree. Ben's need for guidance makes him respect the authoritative Diane. For her he probably serves as a potential disciple for scepticism but they develop an attachment to each other. Although it appears as if Phoebe is his object of desire, I would argue that he seeks Diane's company just as much, only not as a lover but as a mother-figure. This is not surprising considering his troubled background. He is described as a "hopeless romantic visionary" (25) by Diane, and he is the embodiment of the highly motivated, green scientist. But his environmental ambition is only an aspect in his life with which he can cope. He is attending therapy sessions and has attempted suicide. Even if he does marry Phoebe in the end it is questionable whether the two can make their lives work together. Both

characters are challenged and troubled, which presents a thought-provoking picture of the younger members of society.

Professor Kevin Maloney as the fourth of the group stands in relation to the female protagonist. He is Diane's boss and former lover, which shows their relationship to be an ambiguous one. Maloney is an ambitious character who makes questionable choices. Yet, in some regards, he fits perfectly as the man at Diane's side. His character is important in the play because he acts as a counterpart of Diane. What makes their situation more complicated is that they are obviously in love with each other. Their characters are very different. Her need for facts makes her a sceptic, while Kevin is happy to publish numbers he knows not to be true in order to gain attention from the politicians. Diane criticises him for doing so while he is admired by Phoebe for his bold move. Kevin's character is explored less than that of the others. His character serves as a supplement to the others and he has no relationship with the younger characters, while they both have one with Diane. He serves as a father substitute for Phoebe and as a compensational husband for Diane. However, he needs to be ranked among the important characters because he provides a new perspective on the issues discussed. Diane's scepticism, Phoebe's illness, Ben's obsession with the preservation of the planet and Kevin's failure in relationships and opportunism are the traits that denote the characters. Overall one can say that the unifying element of the four characters is that they can all be considered to be lost souls. Each of them has a moment of emotional strain in which they are shown from their most vulnerable side. They appear to be a dysfunctional family, all of them struggling with their lives and yet dependent on each other. Otherwise they would not find themselves together like a family on Boxing Day.

#### **5.3.4. Time-span and Structure**

*The Heretic* is straightforward in its structure and can be referred to as one of Bean's more conventional plays in terms of the passage of time. There are five acts, some of which are split up into different scenes. After plays like *Honeymoon Suite* and *England People Very Nice*, the conventionality in structure might be considered a retreat to convention. The discussion of the other plays has shown that Bean employed different structures if they contributed to the discussion of the main theme. In *The Heretic* Bean used a straightforward format as the events happen in chronological order. The description of Act One reads "A September Morning" (21), which places the action

into no specific temporal context apart from the month. A concrete year is not given. This might be interpreted as Bean's manner of saying that the theme of anthropogenic global warming is not an issue of a definite year but rather of an undefined and universal time setting. The time-span of the play is almost one year. The later time references refer to a midterm day, to Boxing Day in December and to a day in August. The events of the first three acts happen during one term, with the exception of Scene Two of Act Two. The main part of the second half happens during the Christmas holidays, while the very short last act is set in August. The first half of the play, i.e. Act One and Act Two, has a temporal ellipsis of unknown duration in between. In the second half there is another ellipsis that is indicated through the heavily pregnant Phoebe.

The climax of the play is in the third act. Diane is shown in an interview with Jeremy Paxman which marks the highlight of her career, as she is able to present and defend her opinions on public television. Her academic career stops after this incident because she is banned from the university due to a disagreement with Kevin Maloney.

Besides this noteworthy event in *The Heretic* there is a second one that needs to be given consideration. I have commented on one specific moment of tension when suspense is created through an intruder in Act Four. Since the play generally relies on its characters rather than on action scenes, this event stands out. I have described a similar moment of tension at the end of the second half in *Toast*. There are also other plays by Bean that feature a similar moment of tension, for example *Under the Whaleback* or *Mr England*. In *The Heretic*, Bean uses this method again and he has been criticised for it by the reviewers.<sup>46</sup> I will write about the split presentation of the topic matter, which is reflected in the setting, in the next chapter. But one observation can be made at this point. The play is clearer in its genre description as well as its temporal arrangement in the first half.

