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“Can I Tell You about It?": England, Austerity and “Radical Optimism” in the Theatre of Anders Lustgarten

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the plays of Anders Lustgarten have taken a prominent place in the English theatre repertoire. Performed by companies including Red Ladder, Cardboard Citizens, and the Royal Shakespeare Company, Lustgarten’s dramatic writing places social and political issues centrestage, ranging from the housing crisis and the electoral ascendancy of far-right parties to the alienation of the urban working class and the racist scapegoating of immigrants. This article focuses on Lustgarten’s landmark play inspired by the Occupy movement, *If You Don’t Let Us Dream, We Won’t Let You Sleep* (Royal Court Theatre, 2013). I explore how the play engages with, and reflects on, economic austerity, forms of contemporary mass protest, and, indirectly, evolving conceptions of English nationhood. I also examine Lustgarten’s notion of “Radical Optimism” – a term he identifies with the global anti-austerity protests following the 2007-8 financial crisis – and consider its importance to what he calls “anti-prop” political theatre. The first part of the article probes the relationship between *If You Don’t Let Us Dream* and the established “tradition” of state-of-the-nation playwriting; the second part identifies the play’s challenge to this “tradition,” which is informed by its proximity to the Occupy protests.

Keywords: Anders Lustgarten, austerity, England, nation, Occupy, playwriting, political theatre, Radical Optimism

“Activist first”

Over the past decade, the plays of Anders Lustgarten have taken a prominent place in the English theatre repertoire. Performed by companies including Red Ladder, Cardboard Citizens, and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Lustgarten’s dramatic writing places social and political issues centrestage, ranging from the

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housing crisis and the electoral ascendancy of far-right parties to the alienation of the urban working class and the racist scapegoating of immigrants. His plays are varied in form and engage with diverse subject matter: indicatively, *The Insurgents* (Finborough Theatre, 2007) mounts an attack on “gentrification” by exploring the impact of property development on a family of Kurdish immigrants in north London; *A Day at the Racists* (Finborough Theatre, 2010) is a fluid piece of social realism about the growing appeal of the British National Party in a disaffected working-class community; and *Kingmakers* (Salisbury Playhouse, 2015) is a pugnacious one-act satire about Magna Carta written in blank verse. Lustgarten’s plays also address international conflicts and crises: for example, the violent legacy of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe in *Black Jesus* (Finborough Theatre, 2013), the European migrant crisis in *Lampedusa* (Soho Theatre and tour, 2015), and the impact of the Chinese Revolution in *The Sugar-Coated Bullets of the Bourgeoisie* (Arcola Theatre, 2016).

Arguably, however, Lustgarten’s most distinctive contribution to theatre is his sustained critique of economic austerity at the local and global level. In this article, I define “austerity” as the policies and programmes adopted by governments to reduce their fiscal deficits through wage restraint, cuts to public spending, and tax increases, most recently in response to the 2007-8 global financial crisis. In Britain, Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 have implemented draconian austerity measures that have been justified as an endeavour to “balance the books” after the supposedly excessive public spending commitments of the previous Labour administrations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997–2010); the inability or unwillingness of Labour politicians to construct an alternative narrative on austerity – one that confronts the systemic injustices of the global financial system – has been immensely damaging to the party’s recent electoral prospects. Lustgarten’s drama, in contrast, repeatedly lays bare the global provenance of austerity, as well as its individual and social costs: indeed, he describes austerity as “the zombipocalyptic idea of the infallible private sector” (*Plays*: 187). In June 2013, he contributed a short piece, *Three Gifts*, to a week-long season of play readings about the impact of austerity measures on the so-called “PIIGS” (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain) economies at the Royal Court Theatre, and his ambitious play for the RSC, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (Swan Theatre, 2016), presents the turbulent life of Caravaggio as a lens through which to apprehend the social depredations caused by austerity in the northern English town of Bootle.

Routinely described in media headlines as an “activist playwright” (Dickson, Godwin, Sierz), Lustgarten is careful to emphasize in interview that his political activism preceded his interest in theatre: “Remember? I’m an activist first” (qtd. in Watson). As an undergraduate student, he read Chinese Studies at Oxford

University and took a PhD on China's transition from communism to capitalism at the University of California, Berkeley. While studying in the US, he volunteered on Death Row at San Quentin prison where he devised courses on art history for inmates. He has campaigned against corporate interests in Kurdistan and the Congo, and played a leading role in human rights and international development initiatives. Lustgarten's interest in theatre was sparked when he rewrote Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* – adapted to address the Stephen Lawrence murder case – for a production by Synergy theatre company, at Wandsworth prison in London, in 2001. This experience awakened him to the power of concentrated storytelling in live performance (Godwin; Lustgarten, *Plays: 188*).

