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# Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* A Treasure Hunt in London



By Margherita Laera

**Photo 1:** Royal Court Theatre, *War and Peace*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). Alex (Lewis Lempereur-Palmer) shoots the headless Soldier (Burn Gorman) in the arm.

Photo: Robert Workman

*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* is a series of short plays by the acclaimed British playwright Mark Ravenhill (b. 1966), author of texts such as *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999) and *The Cut* (2006). *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* opened at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007 with the working title *Ravenhill for Breakfast* and was performed over sixteen mornings at the Traverse Theatre, where breakfast rolls were served to the audience. Winner of the Fringe First Award, the project was produced by Paines Plough, the new writing theatre company, that commissioned Ravenhill to write one short play for every day of the Edinburgh Festival.

The entire cycle investigates the effects of war, be it in Iraq, Afghanistan, or other regions of the Middle-East, on our domestic everyday life. Ravenhill also examines the West's urge to export its trademark goods of "freedom and democracy;" while at home, "we live in gated communities" and "withdraw into more and more fearfully isolated groups" (Ravenhill, "My Near Death Period"). Each play takes its title from a classic epic such as *Paradise Lost* and *The Odyssey*. The collection consists of sixteen short plays of twenty minutes each. A seventeenth play, *Paradise Regained*, was commissioned by the Golden Mask Festival in Moscow and presented at the Royal Court in September 2008. Altogether the plays would make a six-hour marathon if performed one after the other.

In April 2008, the sixteen original plays were produced by different companies, including Paines Plough and Out of

Joint, and presented across London at various venues such as the National Theatre, The Gate Theatre, The Royal Court Theatre, Village Underground in Shoreditch, and on BBC Radio 3. Ravenhill and Dominic Cooke (the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre) felt that, had the cycle been presented as a single continuous piece, the audience would have been confronted with too great a burden. This is a pity, considering that Canadian director Robert Lepage managed to gather a considerable number of Londoners for a nine-hour run of his latest production *Lipsynch* at the Barbican Theatre in September 2008. However, *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* does contain a high degree of violence, which is perhaps why it might be best assimilated in small pieces.

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In the author's own description, *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* is an "epic cycle of short plays" (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 5), the title of which refers to videogame terminology, suggesting an interactive quest for a treasure by the audience. Ravenhill was told by an expert that every videogame quest can be reduced to the phrase "shoot, get the treasure and repeat." Inspired by this description and feeling that it well described the relationship he wanted the audience to have with the fragmented performance in London, he changed the initial title to encourage participation by the audience. Combining theatre with videogame, the spectators now became "players" in search of treasures. But what exactly were they looking for? Far from being a heterogeneous collage, *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* should be conceived as a fragmented whole in which it is possible for members of the audience to "piece together a bigger narrative" (Ravenhill, "My Near Death Period") and to be an active "meaning hunter" by drawing connections between the plays. Perhaps this is the "treasure" that Ravenhill wanted the audience to "get."

The contradictory structure of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*—monumental and concise at the same time—is conceptualized by the author as an "honest" depiction of our times, a sort of formal realism:

I didn't want this to have a grand narrative with linking plot and characters. I wanted this global theme to be glimpsed through 16 fragments, individual moments that could be watched singly but that would resonate and grow the more fragments each audience member saw. I felt this would be an honest reflection of the world we live in. It's a world in which we are more aware than ever of our global connections, and in which we still hunger for the grand narratives of the *Lord of the Rings* or Shakespeare's History plays. But it's also a world in which we get so much of our information in shorter bursts: the soundbite, the text scrolling across the screen, the YouTube clip ("My Near Death Period").

The short plays are located half-way between realism and symbolism: as Patrice Pavis suggests, Ravenhill's realist writing is "reminiscent of Ibsen" (Pavis 6). An overall purpose can be detected in this epic, which is perhaps closer to a Brechtian epic play than might immediately be recognised. The structure and the characters are symbolically charged but carefully individualised, and although conclusions are not drawn explicitly by the author, one feels that far from being radically subversive of the "System," Ravenhill's writing is nevertheless dismissive of both American theo-conservative Manichaeism and the British Labour Government's patronising rhetoric abroad and at home.