### 5.3.5. Setting

The setting of *The Heretic* is twofold. For the first three acts the location is an office of a university in Yorkshire. The university that is featured is a fictitious one, which means that Bean did not use the name of an existing institution. The second set is Diane's kitchen, which is used for the second part of the play.

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<sup>46</sup> see Henry Hitchings or Sarah Hemming, both TR 2011.

The settings highlight the various character traits of the heroine. The first shows Diane in her place of work, which is a place of higher education and strict hierarchies, where she has to defend her views. The academic side of her character is emphasised in the three acts at the university. Diane's troubles with the institution are presented in this place of knowledge, which enhances the credibility of the arguments. The second half moves the focus from the working place into the private space of Diane's kitchen of her house in the countryside. The kitchen emphasises the focus on the personality and the emotions of the protagonist. It seems as if the whole argument of the play shifts with the place of action. Diane's personal struggles are displayed and the vulnerability of her character is emphasised in this intimate place of hers. The reviewers criticised Bean for shifting the focus onto Diane's personal problems. However, it needs to be stressed that, while the other characters naturally partake in the action, the play constantly focuses on Diane. To show the protagonist in her home appears only logical for a play that is preoccupied with the personality of the heroine.

In *The Heretic* it is again an intruder who is determined to harm the central figure by entering into the private space, the sanctuary of the character as it were. A similar example is depicted in the final scene of *Harvest*, in which two burglars break into the farmer's house. In *The Heretic*, the aim of the intruder and the organisation behind him is to kidnap Diane, which is only prevented by Phoebe's heart attack. The Campus Site security man Geoff, who was featured as a sympathetic character in the first half, is shown to be a member of the activist group. He deserts his organisation in order to save Phoebe and the ending suggests that emotions triumph over political agenda. In the emotional outburst of Diane in the same scene the focus is brought onto the sentiments, thereby indicating once again that the second half of the play is dedicated to the personal side of the character rather than the academic. Noteworthy is once again that it is the closed and limited space of a kitchen which serves as a setting. It appears as if this place of community is among Bean's favourite settings, as it is often featured in his plays, as I have shown before. The kitchen amplifies the feeling of intimacy of the latter part of *The Heretic*.

There is one scene which happens neither in the kitchen nor at the university: Scene Two of the second act. It takes place in the Newsnight studio and features the famous English newsman Jeremy Paxman, a BBC journalist who is known for interviewing politicians in a provocative way. The content of this scene is particularly amusing for an English audience, as they are probably able to recognise this public

figure immediately. I find it symptomatic that Diane's public outing is set in an altogether different location from the other two settings. This might be interpreted as a suggestion of her emancipation as a scientist. At the university she was never able to convince her colleagues, but on TV she finally has a platform of listeners for her theories. The studio marks the end of her job at the university, thus indicating a halt of her academic career. However, she is shown to write articles for a newspaper in Act 4, which is interesting because the printed media, especially newspapers, are the source of circulation of orthodoxies which Bean evidently questions in this play.

### 5.3.6. Language and Style

*The Heretic* unsurprisingly lives off the dry humour with which the speech of the characters is delivered. But rather than the 'gallows humour' often found in his plays, Bean employs deadpan humour that underlines the quality of scepticism in the heroine. One example for this is the following dialogue:

KEVIN: After Christmas we're getting a visit from Catalan International Securities. DIANE: Are they Quarkers?

KEVIN: One of the biggest insurance and underwriting firms in Europe.