The self-description “activist first” is revealing but also potentially misleading since it carries the inference that Lustgarten's theatre is driven by a campaigning agenda and the dogmatic advocacy of “messages.” As the arts journalist Andrew Dickson observes, Lustgarten's plays are, for some of his critics, “too pitchfork-waving and agitprop-y by far” (see also Spencer). This helps to explain why, despite his prodigious theatrical output since 2007, Lustgarten has attracted relatively little attention from scholars to date.¹ This article seeks to redress the gap in scholarship by focusing on his landmark play about austerity, *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep*, staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 2013. One way of gaining a deeper understanding of this play is to examine its relationship to the established tradition of state-of-the-nation theatre in Britain: while there are similarities between *If You Don't Let Us Dream* and the state-of-the-nation play, there are also significant differences. Specifically, I argue that Lustgarten's notion of “Radical Optimism” (*Plays: 188*), a term he identifies with the global anti-austerity protests following the 2007-8 financial crisis, is integral to his vision of politics and theatre. Far from being too “agitprop-y,” I contend that this play, while highly critical of austerity economics, gives expression to the indeterminate hermeneutics shaping forms of contemporary mass protest, including the Occupy movement which inspired the play. In so doing, Lustgarten reworks the conventions of state-of-the-nation dramaturgy to reflect on economic austerity, Occupy activism, and, indirectly, evolving conceptions of English nationhood. In the ensuing analysis, therefore, I begin by considering *If You Don't Let Us Dream* in relation to state-of-the-nation playwriting before examining its challenge to this “tradition,” which is informed by its proximity to the Occupy movement.

¹ With some exceptions: Mark O'Thomas, and Emma Cox and Marilena Zaroulia have recently published illuminating commentary on specific plays.

State-of-the-nation playwriting

In *Theatre & Nation*, Nadine Holdsworth points out that, although the state-of-the-nation play is difficult to define, “it is one of those things that we know when we see it” (39); she also observes that, internationally, it can “take many forms [...], from psychologically rich social realism, through magic realism, to multimedia productions that fuse live and recorded action” (39). In Britain, however, state-of-the-nation theatre is most readily identified with the generation of playwrights that emerged from the counterculture of the late 1960s. The rise of the state-of-the-nation play at this juncture is expressive of the creative ambition of younger writers to address and historicize topical subject matter in the larger theatre spaces newly available to them, including – by the time of its opening in 1976 – the new National Theatre complex on London’s South Bank. Arguably, the first state-of-the-nation play of the seventies was *Brassneck*, a dynastic satire on local government corruption co-written by Howard Brenton and David Hare, and directed by Richard Eyre at the Nottingham Playhouse in 1973. Two of the most prominent state-of-the-nation plays from later in the decade are David Edgar’s *Destiny* (The Other Place, 1976) and David Hare’s *Plenty* (Lyttelton Theatre, 1978): the former offers a forensic account of the class politics of the far right in 1970s Britain; the latter stages a woman’s heart-shattering odyssey, at once intimate and epic, through years of post-war disillusionment. Despite their differences in structure and content, state-of-the-nation plays tend to offer a wide-angle perspective on the recent past filtered through the experiences of their often-beleaguered protagonists; they are broadly social realist in style with episodic or non-chronological narrative elements, and their dramatic momentum is directed towards a ferocious indictment of British public life and institutional stagnation. The state-of-the-nation play is, in fact, symptomatic of a wider cultural turn towards the anatomization of national decline in the 1970s, which accounts for its frequently pessimistic, even dystopic, tone: *Plenty* concludes in a melancholy but unforgettable image of nostalgia-soaked reverie; *Destiny* ends with the voice of Adolf Hitler at Nuremburg in 1933 – a warning that the wheels of history are turning, once again, towards fascism; and the final line of Howard Brenton’s revised version of *The Churchill Play* (Nottingham Playhouse, 1974; revised for RSC, 1978) is the most chillingly apocalyptic in post-war British theatre: “I don’t want the future to be [...] The Third World War” (Brenton 176, 177).

