

Candidate 7 evidence

Advanced Higher Drama 2021-22
Project (Dissertation)

Title: Perhaps this *is* the death of England...

**Question: Does Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' Trilogy reflect the demise of
"britishness"?**

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Practitioners referenced:
Clint Dyer
Roy Williams
The National Theatre
Rafe Spall
Michael Balogun
Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey
Neil Maskell
Giles Terera
Sam Harley

"Brexit means Brexit and we're going to make a Titanic success of it."

– *Boris Johnson*¹

What does it mean to be British? Does being British mean that you support your local team, does it mean you spend match day at the pub with a pie and chips? Does it mean that you would die for Queen and country? With the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism in the 21st Century as well as the divisive effect of Brexit, it has become clearer that being British, or rather, feeling British becomes harder every day. Trust in our current government crumbles substantially with every news cycle. Each decision made to deal with Brexit, Covid, or whatever next disaster falls upon Westminster brings uproar and disagreement. We live in a disjointed Britain. People could not feel further apart. As a half-Scottish, half-English man, I consider myself to be British, yet, frankly, I'm not certain I would call that such a positive thing anymore. Within the transition period for Britain leaving the EU and with the aforementioned public dissatisfaction being so high, Clint Dyer and Roy Williams joined together to create a trilogy of plays for the National Theatre under the title 'Death of England'. The initial concept for the first play focused on this idea of a stereotypically "British" man, who held his ideals high and wore his opinions (although controversial) on his sleeve. Dyer and Williams' trilogy provokes the question of whether or not it is a good thing to conform to these "British" ideals, or if perhaps we as a country should begin to rethink our views and potentially find other ways to reunite.

The first production in the Death of England Trilogy, simply titled *Death of England*, premiered on the 31st of January 2020 in the National's Dorfman Theatre directed by

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/nov/03/brexit-will-be-titanic-success-says-boris-johnson>

Clint Dyer and Roy Williams. Dyer and Williams text explores the events following the death of Alan Fletcher from the perspective of his son Michael (Rafe Spall). Michael struggles with his father's legacy as both a racist man, Brexit leaver, and self-proclaimed nationalist and we see him, throughout the one-man production, begin to try and find his own ideologies rather than follow in the footsteps of his father. *Death of England* literally reflects the demise of "Britishness" in one clear moment, the death of Alan Fletcher. Alan is described to the audience as the stereotypical hard-conservative, racist, leaver, arrogant man, who in the eyes of Spall's Michael, is what "British" is. When Spall portrays his father in the play, he uses an angry tone of voice and a much heavier cockney accent resembling the stereotypical rough east London figure Alan embodied. Michael describes the scene of his father's death to the audience. The pair are at the pub watching England play Croatia at the World Cup and as England begins to lose the game, Alan (who on stage was represented by a football strip over Spall's shoulder) passes out against his son's arm. Michael believes that his dad has fallen asleep before realising his father has in fact passed away. This moment reflects the death of English culture as a whole. Not only through the loss of the world-conquering dream, but his dad, a man who is Michael's main concept of "Britishness", passing away too. This idea of Michael watching his own England die was represented by Spall when he performed with a lack of clarity and a fast pace as Michael is trying to explain his father's death to his mother and sister. The vocal techniques used by Spall in this moment display to the audience the initial cracks in Michael's previously concrete idea of "Britishness". These cracks are reflected in the messy way that Spall delivers the dialogue, he clearly begins to doubt his connection with "British culture" from this moment onwards.

In an interview with Dyer and Williams for the National Theatre discussing this scene, Dyer states that "sport is a great way to exercise your nationality. Your passion for your country's ideals"². Dyer and Williams chose to use this concept of "proxy glory" to convey the idea that Alan's death happening at the height of this huge sporting event (which the entirety of the country is watching) reflects the fact that this old idea of "Britishness" is itself dying. There is no room in this already divided country for racism or hatred, so commonly associated with football fan culture and national rivalries, suggesting newer generations must learn to co-exist. Williams himself states this in a separate interview: "The death of his father represents the death of old England, and Michael represents, potentially, a new England"³

At his father's funeral, the audience get to hear Michael's inner dialogue spill out via a drunken and messy rant. When visiting the National Theatre Archive to analyse a live recording of this production, I noted that Spall spoke with a slow pace, lack of fluency and almost over-emphasised clarity in these moments, these choices demonstrate to the audience that while Michael is drunk, he most certainly believes everything he is saying and is choosing his words carefully. Through his internal ramble, Michael makes jabbing comments at both the left and right side of the political compass. He mentions how the more conservative among the crowd are hypocritical for "blaming the immigrants for everything"⁴ and who spend their time "going on and on about foreign players ruining the English game, killing it"⁵ by making the counterargument that immigrants and asylum seekers who come to the

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6smpQZfe9Y>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pU7w3exEhU>

⁴ Death of England, page 24

⁵ Death of England, page 24

UK to work end up building our very homes for below the minimum wage. However, he also points out how the politically left of the audience spend all their time pretending to care while simultaneously “think a cockney accent is verbal suicide, a council flat destitution and whose greatest marker of success is how far they can live away from us”⁶ which, when Spall imitates, he speaks with an angry tone of voice and gradually increasing pace, indicating a rising fury towards this left-wing hypocrisy.