DIANE: Oh yes. They sponsored that mad person who tried to pedalo across the Arctic to show how radical the melt was. He got stuck in pack ice and the dogs had to shoot him and eat him. (32-33)

The short passage above shows the dry humour of the protagonist which she delivers with a sharpness that is particularly credible regarding her character. The portrayal of events presented above is not to be taken literally. Diane manages to describe the tragic events in a way that almost forces the audience or the reader to laugh. But Diane does not intend to be regarded as funny. The same is true of the other characters. They are not aiming to be considered as comedians or entertainers, the dry humour is part of their natural way of speaking. Also, the characters do not laugh at the comments of the others. It is the interplay between the characters and often their contrary way of looking at things which makes the play so incredibly funny. Humour is the main tool for expressing the heretical views of the heroine. Similarly, it is her means of escapism. I have presented one example of Diane's crude statement about Phoebe's anorexic condition in the chapter on 'Characters'. Her behaviour towards her daughter has to be viewed as a means of coping with the severity of Phoebe's condition. Like her

comments about all the serious issues that she is aware of, Diane uses her humour in order to shield herself against her personal tragedy.

In a play which revolves around the opinions of a sceptic it is to be expected that the language and the style must be of major importance. Bean's technique in the play is to make his characters speak about real-life events and engage in humorous interplay. One example I have chosen concerns the American politician Al Gore:

KEVIN: In that film of his, Al Gore, he's got the y axis upside down.

DIANE: I told you that two years ago.

KEVIN: If you get up really close to the telly, and freeze frame it, you can see. You work your guts out, a lifetime, then some smarmy tit comes along, gets his y axis upside down and picks up a Nobel Peace Prize.

[...]

PHOEBE: Al Gore cares about the future because his son died.

KEVIN: No! The kid was hit by a car but he didn't die.

PHOEBE: His child didn't die?

DIANE: Have you gone off him now?

PHOEBE: A bit. (82-83)

The described incident in the movie is based on a real event. It is also true that Gore's child was involved in a car accident. Bean uses common knowledge as well as the orthodox view of Al Gore as a climate expert, who can be considered to be known because of his status as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and creates humorous lines out of the facts. This enhances the appeal of his play and makes it understandable because it is likely that an audience who reads newspapers are probably aware of the stories involving Al Gore. The example presented above also shows that the dialogues reflect on the character of the speakers. The academic Kevin does not approve of Gore's success and recognition. Similarly, Phoebe is seemingly obsessed with tragedy, which is one possible reason why she falls for Ben, and reacts in a disappointed and disapproving way when she learns of the child's survival. I chose to include the Al Gore example because Bean talked about Al Gore's film in the interview with me. He was clearly still upset about the content of the movie and he stated that this was a huge motivation for him to write the play. The remarks of the characters show the playwright's concern with this issue and I was not surprised to find a direct reflection of Bean's opinion in *The Heretic*.

I would like to highlight an observation about the language use in the play. In *The Heretic* because Bean employs a vast number of references to pop culture. These references are mostly used in order to draw comparisons or conclusions that are

understandable for the general audience who read or listen to the media. One example is Phoebe's statement after Kevin revealed that his wife is having an affair: "I'm in an episode of EastEnders." (73) Her comparison to the series reflects on the tone of the second half of the play, which in fact is more melodramatic than the first half, and it also refers to the highly popular British television series which depicts the emotional turmoil of its characters. To compare Kevin's personal problems to this melodramatic show could be considered to be insensitive, but Phoebe's outspokenness is presented in such a positive light that the remark cannot be found to be offensive. The humour of this statement is the result of the audience's knowledge of the nature of the TV series. Pop references also gain importance in the discussion of themes, which is the topic of the next chapter.

### 5.3.7. Summary of Themes

There are a number of themes that can be discerned in the play that are all connected to the central issue. The major theme of *The Heretic* can be said to be climate change and it is often juxtaposed with religion. The other theme that serves as a red thread in the play is the generational conflict which is fought out by Diane and Phoebe but which is also embodied in Ben.