Forty years on, veteran playwrights such as Edgar and Hare remain deeply invested in the ongoing vitality of this form of theatre and, beyond that, to the role of the dramatist in contributing to public debate on issues of national importance. Indeed, in an article written by Dalya Alberge for the *Observer* in January 2017, Hare is quoted suggesting that the “state of England” play is “the strongest line in

British theatre,” with Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009) designated “the last surpassingly successful play in that tradition.” More controversially, Hare insists that this “tradition” is currently facing extinction because of the pervasive influence of European “theatre makers” and their “over-aesthetised” productions: as he puts it, “all that directorial stuff that we’ve managed to keep over on the continent is now coming over and beginning to infect our theatre.” To elide “England” with “Britain,” as Hare does in these remarks, is problematic – as is the implication that “state of England” playwriting is an indigenous “tradition” (a notion that effaces the European antecedents and influences – ranging from Bernard Shaw to Brecht – that are part of its dramaturgical DNA). But, unsurprisingly, it is Hare’s characterization of European theatre aesthetics as a viral contagion, coupled with the publication of his remarks in the aftermath of Britain’s EU Referendum in June 2016, which have attracted the most condemnation from critics and scholars alike (see, indicatively, Radosavljević).

In her article responding to Hare, the *Guardian* theatre critic Lyn Gardner insists that contemporary playwrights *are*, in fact, addressing the “state of England” but they are doing so by writing about global concerns: there is, she argues, “an entire swath of playwrights who are writing not just state of the nation but state of the world plays.” Gardner does not cite Lustgarten as an example but his theatre certainly illustrates her point: even though they are set in England, plays such as *The Insurgents* and *A Day at the Racists* make visible the damaging effects of multinational corporations, international property speculation, and globalization on the lives of his characters. Lustgarten himself acknowledges this point in a discussion of *If You Don’t Let Us Dream*: while some audience members assumed that the play was set in a dystopic future society, in fact, he states, “Everything in that play [...] is true. [...] It’s either happened in Greece already or it’s being trialled [by companies such as Goldman Sachs]” (qtd. in Sierz). Lustgarten insists that austerity should be understood as “development politics coming home” (qtd. in Sierz) and this idea is instantiated as the dramatic premise of the first part of *If You Don’t Let Us Dream*: in other words, the play imbricates the “state of England” with the “state of the world” by relocating, to the contemporary English context, the harsh economic policies visited upon southern Europe and ‘developing’ countries in Africa.

In her concluding remarks on state-of-the-nation playwriting, Holdsworth observes that some theatre critics, such as Michael Billington, prefer “upheaval and turbulence [...] thesis, argument and pronouncement” in the experience of drama while others, such as Jill Dolan in her writings on theatre and utopia, attempt “to move beyond the national paradigm [to harness] the power of theatre as an imaginative, creative, communal, expansive, ephemeral and ever-evolving process” (41). I want to suggest that *If You Don’t Let Us Dream* sits precisely at the

crux of this tension: it is a left-wing drama that enacts – in Part Two – a public debate that draws on multiple perspectives on an issue of national concern (austerity). In these respects, the play is recognizably part of the state-of-the-nation “tradition” lauded by Hare and Billington. But, following Gardner and Dolan, it also brings local and global points of reference into theatrical conjunction, “move[s] beyond the national paradigm” by presenting austerity in England as “development politics coming home,” and refuses to proselytize “messages” affirming, instead, solidarity and hope – what Lustgarten calls Radical Optimism – as prerequisites for “ever-evolving” social transformation. Indeed, the location of political energy in Radical Optimism is the key element in his theatre that differentiates it from the glittering but pessimistic state-of-the-nation “tradition” of the past.

If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep

If You Don't Let Us Dream opened in February 2013 on the Royal Court's main stage, directed by Simon Godwin and designed by Lucy Sierra. The cast of eight actors included Meera Syal, Lucian Msamati, and Damien Molony, with most performers playing multiple roles. It was staged without décor – a pared-down, asset-stripped scenography that signalled the context of austerity.