For instance, *Women of Troy*, the first play of the cycle, was inspired by an American from the Midwest asking on TV: "Why bomb us? We're the good guys" (Ravenhill, "The Daily Play"). The play represents a chorus of women, whose

different voices are only identified by hyphens in the written script, struggling to understand why their city has been hit by a terrorist attack. The women's lines sound like an anthology of clichés and "commonplaces" so trite that they lose the connections with the individuals who articulate them: "I only eat good food. Ethical food. Because I believe that good choices should be made when you're shopping. All of my choices are good choices. They really are." (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 8). While members of the same community are seen as "a world of good people," outsiders are constructed as an absolute and evil Other. The suicide bomber who appears at the end of *Women of Troy* can be understood as a parodic materialization of the community's worst anxieties and fears:

- Which of you is the suicide bomber?  
Identify yourself. Come forward. Come forward.  
*A Man steps from the crowd with a backpack on.*  
**Man** I am the suicide bomber.
- You can kill us, detonate your. . . blow our bodies apart, rip our heads from our... consume us in your flames because we will die a good death.
- A good death for a good people.
- A good death for a good people.
- Hallelujah!  
(*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 15)

Ravenhill explores the effects of politics and ideology over the characters' bodies and language practices. He exposes the repercussions of war and the effects of the society of the spectacle on our relationships and biological functions such as eating, dreaming, and having sex. According to Debord's analysis of twentieth-century society, the importance of the image, commodity fetishism, and the cultural hegemony of mass media means that "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (*The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 1). For Retort, the notion of society of the spectacle in the twenty-first century is implemented by the state's "investment in, and control of, the field of images" (*Afflicted Powers* 21). The concept of spectacle can be defined as "a submission of more and more facets of human sociability [...] to the deadly solicitations [...] of the market," which generates a mechanism able to "systematize and disseminate appearances, and to subject the texture of day-to-day living to a constant barrage of images, instructions, slogans, logos, false promises, virtual realities, miniature happiness-motifs" (*Afflicted Powers* 24).

Although Ravenhill claims that there is not a correct order in which to see the plays (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 5), the positioning of the plays within the cycle (i.e. the order in which they were written and performed in Edinburgh, and consequently published in the collection by Methuen Drama) is reminiscent of the basic structure of Greek tragedy where episodes alternate with choral ensembles. There is a Chorus at the beginning and the end of the cycle, and choral scenes separate the other short



**Photo 2:** Royal Court Theatre, *War and Peace*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). Alex (Lewis Lempereur-Palmer) is visited in his bedroom every night by a headless Soldier (Burn Gorman).  
Photo: Robert Workman



**Photo 3:** Royal Court Theatre, *Fear and Misery*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). A headless Soldier (Burn Gorman) enters the living room and watches Harry (Joseph Millson) and Olivia (Joanna Riding) while they are having dinner.  
Photo: Robert Workman

plays into acts:

1. *Women of Troy* (Chorus)
2. *Intolerance* (Monologue)
3. *Women in Love* (Dialogue)
4. *Fear and Misery* (Dialogue)
5. *War and Peace* (Dialogue)
6. *Yesterday an Incident Occurred* (Chorus)
7. *Crime and Punishment* (Dialogue)
8. *Love (But I Won't Do That)* (Dialogue)
9. *The Mikado* (Dialogue)
10. *War of the Worlds* (Chorus)
11. *Armageddon* (Dialogue)
12. *The Mother* (Dialogue)
13. *Twilight of the Gods* (Dialogue)
14. *Paradise Lost* (Dialogue)
15. *The Odyssey* (Chorus)
16. *Birth of a Nation* (Chorus)
17. *Paradise Regained* (Dialogue)

All of the chorus plays feature “impersonal singularities” rather than rounded characters. Acting like a bond, fear ties together members of a community as in *Yesterday an Incident Occurred*, where an undefined assault has been carried out against a city and the speakers are looking for the “rotten egg” (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 63). In *War of the Worlds*, the people of a city gather together to express their dismay after another city has been hit by a “terrorist” attack. In *The Odyssey*, a group of soldiers fighting the “battle of freedom and democracy” prepares

to return home, and in *Birth of a Nation*, a team of “artists-facilitators” introduce their patronizing strategy to help a bombed nation deal with trauma through art therapy. In all of the chorus plays it is as though the audience could hear the voice of neoliberal ideology itself speaking through a series of exemplar individuals.