There are numerous allusions to the orthodox faith in climate change being almost a religion. This observation is also made by reviewers. Paul Callan writes that "Anthropogenic global warming [...] has developed in a deeply held belief. Indeed some hold it in the kind of awe strictly reserved for Catholicism in the Middle Ages." (in TR 2011, 123). Callan forges a link between the obsessive attitudes towards global warming and religion, and in the play these references are being made frequently. The juxtaposition also helps to emphasise the conflict between the characters. The deeply distressed Phoebe declares surprisingly that she believes in God: "Rather controversially I believe that God is an old man with a white beard sitting on a cloud." (23). Phoebe is a member of Greenpeace, an organisation highly criticised by her mother, and she believes in a higher spiritual power. Her mother, the sceptic, obviously does not believe in anything. The different attitudes of daughter and mother are highlighted by their different beliefs.

There are moments when religion and global warming are equated with each other as these words by Diane suggest "I'm agnostic on AGW [Anthropogenic Global

Warming], but if you can prove to me there's a God I'll become a nun quicker than you can say 'lesbian convent orgy'." (36). Diane uses religious terms in order to explain her conviction concerning climate change. This serves the assumption that the belief in anthropogenic global warming can be regarded as a kind of religion, as the scientific proof in favour of AGW is not substantial enough at least in Diane's opinion. Another example for this can be found early in the play when Ben explains his inability to attend Diane's classes because of his refusal to ride on a bus that uses fossil fuels.

DIANE: You're going to miss out on two course work credits then, aren't you.

BEN: Harsh man.

PHOEBE: (*To DIANE.*) That's religious discrimination. (23)

Phoebe equates Ben's favour for preserving the planet with religion. The charge against her mother is serious and it displays the severity of Phoebe's issue appropriately. In a world where religion is losing importance, other forms of beliefs are sought for. It is not surprising, therefore, that both of the young characters are shown to have strong beliefs. For Phoebe, believing in God is still possible, while Ben turns towards green preservation policies.

Diane's attitude towards God is ambiguous. She claims that she is not a believer but in her final speech she declares that "Stars are God's mistakes" (115), thus seemingly expressing a belief in God's existence. The questioning of God and global warming are equated and remain unanswered. It can be said, however, that, while there is no longer dialogue or constant argumentation on the subject, it nevertheless is a recurring theme in the play.

The continuous connection between the issue of climate change and religion can only be established because the conversations revolve around some issue of climate change continually. But while the content matter of the play is dedicated to this issue, there is another theme that is prevailing in the play, which is dysfunctional social relationships, as reflected in *The Heretic* in the mother-daughter relationship, the generational conflict and the notion of the dysfunctional family. In this respect the play is very much concerned with how society works. The difficult relationship between Diane and Phoebe is displayed throughout the whole story. The character of Phoebe is introduced early on as being against her mother's opinion to an extreme. This culminates in Phoebe's engagement in the activist group Greenpeace, which can be considered to be Diane's worst enemy. Diane says: "The reasons why we hate each

other are many and complex” (69), Phoebe only replies “No they’re not. I’m an active member of Greenpeace and you’re a gas guzzling planet rapist.” (69). The two women insult each other continuously and they are keenly aware of their struggles with each other.

Diane’s opinion differs from Phoebe’s to a great extent and as usual Diane draws from science in order to explain her beliefs. At one point she refers to Phoebe’s anorexia and states that:

DIANE: Laboratory experiments on mice suggest a genetic root, which suits Phoebe because that means it’s my fault. I have an alternative theory – they bought a batch of really fucking selfish mice. (30)

The comment is not to be taken literally, as mice cannot be selfish. But this example once again illustrates the main conflict of the two characters. It also fittingly connects Diane’s argumentation to her views as a heretic. Theirs is a love-hate relationship, but the ending of the fourth act with Phoebe’s heart attack and Diane’s emotional confessions, displays Diane’s motherly love, indicating an ultimate victory of emotion over reason. One occasion on which Phoebe surprisingly takes her mother’s stance is after she realises that Diane has been crying because of Kevin Maloney. Phoebe protects her, saying “Why have you given her a verbal warning? My mum’s brilliant. I’ll give you a verbal warning – fuck off.” (49). All this shows the deep confusion that marks the relationship between the two characters. One might ask, and I have said so already, why Ben and Phoebe are so deeply distressed and extreme. An answer, or rather a suggestion, can be found in the talk about generational conflict. There is a dialogue addressing exactly this issue:

DIANE: Yes. But this generation –

PHOEBE: - it’s not my generation that has fucked the planet.