The play is divided into two parts. Part One consists of ten scenes that show the incursion of private profiteering into every vector of state provision, including social security, prisons, the health service, and schools. These scenes introduce characters who become increasingly interconnected as the action progresses. At two points in the play's first half, audio snippets from then Prime Minister David Cameron's speeches are broadcast: his response to the 2011 riots in English cities and a speech in which he describes free markets as “the best imaginable force for improving human wealth and happiness” (Lustgarten, *Plays*: 1 122).² These recordings form an ironic counterpoint to the action of the scenes in Part One while establishing a measure of documentary veracity in the play's treatment of its themes.

Part One is comprised of scenes that show ordinary people put under interminable pressure by the neoliberal forces gaining traction on quotidian life. For example, in Scene Two, a Workman installs an electricity meter in the home of a pensioner, Joan, forcing her to pay an exorbitant “debt tax” (101). Scene Three is set in a prison holding cell where a young man called Ryan, arrested for being

² All subsequent quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

caught up in a riot or street protest, is questioned by an employee of “Competitive Confinement Ltd” – a privatized company whose officers are paid “to reduce rates of reoffending” (103) by targeting, not the serial offenders, but those who are disposed to rehabilitation by coercing them to plead guilty to crimes they did not commit. In Scene Four, Joan, injured by her attempt to demolish the meter that we saw installed in her home earlier, is refused admittance to a hospital because its Administrator will not risk extending waiting lists. After hearing this, Joan vents her frustration on an African man, McDonald Moyo, who she sees being admitted to the hospital: “What gives you the right to jump over me? What gives you the right to bloody be here at all?” (108). In Scene Five, we meet Ryan again, this time with his two mates Jason and Ross. They are drinking in a Wetherspoon’s pub watching football; a bottle is smashed accidentally and McDonald, now working as the pub cleaner, appears with a mop to clear up the mess. Jason hurls racist insults at McDonald, claiming that he is taking their jobs: “Everyone, *everyone’s* got a piece of the pie except for us and I am sick and fucking tired of it” (111). The scene ends with McDonald throwing a bucket of water over Jason and a physical fight ensues. In the final scene of Part One, Joan sits in her cold and candle-lit home (her electricity has now been cut off) drinking a mug of tea alongside McDonald, who she has invited to join her. She apologizes for her earlier racist outburst at the hospital, assuring him that “I’m not that kind of person” (123). McDonald tells her that he is a university-educated structural engineer from Zimbabwe: “This is the first time any English person has invited me into their home” (124). Joan’s offer of a cup of tea thus represents the first, tentative, gesture of optimism in the play.

Part One traces a matrix of relationships within one community, exposing the way that vulnerable citizens are scapegoated or subjected to racist abuse as private enterprise puts relentless pressure on the bonds of community. Meanwhile, the scenes set in a government department trace an ever-intensifying momentum to monetize natural and human resources: as McLean, the Whitehall representative, puts it, “It’s more difficult to put a price on clean air or children, to establish a monetary value for happiness or truth. But not impossible. With the right model” (120). Her statement represents the nightmarish but logical extension of what Lustgarten calls “development politics coming home:” by the end of Part One, the statistical increases in crime, rape, and depression are celebrated as maximal opportunities for financial gain.

Part Two, according to Lustgarten, aims to give a sense of a “potential alternative” (qtd. in Sierz). It takes the form of one extended scene in which several activists – including Joan and Ryan from Part One – convene in a make-shift courtroom to put austerity as a system on trial in an act of performative protest; a large banner – “THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION” – hangs across the

judge's bench (125).³ There are references throughout Part Two to recent instances of protest and activism: for example, one middle-aged member of the group, Jen, recalls the Reclaim the Streets movement and the environmental protests at Twyford Downs (125); she also references the anti-capitalist demonstrations of J18, Seattle and Genoa (133). Kelly, a former anthropology student in her thirties and “new to the movement” (125), discloses that she was politicized by watching the killing of Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protests in London in 2009 on YouTube (126). Ray's involvement in activism, meanwhile, derives from his experiences of growing up in Northern Ireland (134). Zebedee, the veteran activist of the group, wears the Guy Fawkes mask from the film *V for Vendetta* (2005), now associated with the so-called “Anonymous” hacktivist network and adopted by street protestors around the world. During their discussions, some of the characters deploy the repertoire of hand signs used to moderate meetings at the Occupy encampments (135).