Recurrent themes such as war, love, death, and fear characterize the cycle and the same language expressions are used by various characters in different plays, such as the image of the “headless soldier” (*Fear and Misery*, *War and Peace*) [Photo 1, 2, and 3] or the “angel with broken wings” (*Women of Troy*, *Armageddon*). Some idioms can be seen as social mythologies in the sense that they refer to cultural commonplaces or rituals that characterize Western Civilization; for example, the idea of having a “breakfast roll and coffee” symbolizes the comfort and security of a Western middle-class home. Frequent discursive practices such as the phrase “we are the good people,” or the sense of fear and terror towards “the bad guys” (immigrants, gays, terrorists, blacks, gypsies, and criminals) exemplifies the mould of mainstream ideology and of the politics of fear on the practice of everyday life [Photo 4]. The phrase “freedom



**Photo 4:** Royal Court Theatre, *Fear and Misery*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). Harry (Joseph Millson) and Olivia (Joanna Riding) have dinner and discuss the fact that “the Gyppos” were finally removed from their neighborhood by the police.

Photo: Robert Workman

and democracy” becomes a meaningless refrain degraded by overuse and misuse, but it is also an example of how the society of the spectacle expropriates and alienates language itself. Ravenhill questions neoliberalism, the triumph of capitalism and New Labour ideologies, but seemingly does not take sides as evidenced by the divergent interpretations of his stage metaphors by theatre critics and scholars.<sup>1</sup>

As Ravenhill puts it the “blurred geographies” of the plays, in which no clear setting is ever mentioned, contributes to the openness and indeterminacy of his stage imagery (BBC 4 Interview). The playwright unsettles common beliefs and dominant middle-class ideologies—sometimes to the point of parody—by exposing their everyday deteriorated use by “normal” people and communities. Are we here or

are we there? Ravenhill creates an “anywhere” which reflects the approximation of ignorance and the blindness of fear, where the “good guys” are natives of western democracies, the “bad guys” are the Palestinians, the Iraqis, the Taliban, the Pakistanis, or Al Qaeda supporters – anyone or all of them indifferently. The fundamental aspect of our society that Ravenhill so powerfully captures is that the media and mainstream political discourse have constructed a fearful opposition between “us” and “them,” the familiar and the unfamiliar, which establishes an atmosphere of reciprocal suspicion that permeates people’s bodies, expropriating them of their own words and influencing their physiological functions. The political affects the domestic dimension of dreams (*War and Peace*), diseases such as cancer (*The Mikado*), obsession for order, security, and cleanliness (*Fear and Misery*), food intolerance and gut irritability (*Intolerance*), sexual behaviour (*Crime and Punishment*, *Fear and Misery*), gum sensitivity and bleeding (*Armageddon*), and so on.

The innovative aspects of the London productions were the user-friendly structure, which enabled interactivity and encouraged different levels of engagement by the audience. Theatregoers were expected to enjoy the shuffle mode and the fast-forward option to skip unwanted tracks. Throughout April 2008, London became the site of a huge treasure hunt: catch as many Ravenhill’s as you can and spot the connections between the plays. No doubt the fragmentation of the piece was part of its original aesthetics, but the scattering across London venues—which must have been in part due to financial reasons since none of the theatres alone could afford a run of the entire cycle—made *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* all the more exciting. In order to see the entire series, Londoners were required to travel and hunt for the scattered episodes, like single glimpses of a bigger picture they could only reconstruct in their minds.

The National Theatre, one of London’s most established state-funded venues, presented four short plays at unconventional times (10 am, 11 am, and 6 pm) on two of its three stages. Spectators arrived on a Saturday morning at 10, still struggling to keep their eyes open and holding take-away coffees—an unusual feeling for a theatregoer, but one that added to the experience of the treasure hunt. *The Mikado* was performed on a double bill with *The Odyssey* in the Lyttelton Theatre, while *Crime and Punishment* and *Intolerance* were at the Cottesloe Theatre. Both shows were at 10 and 11 am, so that people could catch the two double bills in either order. Piecing together these four distinct stories, the audience was encouraged to engage with the multiple repercussions of war, both at the front and at home.

*Intolerance* is a monologue about a middle-class wife and mother-of-one who is obsessed with her health. Besides her beloved son and husband, she is exclusively interested in her detox smoothie, which will help her get rid of the bad stuff trapped in her guts. Sitting at her breakfast table, she addresses the audience while she drinks her freshly squeezed raspberry, cranberry and apple juice, wearing a

fashionable brown tracksuit. She tells us she used to suffer from severe gut irritability, which would suddenly hit her with unbearable pain for apparently no reason. Then she discovered “the key”: she was intolerant to coffee. She has been following a caffeine-free diet, but eating lots of probiotic yogurt “plays its part in keeping the pain away.” Unleashing a series of middle-class prejudices and unconsciously racist claims, she recalls the time when she was seeing an analyst to address her problem and dismissively calls him a “Little fat Jew.” Her mysterious pain instantly comes back and she crawls on the floor.

