

**Reproducing Masculinities – The Edwardian Performance of Male Adolescent ‘Crisis’. University of Newcastle presentation. July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019.**

### **Interrogating Representations of Dystopic Adolescence**

In 2004 by playwright Finn Kennedy, describes how:

Our theatrical output often reflects ... stylish plays about youngsters going awry, but with little sense of a world outside. We struggle to dissect the bigger socio-political backdrop that might hold the reasons for their, and our, predicament. Our plays are as alienated from their political context as we are from politics itself. And that suits the vested interests that manipulate us just fine. (Kennedy, 2004).

Kennedy was commenting on a wave of ‘In Yer Face’ theatre in Britain which, in the aftermath of the Jamie Bulger case, represented the young working-class urban male as emblematic of social corruption. Dysfunctional families and malignant adolescents featured in plays, such as Simon Stephen’s *Hérons* (2001) and Mike Bartlett’s *My Child* where as

Vicky Angelaki describes, 'in a number of contemporary plays capitalism and family are presented as closely interwoven narratives (2013:69) where we witness the vivid after-effects of the previous generation's failure to sustain the malfeasances of capitalism (p.70). These plays were produced in a largely depoliticised theatre ecology post 1979 and a diminution of oppositional voices. These plays 'seemed to propose a drastic detour from working-class lives' and 'appeared to legitimize the primacy of privileged experience'(p.58). Using the argument of Jacques Ranciere, that, '**we no longer live in the days when playwrights wanted to explain to their audience the truth of social relations and ways of struggling against capitalist domination**', Angelaki discusses the increased prominence of spectatorial experience (p.59)

In this context young men are represented as agents of social corruption without a commentary to explain the damage to the social fabric which affects them.

In his analysis of plays of this period, Fintan Walsh describes how the trouble of 'heteronormative, heterosexual, white masculinity' (Walsh 2010:10) became consolidated by the intensification of performances of diseased, failing or wounded male bodies. or the absence of father figures / parents'. (2010:55). These cultural representations and critical reflections on them form the starting point of my discussion here, a landscape of failure to chart a path from boyhood to manhood – conditioned by underlying conditions of a collapse in authority and responsibility of care for the young - a world described by Mark Ravenhill, where it had become impossible for men to achieve autonomy within a social malaise, which 'has created an environment of the infant 'me' where it is difficult to grow into the adult 'us' (2004:312).

In this paper, I wish to explore further how perspectives on the contemporary 'crisis' of masculinity and the related 'boy' crisis can be developed through historic perspectives, in particular of Edwardian understandings and representations of adolescence.

The turbulent Edwardian era, mirrors our own in relation to its rapid technological and social changes – the invention of flight, telecommunications. It is significant, too, as a period when ideas of ‘adolescence’ became fixed.

I wish to demonstrate how theatre representations of the social and economic conditions of the turbulence of Edwardian society can inform our thinking and action in relation to the contemporary impasse in the progression of young men to adulthood. My approach is interdisciplinary. My academic discipline applied theatre to be precise, theatre that is socially-engaged, participatory and often involves a renegotiation of participant identity and ideas of social change. Recent discourse in this discipline reflects a historic turn as to how theatre has operated as a reflexive site where understandings of gender and identity are represented and contested. **As Helen Nicholson argues, a history of theatre education not only demonstrates how theatre became allied to educational and social reform, it also illuminates ‘how**

**childhood, for example, has been valued, conceptualized and understood at different times' (2006:6).**

This argument reflects a wider body of cultural materialist theory and thinking as to how play texts and performances work as social records. As Marvin Carlson argues, theatre can be understood as 'a repository of cultural memory', as:

a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself  
.....[which] has always provided society with its most tangible records, of its attempts to understand its own operations  
(2001:.2).

These theories reflect Raymond Williams' perspective of drama as a site where 'processes of change in the conceptions of self and society were articulated and realised' (1981:205). It offers a record of 'emergent' forms of language and identities. These ideas are particularly relevant and useful in analysis of theatre in the Edwardian period, for example, when new concepts of adolescence were being constructed and interrogated. As British

art historian Kobena Mercer suggests, 'identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty' (1990:43). Charting a history of masculinity in its contemporary forms, where male hegemony is constantly challenged, is charting a history of crisis. Walsh's analysis of the performance of masculine crisis draws attention to the what he calls the contingency of masculinity 'its violent conditions of construction, its precarious modes of operation, and the effects of its expectations on individuals'. (2010:4)

Readings of masculinity which acknowledge this precarity and contingency also indicate ways to re-interpret processes of adolescence, by which I mean progression to male adult status.