These verbal and visual signifiers situate the group's protest within real-world contexts of struggle; they also identify the theatre as a prosthetic of protest, a space for deliberation on the necessity and value of activism. Importantly, Lustgarten's dialogue communicates information that spectators may be unaware of – for example, the international precedents for debt cancellation (150) and the “Rolling Jubilee” initiative to buy up debt (153). As Lustgarten states, “What I've tried to do very explicitly in this play is inject concepts that are not in the political mainstream as much into the political mainstream as possible” (qtd. in Sierz). One of the most important speeches in the play concerns the subordination of politicians to banks: as Tom – a former banker who joins the group out of curiosity – puts it, “you have to give us an alternative” (142). Kelly states that there is no alternative yet because of the attachment of Western societies to debt. Her memorable line “debt is our word for love” (143) is inspired by the anthropologist David Graeber's book, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011), which argues that social obligations across human cultures tend to be expressed in terms of debt (Sierz). Zebedee describes austerity as “the greatest heist in the history of the modern world” (153) and argues that the bank bailout should lead to debt cancellation. Kelly claims that people today have a strong sense of what is wrong but not how to put it right: what is needed, she insists, is “a new space and a new language. It's not the answers right now, it's the questions” (143). Her remark resonates with an earlier comment from Ray in which he laments “a loss of life, a

³ There are echoes here of Howard Brenton's Situationist-inspired *Magnificence* (1973), which was performed on the same Royal Court stage almost exactly forty years earlier. Both Brenton's play and Part Two of Lustgarten's take place in a dilapidated setting occupied by a small group of activists (with a banner) planning a protest against capitalism.

whole world of what could have been that's being strangled" (134). Part Two is characterized by this incessant stoking of desire for an alternative world and the formulation of questions that might expedite its emergence.

Towards the end of the play, McDonald enters the courtroom to inspect the premises in his new job as a Health and Safety Officer. His arrival throws the viability of the protest into doubt but brings him into contact, once again, with Ryan whom he last encountered during the racist assault at the pub. In the play's final sequence, there is the possibility of *rapprochement* between the white working-class young man and the older black immigrant. When talking with McDonald, Ryan emphasizes the importance of being able to "*imagine* something else whether it's this or something different but the *possibility* of something else" (157); in the play's closing line, he invites McDonald to join him in conversation about the upcoming protest: "Can I tell you about it?" (157).

Occupy and radical optimism

The full title of the play, *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep*, is taken from a slogan adopted by the "Indignados" ("the Outraged") anti-austerity movement that began in Madrid's Puerta del Sol public square in May 2011. Lustgarten spent time with the Indignados in Madrid and Barcelona, and became involved in the nascent Occupy movement, which acquired global momentum following the Occupy Wall Street protests in Zuccotti Park, New York City, in September 2011. Whilst the scope of the Occupy movement is wide ranging and it has not published a manifesto, the Occupy protests targeted social inequality, economic injustice, the pervasive influence and greed of corporations, and the lack of democratic control and accountability in governance. The play was commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre to capture Lustgarten's experiences of the protests and it opened one year after the eviction of Occupy London from its encampment outside St Paul's Cathedral.

In the introduction to the published text of his play, Lustgarten states that participation in direct action is empowering because it "gives you a sense of optimism and excitement, and optimism is about the most radical quality you can possess right now" (*Plays: 1* 88; see also Thompson). For him, theatre and protest are related forms of public participation – he describes theatre as "a strange microcosm of a good society" (qtd in Lewenstein) – within which optimism and the impulse to sociality can be incubated at the individual and collective level. Radical Optimism arises from involvement in direct action and peaceful protest; it is made resilient by an awareness of the vibrant and often hidden histories of

class struggle, and, by implication, it has the potential – including in theatre – to galvanize new social imaginaries.