DIANE: This generation, are disaster junkies. Armageddon in three acts.

PHOEBE: Fuck off.

DIANE: [...] Every day they wake up craving a narrative fix. When they see a polar bear, hitching a lift on a passing ice flow, they cannot see a wild animal at ease in their natural habit. What they see is the last five minutes of Titanic. (91)

This is Diane’s explanation for the struggle of the generations. Bean includes two pop culture references in order to illustrate the argument. Diane’s claim that the younger generation are “disaster junkies” she is not far from the truth. But while it is hinted that popular media and their impression on people’s minds is the reason for the

distortedness, I suggest that the two younger characters' distress derives from an altogether different source. Phoebe's as well as Ben's extremeness might originate from being part of a dysfunctional family. Ben's difficult background is explained in a dialogue and Phoebe's troubled relationship with her mother and the absence of her father are further examples of instability, which then try to compensate by clinging to strong beliefs. Bean is very thoughtful about his characters and in the display of their background he lays the basis for their character traits. That the play's core concern is not climate change becomes apparent as the plot proceeds. It is a play about society and how society functions, as I have shown in this last chapter on *The Heretic*. In the presentation of his characters he blends the discussion about a challenging topic in a very provoking way.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

The representative plays from the last phase emphasise the diversity of Richard Bean's works. The most prominent aspect of his more recent plays is the distinguishing choice of themes. I have described that Bean likes to concern himself with topics that are connected to Englishness or England in some way. The topics he dedicates himself to in the most recent phase are of much broader concern than his prior ones. It is probably best to describe his development by saying that he moved out of the English boundaries and takes considerably more risk. While he is still prone to writing English characters it is not a necessity in his plays anymore. It is possible that he will continue and in fact never cease to write about the English because this has been his prior aim for so long. But it becomes apparent that he is able to leave familiarity behind in order to explore new domains. In the context of an interview about *England People Very Nice* Bean once stated that "If I can't write about my fellow Englishmen I might as well pack up and go home."<sup>47</sup> In the quote he seems to defend himself against the claims that his views in the play are racist. For him his depiction of the characters is a matter of Englishness. It is the English psyche that he portrays in his plays, but in this last phase he moved on from "northern individualists" (233), as Sierz accurately describes this reappearing character type of Bean's.

In this last phase Bean proved with plays like *The Heretic* and *The Big Fellah* that he is capable of addressing controversial issues out of the realm of Englishness in

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<sup>47</sup> see <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/interview-richard-bean>

an unconventional way. In *The Big Fella* this was achieved by his sympathetic portrayal of the members of a terrorist group in New York and their interpersonal relationships. Noteworthy was the ironic ending that I have described. In *The Heretic* it was most of all the unconventional views of the heroine which served the discussion of the precarious topic of global warming. While the events are situated in England, Yorkshire, the place of action, does not have an influence on the events. Both plays represent a leap for Bean and I regard them as a trend for the playwright, who seems to have exhausted his exploration of Yorkshire topics. This is of course only an assumption on my part. I also need to comment on another example that I have shortly addressed in the beginning of this last phase: *Pub Quiz is Life*. *Pub Quiz is Life* is not a play written for London but for the Hull Truck Theatre in Hull and therefore for a northern audience. This might be considered the reason why he chose the rather conventional topic and the format for this play because his other Hull plays are fairly similar to this one.