After a five-minute break, *Crime and Punishment* relocates us to an unidentified war-zone, where a soldier is interrogating a female prisoner without any clear charge. The woman’s country has just been “liberated” from the tyranny of an evil dictator by the soldier and his comrades, but the woman maintains that, with a civil war now exploding, they have actually been thrown out of the frying pan into the fire. The woman, who wants to leave to assist her mother-in-law, is sexually harassed by the soldier who points the gun at her every now and then. Pointing the gun at her every now and then, the soldier starts to sexually harass the woman, who wants to leave to assist her wounded mother-in-law. The soldier appears to be mentally unstable and his craving for human affection makes him desire the attentions of a “detainee” whose husband and son have been killed by his army: “I’m in a lot of pain here. I want you to love me. How do I make you fall in love with me?” (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 86). As the woman refuses to say “I love you,” the soldier cuts out her tongue, kills her and then goes on blaming democracy. There was no attempt to spare a single drop of tension and

unease in the audience. As Ravenhill suggested in his blog on *The Guardian* website, banning violence from the stage would be as damaging as banning critical responses to current political issues:

[T]hese violent plays are an honest attempt to express the brutality of our “clash of civilizations,” of “jihad” and “the war on terror,” the white noise that fills our everyday lives, driving us to act in irrational, cruel ways. There may be an element of the personal, even the therapeutic in this writing, but they are, above all, political plays. [. . .] There have been as many shallow, brutal plays on the British stage as there have been urgent, important ones. We have to be wary of violence as fashion. But to discourage all such writing is to curb a natural response to the world around us. (“You Can’t Ban Violence From the Stage”)

What is there in common between a woman who is intolerant to coffee and a soldier who lacks affection? Ravenhill wants the treasure-hunters to understand that they are the product of a society that worships the image and only responds to the laws of the market.

Directed by Gordon Anderson, *The Mikado* is a conversation play between two gay lovers, Alan and Peter. The stage is bare except for an outdoor bench on which the two characters are sitting. Peter suffers from an advanced form of cancer and has just come back from an intense period of treatment at the hospital. Side by side in their imaginary garden (a traditional English garden with a Japanese-style bridge), the two discuss the possibility of moving to the Dordogne. Alan would like to sell their city



**Photo 5:** National Theatre, *The Odyssey*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). The chorus of Soldiers rejoices for their imminent return home.

Photo: Marilyn Kingwill



**Photo 6:** National Theatre, *The Odyssey*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). The Dictator (Danny Sapani) makes an apologetic speech in front of the chorus of Soldiers.

Photo: Marilyn Kingwill



**Photo 7:** National Theatre, *The Odyssey*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). The Dictator (Danny Sapani) is giving an apologetic speech.

Photo: Marilyn Kingwill



**Photo 8:** National Theatre, *The Odyssey*, part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). Female members of the second chorus put make up on the face of the dead Dictator (Danny Sapani).

Photo: Marilyn Kingwill

property and move to the French countryside to enjoy a more relaxed lifestyle with his partner. But Peter is tired and sees no point in moving away from his world. He is resigned to his fate but views his cancer as an injustice. He carries a ferocious anger which he vividly expresses through imagery and terminology that is reminiscent of terrorist strategies. With a touch of black humor, he imagines himself as a suicide bomber:

**PETER.** [. . .] I felt the same at the garden centre. I wish I could explode at the garden centre. I wish I could make everybody die at the garden centre. [. . .]

**PETER.** This beautiful garden I would consume is flame. I would swallow it in one huge gulp and crunch – destroy.

**ALAN.** The beauty here, the people here –

**PETER.** The beauty here, the people here would be gone.. All of it would be nothing.

**ALAN.** And me? Our love? All these years –

**PETER.** – would be nothing too. Because, because this is so much bigger than that. (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 117-8)

Alan threatens to leave Peter but in the end they realize the only thing they can do is “carry on.”

References to the late-nineteenth-century comic opera *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan can be found throughout the play. The opera, which was a major success in London and ran more than 650 consecutive performances at the Savoy Theatre between 1885 and 1887, is a satirical tale of love and death in which the authors parodied British politics and institutions by disguising them as Japanese. What Ravenhill is trying to do here is to reverse our perspective by placing the “barbaric” mechanisms of armed violence in the realm of intimate relationships, but at the same time he is pointing to the fascination of the “exotic other.”