In her reflections on Occupy and recent dramaturgies of protest, Sophie Nield, drawing on the writings of Henri Lefebvre, observes that “the forces of authority continually seek to draw what we might term prosceniums around protest” (126). She attends to the ways that mass protest is typically policed, regulated, and sometimes literally ring-fenced – or “proscenium-ed” – precisely in order to make it “legible:” that is, liable to recuperation “and positioned once more as a representational, discursive activity, making a ‘point’ rather than a material breach in the social fabric” (128). Nield observes, however, that the Occupy movement refused to participate in this “politics of legibility” (122):

It came, it stayed and it said little. [...] the sustained refusal of the broader movement to make a coherent statement out of itself essentially reversed the usual function of symbolic theatrical gestures [...] the very refusal to articulate caused it to return onto ideological and other structures of power an exposing gaze which revealed something of their inner structures and contradictions. (121, 132)

Although, on 16 October 2011, Occupy London released its foundational “Initial Statement,” this document, tellingly, affirms that Occupy “will always be a work in progress.” The “illegibility” of Occupy extends from this refusal to delimit its aims, to state categorically its purpose, and to deliberate a utilitarian function for itself within the symbolic, rhetorical, and performative repertoires of mass protest. Lustgarten himself confirms this point: “The first step in any political resistance is *Je refuse* and that’s what Occupy was” (qtd. in Doohan). He also insists, with some justification, that his theatre is similarly invested in raising questions rather than giving answers: in a discussion with Aleks Sierz about *If You Don’t Let Us Dream*, Lustgarten states that “What I’m really looking for here politically [...] is not an answer, it’s a realization of the questions we need to ask.”

One of the striking features of the play, then, is the absorption of Occupy’s “refusal to articulate” into its dramatic structure. It is notable that the show-trial of austerity is not represented in Part Two but, instead, the emphasis is placed on the preparatory work – the group’s discussions, their disagreements, the difficult maintaining of unity, the making ready of the space. This focus puts the dramatic conventions of the state-of-the-nation play under reflexive scrutiny: the play returns – to co-opt Nield’s terminology quoted previously – “an exposing gaze” onto the “inner structures” of state-of-the-nation dramaturgy with its disposition to pessimism and “making a ‘point.’” Michael Billington, in his review of the Royal Court production, commends the political subject matter of *If You Don’t Let Us Dream* but remarks that it “rarely offers the dramatic satisfaction of intellectual debate:” he compares the play to a Brechtian *Lehrstücke* that

falls short of “genuine dialectic.” Billington’s reaction comes as no surprise given Holdsworth’s observation, referenced earlier, about his penchant for a theatre of intellectual clarity driven by the juggernaut of reasoned dialectic. For Lustgarten, however, the refusal of “dramatic satisfaction,” the disavowal of resolved “dialectic,” is precisely the means through which he enjoins the spectator into dialogue about austerity and the possible alternatives to it (it is apposite that the play concludes with one character extending an invitation to another to join a conversation).

Theatre critics have offered contrasting responses to the play’s strategic “illegibility:” depending on the reviewer, it is both recognizable and unrecognizable as a state-of-the-nation play, at once too message-driven (Charles Spencer dismisses it as an “agitprop drama about zombie capitalism”) and not message-driven enough (Billington). In a pre-emptive remark that anticipates some of these reactions, Lustgarten states:

I have a feeling they’ll try and call it agitprop, but in fact it’s the exact opposite. It’s far more nuanced and subtle analysis of how things actually are than most non-political plays. It’s actually looking at the effects of major systems on real people and not in a dogmatic way but in quite a realistic, practical way. What it is is anti-prop. (qtd. in Doohan)

In summary, Lustgarten melds the pared-down stage aesthetics, representative characters, and dystopic satirical bite of agitprop (in Part One) with state-of-the-nation, debate-driven social realist elements (in Part Two). And, although an incendiary indictment of economic austerity issues from the play, its central preoccupation is the deliberation of alternatives. In this respect, *If You Don’t Let Us Dream* is a play of “*Je refuse*,” of “agit” rather than “prop,” where the force of negation is off-set by (Occupy-inspired) Radical Optimism: the latter is discernible across a spectrum of social interactions in the play, from small acts of hospitality – such as the offer of a cup of tea – to impassioned discussions about the failing global economic system.