John Beynon argues that masculinity is always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location. (2002:1). His interpretation of masculinity as a social construct sets out how masculinity is something into which boys are 'acculturated and which

is composed of social codes of behaviour which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways' (2002:2). Historians John Roper and Michael Tosh offer a further insight in relation to 'how cultural representations become part of subjective identity' (1991:15), which supports the view of adolescent 'crisis' I take forward here, as a process where dominant ideas of gender and other power relations are either accepted or challenged:

One of the most precarious moments in the reproduction of masculinity is the transfer of power to the succeeding generation, whether it be within the family from father to son, via apprenticeship in the case of skilled workers, or by 'palace revolutions' in business. The key question is whether the 'sons' take on the older generation's gender identity without question, or whether they mount a challenge, and if so how. (p.17)

This insight shapes my thinking on adolescence as varied as masculinity in its social or historical characteristics. I connote adolescence as a process of acculturation in masculine identities and adolescent 'crisis' as a structural aspect of performance, the cultural reproduction of masculine identities through processes of symbolic

transfer of value and masculine identity. This conceptualisation has helped me frame a comparative approach as I will seek to show. If these possibilities are stunted in contemporary society and the drama that reflects it, as Ravenhill suggests, what might Edwardian representations suggest?

There is since 2004 'a new cultural appetite for historicity', reflecting the arguments of *The History Manifesto* (2014) published by historians, Guldi and Armitage and their call against 'short-term thinking and in favour of macro-historical approaches in the public sphere'. (2017:84). A macro-historical approach has a particular usefulness, I argue in discussions of a 'boy crisis'

I will assume here **that the contemporary social facts of a 'boy crisis' are familiar** enough. A recent report by the Men and Boys Coalition details this fully in relation to academic underachievement and mental health. What I wish to elaborate here is a comparison of discursive positions in both social history and in performance studies in relation to 'the boy crisis' between

the Edwardian period and the contemporary.

The possibilities for this kind of approach can be illustrated in overview by a discussing **the reporting of the 2011 English Riots and the Schoolboy riots of 1911.**

These events, separated by a hundred years, offer distinct parallels in ways in which politicians characterised the urban young male as delinquent, or as an alien foreign 'other'. **David Cameron's call for 'all out war' on gangs (2011) mirrored the response of the Home Secretary a century earlier, Winston Churchill, to riots and disturbances in a General Strike in Liverpool: Churchill sent in a complete brigade of Infantry and two regiments of cavalry to suppress them.**

In 2011, sociologist Steve Hirschler recorded how historian David Starkey described the riots in a BBC Television interview as part of an invasive non-English culture. These responses are described by social historian, Geoffrey Pearson as a part of a continuous othering of the urban young commenting that 'the judgement of

foreignness is very much part of the dead-end discourse against 'troublesome youth' (2013). Geoffrey Pearson. *Hooligan. A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) identifies historic continuities in the characterisation of urban youth as 'alien' were 'convenient metaphor' that masked far more complex issues (p.230). While these reports focus on the 'Hooligan', a similar comparative lens can be applied to Edwardian writings on their 'boy crisis'.

### **The Edwardian 'Boy Crisis'**

Writing in 1911, Paul Whitehouse in his work *Problems of Boy Life* (1911), wrote of the challenge of finding appropriate education routes for the young and a new industrial order outside school discipline where the young gained financial and spatial authority but no moral guidance. Boys became associated with the advent of new technologies of mass industrialisation, the telegraph, the factory labourer and with it unstable forms of employment, early forms, I suggest, of our present conditions of precarity. These references suggest further routes for comparative

research.

### **Adolescence, Constraint and The Reinvention of Tradition**

The fixing of ideas of adolescence in this period was oriented around these notions of 'juvenile corruption', an antidote to the conditions of social and labour instability brought about by industrialisation. G. Stanley Hall's influential work *The Adolescent* legitimised social restraints and further discipline of the adolescent body. Hall's revival of Rousseau-esque ideas of 'natural' growth was intrinsically nostalgic as historian John Kett argues. It offered a nostalgic view, rooted in a sense of loss for a lost arcadia 'when young people were firmly in their place' (1977:60). Ideas of loss and restitution of a natural order underpinned much thinking about youth and adolescence. It shaped the thinking, for example, of Baden-Powell and the formation of *Scouting*. His performance practices, in the reinvention of ritual and story-telling, a key example of what Hobsbawm describes as the 'reinvention of tradition'.

These histories are important, I suggest here, to understand the social and political factors that shaped a sense of 'boy' and masculine crisis that in many ways mirrors our own. They also uncover ways in which industrialisation drove a creation of a new category of age in the adolescent, one who was increasingly identified by new spatial markers, of fashion, generational consciousness but also by ideas of spatial exclusions and disruption. What Edwardian performances also offer is a vibrant debate, before the traumatic experience of what Hobsbawm describes as the thirty-one years war from 1914 to 1945, as to new ways in which boys were to be educated to manhood.

The plays of 1912 in particular, reflect a new psychological realism in discussion of youth identities as well as a search for paths to resolve new contests of identity. Fuelled by Ibsen's naturalism, drama such as *Spring Awakening* first performed in Germany in 1891 opened up a new discussion on sexuality and adolescence. Theatre in this period represents a vibrant reflexive site, raising questions about

the boundaries between boyhood and masculinity and the transmission of values between generations.