More than ever do the plays have significance for the present, which is shown in *England People Very Nice* and *The Heretic*. Contemporary relevance seems to be what Bean aims at now. This does not necessarily mean that the plays must have the second decade of the 2010s as their time setting. But his most recent plays are definitely meant to comment on the present rather than on the past. Even if *England People Very Nice* features a massive time-span, the accent lies on the present. It is the frame that is set in the present. But it is also the ending of the fourth act, which presents the events of more recent years, that is highlighted. The main issues of *The Heretic* are also of contemporary relevance. Both the societal as well as the environmental issues reflect on concerns of the present. In that respect Bean has moved on from his preoccupation with the past which I have mentioned in various play interpretations.

What has become a common trait of all the plays in the last phase is Bean's mission to challenge the orthodoxy. It becomes very apparent that this has become his purpose and it is mostly his humour that works as the tool for expressing the unorthodox. This is observable in *England People Very Nice* as well as *The Heretic*, both of which use humour in order to express dissenting views. That humour is Richard Bean's trademark can be confirmed by the constancy with which he employs it and also by the uproar the humour usually causes, which is reflected in the reviews of his plays.

Concluding *England People Very Nice* and the discussion of the last phase, I would like to quote Sierz once more with a statement which reflects on the question of identity, a topic that is of major concern in a great number of plays by Bean.

In a world of multiple identities, diverse communities and conflicted individuals, a one-size-fits-all national identity is clearly a non-starter. Aptly enough, in *England People Very Nice* Bean alludes to Daniel Defoe [...] who in his 1701 poem 'the True Englishman' concludes: 'A true-born Englishman's a contradiction,/ In speech an irony, in fact a fiction.' But it's precisely because national identity is a form of fiction that it is so suitable for fictional treatment. (225)

Sierz comments on the impossibility of defining a unified identity of a mongrel nation which is what Bean addressed in *England People Very Nice*. Bean dealt with this stirring topic in a way that might come closer to reality than one might expect. That national identity, no matter whether it is discussed on a very small scale as in *Toast* or on a larger scale as in this play, is addressed leaves no doubt that Bean's point of view derives from his concern as an Englishman. This makes him an important playwright of the nation who participates in the discussion of the more controversial topics concerning his home country. But more importantly, Bean has expanded his interests recently and there is the trend that he might address many precarious issues in the future. It will not be a surprise if he merges his interests as a national playwright with the ones of world concern.

## 6. Final Statement

Bean is an 'in-yer-face' comedian. His jokes  
are his trademark, and he has said that  
he is a comedy writer, not [...] a poet.<sup>48</sup>

The aim of this thesis was, on the one hand, to give an overview of the work of Richard Bean and, on the other hand, to outline his development as a playwright. It has become apparent while interpreting his plays that he started out as a writer who concerned himself with subjects that were familiar to him and that were of personal interest for him. The story of his background serves as an explanation for many choices he made regarding the topics and themes of his early plays. I consider his second phase as an experimenting phase. Bean does not only focus on a variety of different themes but he also tests new formats concerning time-span, structure, settings and themes. What can be said about the current phase is that Bean's work developed as a reaction to pressing and relevant matters that concern not only London's or the English population but also the rest of the world. Interestingly, the editors of the book on contemporary British playwrights highlight the fact that "year after year, new playwrights continue to emerge, the story of British new writing – in its most traditional forms as well as in its most experimental – continues to develop." (xxii). This progress of the new writing tradition can easily be applied to the development of Bean as a writer. Bean merges the traditional and the experimental in his work. He also connects the personal and the political in many of his plays, a prominent example is *The Heretic*, a more subliminal one would be *Toast*. Bean is a versatile playwright who expands his work into different directions. His use of humour can be considered to be a constant in his work. I have referred to his background as a comedian and have also heard him saying that it is his most essential trick in his writing. Humour is used as a characteristic in his plays and it is one reason why he is a distinctive playwright now. It states in the introduction of the *Methuen Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* that "[l]aughter is directed against 'correct' positions and against any fundamentalism, and is so to be found in writers as diverse as Bean." (xx).

Another ambition of this thesis was to give an overview of the reactions to Bean's plays by the critics, not in an extensive way but rather as a means of supplement.