Staging English nationhood

Crucially, Radical Optimism and the context of austerity also shape the representation of national identity in the play. The politics scholar Michael Kenny, in *The Politics of English Nationhood* (2014), observes that there has been a recent resurgence of interest in Englishness triggered by factors including devolution, multiculturalism, “an emerging discourse of anti-system populism” (2), and the social insecurities unleashed by austerity. He also contends that, since the 1990s, “the realms of culture, the arts, and the creative industries, rather than the arenas

of politics, policy-making, and political thought” (26) have led the way in reimagining Englishness. To illustrate this point, he cites numerous examples of theatre – Butterworth’s *Jerusalem*, Edgar’s *Playing with Fire* (Olivier Theatre, 2005), Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s Kitchen* (Cottesloe Theatre, 2003), and Damon Albarn’s opera *Dr Dee* (Palace Theatre, Manchester, 2011) – that have revived concepts of English national identity and myth in the new century. In the past few years, Kenny argues, theatre, literature, and the arts have given expression to “growing uncertainties about who the English are, and [have also provided] a stimulus to the development of new ideas and feelings about this form of identity” (132). For him, there is a pressing need to develop a vision of Englishness that is “sufficiently meaningful to be resonant at a popular level” while also “sufficiently outward-facing to promote the idea of trans-national cooperation” (240). Theatre is identified by Kenny as an important arena for “outward-facing” public deliberation on national identity: *If You Don’t Let Us Dream*, while not dealing explicitly with questions of Englishness, undertakes exactly this deliberative function.

The play constructs its vision of Englishness through the staging of a disparate community of activists brought together in opposition to austerity. In his insightful essay on cosmopolitanism and Englishness, the sociology scholar Christopher G. A. Bryant advocates a vision of English nationhood rooted in the cosmopolitan ideal – which he summarizes as “a move towards mutuality and solidarity within wider alliances and bigger blocs and, crucially, beyond them” (99). As part of his analysis, Bryant imports the term “utopian realism” – from Anthony Giddens’ *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) – to capture this aspiration for a cosmopolitan England:

It is utopian insofar as it treats cosmopolitan England as a good thing, an England whose desirable characteristics and possibilities outweigh its undesirable ones. And it is realist in that it recognises that the formation of a cosmopolitan England has already started and might credibly be expected to continue. (95)

“Utopian realism,” as set out by Bryant, upholds the prospects of an Englishness “that is perceptibly constituted in significant measure by people, practices and ideas from around the world” (95). I argue that this notion of “utopian realism” is encapsulated and given embryonic expression in *If You Don’t Let Us Dream*: Lustgarten’s play – and the casting of the Royal Court production – represent an ethnically diverse group of citizens constituted in alterity, growing solidarity, concern for the national interest, global consciousness, and a commitment to inclusive dialogue. In other words, from the play’s dramatization of a fledgling anti-austerity protest, a microcosmic vision of cosmopolitan England is constellated. And, importantly, what links Bryant’s discourse on evolving English na-

tionhood to Lustgarten's Occupy-influenced dramatization of political protest is the shared idea of "work-in-progress" – of large-scale transformations in identity and thinking grounded in difficult processes of dialogic encounter (which is exemplified, finally, in the play's open-ended conclusion: "Can I tell you about it?").⁴

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for the distinctiveness of Anders Lustgarten's playwriting in its insistent critique of austerity. I have explored the relationship of *If You Don't Let Us Dream* to the "tradition" of state-of-nation playwriting and suggested that Lustgarten constructs an image of cosmopolitan national identity which, like the anti-austerity protest underway in Part Two of the play, is a dynamic "work-in-progress." Finally, I have argued that Radical Optimism is the directive principle at the heart of Lustgarten's dramatic and political teleology. Radical Optimism, in this respect, can be conceived as the affective residue of the play's "utopian realism" – what is left from the theatrical encounter with unfinished, incomplete protest-staged-as-process that "might credibly be expected to continue."

Lustgarten's play, of course, predates recent seismic shifts in global geopolitics including the vote for Brexit in the EU Referendum of June 2016. Brexit raises questions about the prospects and viability of Radical Optimism, as well as notions of "cosmopolitan England," in the years ahead. Moreover, the onset of the European migrant crisis in 2015 prompted Lustgarten to become increasingly impatient with the Occupy movement's focus on process: "I'm ambivalent about what an alternative ideology would look like. In lieu of that, what we really need is a human connection" (qtd. in Thompson). This focus on "human connection" explains the shift in emphasis of his subsequent 2016 play, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, which explores the *enactment* of Radical Optimism in the corrosive miasma of daily life.

⁴ It is significant that the first major play to address the state-of-the-nation after the vote for Brexit, the part-verbatim *My Country* curated by Rufus Norris and Carol Ann Duffy (Dorfman Theatre and national tour, 2017), is sub-titled "*a work in progress*."

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Bionote

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