I focus on Stanley Houghton's *The Younger Generation* (1910) as a play which both engaged with these contemporary issues and was influential in inspiring a challenge among artists to social conditions restricting the freedoms of the young. Houghton's plays were radical for the time in their interrogation of traditional views of extra-marital sex, marriage and class hierarchies. Subtitled 'A Comedy for Parents', the play is set in the recognisably Northern middle-class, non-conformist and teetotal home of the Kennions. The drama focuses on an intergenerational contest between Mr. Kennion and his younger sons, who repeatedly come home late and under the influence of alcohol.

In many ways, the subtle explorations of young male behaviour in *The Younger Generation* would not be unfamiliar subjects to a contemporary audience accustomed to reading family dramas as social commentaries. Arguments between father and

nineteen-year old son, Reggie, reveal much about the altered family dynamics of Edwardian homes where, as in twenty-first century Britain, children's departure from the home was occurring at a later age than for previous generations. The young Kennions rebel against parental restraints and parents seek to come to terms with new claims of the young for social and economic freedoms. The Kennion's situation reflects changing attitudes to the young, of a long gap between leaving school and the full independence of marriage and a decline in the practice of physical punishment, particularly in middle-class homes. It is possible to detect within the interplay of the Kennions' father-son relationships, the presence of jealousy of increasing youth freedom and affluence. Discovering the bar bill of Reggie and his friend, Kennion argues:

I don't know what the younger generation is coming to. Do you know that the money you two boys spent on one dinner would have kept a working man and his family for a whole week? ..... Wine, a boy of your age!' (1910:35).

Reggie, in contrast, complains of his boring life as a bank clerk. What Houghton brings into focus here are the changed labour conditions of the young and the challenges that issue from this to parental authority and the social and symbolic achievement of masculinity. Reggie is no longer a 'boy' in his view, but his father and society at large still cast him as one. While the arguments between the generations are good-natured, these contests evidence a lack of consensus, an undermining of stable social systems of adolescent male acculturation and an implicit precarity in the processes of transfer of power and masculine identities between generations.

The protests of the young Kennions also illuminate the new value systems that influenced Edwardian adolescent male identities. Reggie's leisure pursuits reflect a sense of economic agency and entitlement achieved through his independent employment. Altercations between father and son evidence how adolescent behaviour within the home was viewed as a disruption of domestic spaces (Donzelot, 1979:6). They also evidence a crisis of authority. In the Kennion household, this is subscribe to arcane Puritan beliefs.

The audience is made aware of the elder Kennion's own (modest) history of youthful transgressions. The allusion to the unspoken misdemeanours of Kennion's past is a significant crux of the drama, an assertion of the rights of the young to transitional spaces and ludic freedoms. Houghton's analysis indicates the limitations of the Edwardian parental home which cannot accommodate the aspirations for mobility and progression of its young male members.

Houghton, who was only twenty-eight when the play was first performed, offers instead a complex argument for recognition both of new young male subjectivities and a humane reminder that spaces for social transition and even transgression have been required by each generation. His appreciation of the particular difficulties for parents demonstrates an awareness of the challenges of passing on value systems between generations in an era of rapid social change. The final exchange of the play captures these intergenerational tensions and uncertainties when the Kennions express a sense of separation from both their parents and children:

Mrs. K. I hope it's all for the best. We seem to be out of sympathy with mother, and with the children, too.

She continues.

Mrs.K. I sometimes wonder whether we are quite right after all. (p.70)

The Kennions' dilemma remains relevant in contemporary discussions where the emergence of distinct youth social identities may present profound challenges to the transmission of values and beliefs. Houghton indicates the limitations of family socialisation for adolescents within the capitalised systems of labour and consumption of the twentieth century. He also makes a subtle but passionate plea for transitional social spaces and ludic freedom for the adolescent, for mobility and the ability to shape his own future. Houghton's work, incidentally, became a significant influence on thinking about young men's education. The play is discussed in Alec Waugh's *The Loom of Youth*, a popular polemic against the strictures and disciplines of pre-war boarding schools. Houghton's work reveals

shifts and new formations in understandings of boyhood. It prefigures late twentieth century representations, of distinctive youth identities, consciousness and patterns of behaviour. It repudiates new systems of adolescence that discipline the young through physical and sexual repression.

Houghton identifies what remains a fundamental issue in discussing a 'boy' crisis or dilemma facing young men: a loss of intergenerational authority brought about by rapidly accelerating or Heraclitean processes of social and technological change.

Finally, this analysis indicates, too, I hope, the importance and potential of study of pre-industrial forms of male association, in particular of apprenticeships and the spatial freedoms they provided for young men. Study of Edwardian realist drama of intergenerational struggle offer symbolic anticipations of a disruption in processes of male symbolic achievement of adulthood.

They reflect the social, political and labour factors which impact or disrupt the acculturation of masculinity. They also open up

perspectives on the losses incurred by industrialisation and ways in which counter-narratives might be established.

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