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<sup>48</sup> see Voigts-Virchow, p. 17.

The reviews clearly show that the reactions to his plays are ambiguous. He has been praised for not being "obvious" (Sierz 138). I consider this one of Bean's fortes because he challenges and surprises his audience. It is especially in his more ambitious plays that he causes furore, which I have shown in my interpretations.

There is a selection of observations that I would like to include in this final statement. Firstly, I have consciously excluded the mentioning of *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2011) Bean's most recent play for a number of reasons. It is a farcical comedy modelled after *The Servant of Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni and therefore an adaptation. I have omitted adaptations from consideration in this thesis, but it needs to be pointed out that commercially this comedy is Bean's most successful play to this date. It had its première in the Lyttleton Theatre at the National Theatre on 17 May 2011. It was transferred to Broadway and returned to the Royal Haymarket Theatre to London. In the interview with Bean, he explained to me that Nicholas Hytner wanted him to write a "pure comedy" and that challenging the laughter of the audience was his aspiration with this play. There is no intellectual argument to it and while the play is tremendously successful, it is not the pride of the author. Bean stated that he prefers writing original plays. The success of this comedy nevertheless reflects on the talent of Bean as a comedian. It is his most important trait as a playwright.

Another observation concerns a certain sense of critical disregard concerning Bean as a playwright. It is mentioned by Voigts-Virchow that "Bean is a glaring omission in the recent collections."<sup>49</sup> During my research I had to draw the same conclusion as there are not many articles to be found on the playwright. One can only wonder at the reason for this. Bean's final breakthrough as a controversial writer was with *England People Very Nice* in 2009 and it is at least since then that he can be considered to be an established playwright, if one could not have said so even before.

Bean's plays are also not transferred to the continent, which is usual for many British playwrights. While there is a number of playwrights who are regularly staged in venues on the mainland, I only know about one production of *The Heretic* in

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<sup>49</sup> edited by Mary Luckhurst *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama*, and Nadine Holdsworth, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*. in *Contemporary Playwrights Guide* p. 21.

Oldenburg.<sup>50</sup> It might be possible that due to Bean's specific humour which is successful with English audiences there might be a reluctance to translate his plays. This is, of course, only a speculation. Maybe Bean will achieve 'continental recognition' with his more recent plays as they do not concentrate on English topics.

Conclusively one can say that Bean's work is primarily concerned with depictions of English people, either from the past or the present. Most of his plays are dedicated to the exploration of the psyche of the characters and the reason for their behaviour. His creation of microcosms is particularly well done when Bean writes about familiar environments. And one can be curious about the path that Richard Bean will choose to follow.

In an article in *The Guardian* in 2009 around the time that *England People Very Nice* was staged at the National Theatre, a journalist made the following observation about the playwright's attitude, which once again emphasises the motivation of Richard Bean for writing as he usually does:

[Bean] now has a strong sense of the playwright's responsibility to reflect society. He gets angry when he sees a new play in which there are "a load of people in a flat doing stuff, and you never find out where they get their money from". That other great maxim, write about what makes you angry, has guided his career. "The problem with our playwrights is that they're all so polite. They daren't say anything about anybody, unless they're slagging off America. What would Joe Orton do if he were alive? He'd go around, find the open wound and pour salt in it." Which is just what Bean aims to do.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The Production was in 2011 under the translated title "Ketzer", see <http://www.staatstheater.de/1112/schauspiel1/ketzer-dse.html>

<sup>51</sup> see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jan/28/richard-bean-taboo-playwright-theatre>