A ten-minute break leads us to *The Odyssey*, the second part of the double bill, co-directed by Mark Ravenhill and Tom Cairns. The scene opens on a gray stage: the set represents a series of concrete city buildings without windows (it was designed specifically for another production, Peter Handke’s silent play, *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, directed by James Macdonald). The play is set in an unknown, un-democratic land where a chorus of soldiers has been sent to fight the battle for “freedom and democracy” on behalf of an oppressed people: “our core values are everything because they are humanity’s core values” (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 180). Ten troops wearing camouflage uniforms, helmets, and carrying Kalashnikovs assault rifles address the audience as though the spectators were the hapless inhabitants of the subjugated country. Just like Odysseus and his army sailed to Greece after the end of the Trojan War

in Homer's *Odyssey*, this unidentified army is about to fly back home (the UK? the US?) after their mission has been accomplished. But it took Odysseus and his crew ten years to reach Ithaca.

The convoys are ready to leave and the Soldiers start daydreaming of everyday life at home. **[Photo 5]** They sound patronising and unable to question the extent to which they are really "free":

Maybe you can't imagine this, but there is no shelling and bombing in our cities. Our cities are beautiful places. Beautiful shops. Leisure facilities. People who move about in freedom, every day making the democratic choices that shape their future (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 179-80).

Warm coffee in the morning, a sexy wife and a game with the kids on the Xbox is all they dream of. Surely, they say, it's all over now, the bombing and the fighting, but the reconstruction must begin—a task which "our" country has completed "several hundred years ago" (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* 181).

Waving at the audience to the sound of music, the troops introduce their "last gift" for the oppressed people: the Dictator, a black man wearing a uniform, is brought on stage. He stands in front of a microphone holding a few sheets of paper in his hands, then starts reading an unlikely statement in which he apologizes for all the pain he has caused and he prays for punishment: a repentant Dictator turned martyr? **[Photos 6 and 7]** The soldiers stare at him, he kneels down. After his last sentence is pronounced, young men and women wearing lower class civilian clothes enter the stage from the stalls as a second chorus. The troops and the chorus surround the dictator on all sides and start to hit and kick him ferociously, to which he tamely responds "thank you." The level of violence on stage is palpable and the tension grows. Soldiers and male members of the chorus urinate on the Dictator's body as he lays unconscious, while women from the chorus apply a thick layer of red lipstick on his lips and powder on his cheeks. He is dead. **[Photo 8]**

As the troops carelessly turn to fantasizing about going back to "civilization," a soldier makes the announcement that the battle is not over yet: the army can't go back home because they need to invade yet another country in order to free it from oppression and spread freedom and democracy further across the world. While the troops loudly protest, a young boy from the oppressed land enters the stage: he looks scared but smart. He tells us he is learning the "core values" and that he thinks they are "very good," and he calls for more action and more battles to "bring good to the world," encouraging the soldiers to continue fighting. Has he been brainwashed? All the characters leave, while the dead Dictator lies on the floor. Black out.

How should the audience react to a young boy endorsing war and asking for more violence in the name of "freedom and democracy"? Is the faith in these values still unshaken after the "war on terror"? To what extent are western

citizens ready to defend these values? Ravenhill questions his spectator's "faith in "freedom and democracy" and encourages them to "get it" back after the show. Regaining faith in the "core values" after they have been belittled can perhaps be considered the real "treasure" that the British author is pointing to. After having attended a number of performances, the juxtaposition of seemingly distant stories makes sense as a whole and treasure-hunters are able to see the blind spots of our society, such as a blind faith in the market ideology and the politics of fear.

*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* suggests that no citizen of western democracies is innocent. Ravenhill's chilling dramatisation of violence made the spectators uncomfortable but his black humour entertained them, targeting their own blindness. The British playwright's serious parody of twenty-first-century biopolitics enjoys the sharp clairvoyance of a pioneering work. Its fragmented 2008 run engaged Londoners in an interactive quest across the city, merging theatre spectatorship with video game strategy and making its "players" feel both empowered and impotent at the same time.

## NOTES

1. Compare theatre critic Andrew Haydon's interpretation on his blog *Postcards From The Gods*, 7 April 2008, <<http://postcardsgods.blogspot.com/2008/04/shoot-get-treasure-repeat-v3.html>>, [accessed 1 February 2009], with the review of the show by Jenny Spencer, "Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat," *Theatre Journal*, 60.2 (2008):286.

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