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## 9. Zusammenfassung

Diese Diplomarbeit mit dem Titel „Die Stücke von Richard Bean: Entwicklung und Interpretation“ ist dem Werk des britischen Dramatikers Richard Bean gewidmet. Bean ist ein erfolgreicher, zeitgenössischer Stückeschreiber, der vor allem in den letzten Jahren mit seinen Werken für Furore gesorgt hat. Seine Stücke sind zumeist Komödien, die sich durch schwarzen Humor und der thematischen Nähe zu Beans Heimat England auszeichnen. Bekanntheit hat der Schriftsteller vor allem durch Provokation und die ‚Herausforderung der Orthodoxie‘ erreicht, welche er sich zum Ziel als Dramatiker gemacht hat. Ich habe aus dem Pool seiner Stücke fünf Werke gewählt, die sich als repräsentativ für die verschiedenen Phasen seiner bisherigen Karriere eignen. Die Interpretationen der ausgewählten Werke umfassen folgende Aspekte: Genre, Charaktere, Handlungsort, Zeitspanne und Struktur, sowie Sprache und Zusammenfassung der Themen. Da es über Bean derzeit wenig Sekundärliteratur gibt, habe ich als Ansatzpunkte unter anderem die Rezensionen genommen, die über seine Stücke geschrieben wurden. In einem Kapitel, welches der Interpretation der Werke vorausgeht, habe ich einige biographische Aspekte zusammengefasst, welche für die folgenden Ausführungen wichtig sind.

Ziel meiner Arbeit ist es, einen Überblick über das dramatische Werk von Richard Bean zu geben und seine Entwicklung als Dramatiker zu skizzieren. Dadurch ergibt sich eine Einteilung seiner Karriere in drei Teile: einer frühen, einer mittleren und einer späteren Phase. Die erste Phase ist vor allem durch Konventionalität gekennzeichnet. Bean bedient sich Themen, die einen Bezug zu England haben und entwickelt vor allem männliche Charaktere. Aus dieser Phase habe ich das Stück *Toast* (1999) für die genauere Interpretation gewählt. In der zweiten Phase experimentiert Bean in seinen Stücken. Er versucht sich an verschiedenen Formaten und Thematiken, und verwendet den für ihn typischen schwarzen Humor. Die Werke dieser zweiten Phase, *Honeymoon Suite* (2004) und *Harvest* (2005), sind noch durch eine Nähe zu England bestimmt. Bean taucht aber immer mehr in das Politische ein und beginnt sich ein wenig von dem Persönlichen, welches seine ersten Werke gekennzeichnet hat, zu entfernen. In der dritten und aktuellsten Phase ist Beans Agenda ganz offensichtlich die ‚Herausforderung der Orthodoxie‘. Dieser Phase bedient er sich wenn er über sein Werk spricht. Sein bislang kontroversestes Stück, *England People Very Nice*,

beschäftigt sich mit Englands Immigrationsgeschichte und hat 2009 für Furore gesorgt. Das zweite Werk dieser Phase, *The Heretic* (2011), behandelt das prekäre Thema Klimawandel. Die Stücke dieser Phase sind sehr politisch und die Themen global relevant. Obwohl Bean auch in der vorhergehenden Phase globale Anliegen adressiert hat, so wird dies in der aktuellen Phase scheinbar sein oberstes Ziel.

Diese Arbeit basiert unter anderem auf der Lektüre der Werke, schriftlichen Interviews, einem persönlichen Interview mit Richard Bean und dem Kritiker Aleks Sierz und nicht zuletzt auf Videoaufzeichnungen und Audioaufzeichnungen von verschiedenen Inszenierungen in London. Abschließend ist zu sagen, dass Bean einer der provokantesten und meistgeschätzten englischen Dramatikern ist, der sich in Londons florierender Theaterszene durch seine vielfältigen Stücke einen Namen gemacht hat.



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### Ausbildung

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### Berufserfahrung

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- 05/2010                **Voluntariat** bei 'Back to the Teuchter' am His Majesty's Theatre in Aberdeen/Schottland
- 09/2008 - 12/2009    **Mitarbeiterin im Sekretariat** bei Mentor GmbH & Co
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- 08/2011                **Selbstständiger Forschungsaufenthalt** in **London** gefördert durch das **Förderungsstipendium** der Universität Wien
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