Michael's anger at political hypocrisy is further revealed when he outbursts at his long-time best friend Delroy. Michael finds it ridiculous that Delroy, himself the child of immigrant parents, voted leave, calling him out on how the “curb on immigration”⁷ includes Delroy too. On stage, Spall performs this moment as if the anger and alcohol had gotten the better of him as he speaks with a loud volume, angry tone and lack of fluency which demonstrates the power of his emotions to the audience. Williams himself has stated: “one thing that shows with that segment is that words are powerful, they can be as potent and as dangerous as a bullet coming out of a gun”⁸. Dyer and Williams used these words and the anger of Spalls delivery to do damage to those around him. Indeed, Michael appears to be indirectly accusing those in his audience and those in his own circle of friends of contributing to the death of modern britishness. Williams added that “he realises something is wrong, everything is wrong that he feels and he just wants to do what he can to strip it down, even if it means attacking his best friend, who is black, to point out their own inconsistencies”⁹.

6 Death of England, Page 25

7 Death of England, Page 25

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU_0l5nFZl

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU_0l5nFZl

By the end of *Death of England*, Spalls portrayal of Michael captures and showcases what it would look like to lose touch with the culture of your own country, his performance demonstrates the anger and emotional instability of a man doubting that the very Government he once believed in is no longer reliable. It is worth noting that this production was staged days before the first lockdown, on the day that Brexit took place and during the surge of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. This performance happened at a time of extreme political turmoil and serves to act as an accurate take on how the average person in Britain felt no faith as they watched their government make decisions that affected them immensely for better or for worse.

Death of England: Delroy is the second part of the Trilogy which premiered on the 21st of October 2020 in the National's larger Olivier Theatre and was directed again by Dyer and Williams. *Delroy* was the first live performance at the National since it closed on the 16th of March 2020. Following the same one-man format, Dyer and Williams second instalment follows a day in the life of Delroy (Played by Michael Balogun) from his arrest on the day of his daughter's birth onwards. It's clear from the outset of this second production that while the death of Michael's England was centred around traditional English culture, the death of Delroy's England focusses on race at a time where the Black Lives Matter movement was particularly present in the UK. It could be argued that *Delroy* was created as a response to the BLM protests, especially given that Dyer was appointed earlier in the year as Deputy Artistic Director at the National. According to a lecture from the North London Collegiate School, both Dyer and Rufus Norris (Artistic Director) were pushing for

more representation within the National Theatre's staff and its productions¹⁰. In *Death of England*, Delroy's own Britishness was questioned and his pro-Brexit policies were mocked, so giving him a chance to convey his own opinions to the audience in this second instalment provided insight into how this "death of Britishness" was affecting immigrant communities in similarly powerful ways to the traditionally British character reflected in Michael. A moment in the production in which Balogun communicates this idea to the audience is when Delroy finds himself jailed and held in a cell overnight. In the scene we see Delroy, through monologue, become increasingly furious with how he feels mistreated by his country, stating "I pay my tax. I abide by the law. I have never committed a crime in my life. I voted for Boris, twice. I don't care that it's f*cked up. Is that not allowed? Am I to be told what I can and cannot do and who I am supposed to be in my own country?"¹¹. Balogun portrays Delroy in this moment with a loud volume, angry tone of voice, lack of clarity and fast pace as he moves around his cell frantically in a panic. Balogun's choice of performance techniques shown the audience how Delroy feels betrayed by his own country at this point. As Delroy stated, he isn't a criminal. To further convey this idea of Delroy being beaten down by his country, a police officer, in a retort towards Delroy punching a mattress out of rage, tells Delroy to stop, referring to him as "boy". Given the heightened sensitivity towards race relations during the time this production occurred, there is deep cultural significance that comes with the use of "boy" as a choice of name. The officer clearly is using this term as an indicator to himself being greater than Delroy because of race. The significance of this choice is reflected in Balogun's performance where he portrays the officer with an overly

¹⁰ <https://www.nlcs.org.uk/news/2021-01-29/the-relationship-between-our-national-theatre-and-the-blm-movement>

¹¹ *Death of England: Delroy*, Page 19

aggressive facial expression and tone. The racial division was further reflected by the design where Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey, the set designer, placed signs on the wall of the Olivier Theatre that read "Please keep your social, racial distance"¹². The audience were therefore presented, not only through Balogun's performance but also his surroundings, with how Delroy was mistreated by his government and how this moment reflects the beginning of Delroy's diminishing faith in his country. Balogun's performance choices further reflected the death of Delroy's England in his vocal response to the racial slur: "I bought my own flat three years ago. I have a mortgage, cha rass, two cats to feed, and yet still, in the eyes of some, I am nothing but a boy"¹³. Balogun translates this anger and betrayal that Delroy feels through a slow pace, sad tone of voice and a raised pitch. These techniques show the revelation that Delroy undergoes as he realises that his country doesn't respect him.

Once Delroy is freed, he goes to the hospital to witness the birth of his child. He is reprimanded by his family who regard him as responsible of his arrest. When Michael tells Delroy that he has no idea how to make amends with him, Delroy retorts: "No course you don't. The English never seem to know"¹⁴. Balogun put particular emphasis on "English" here, which indicated to the audience that Delroy doesn't feel that he is British anymore, given that he refers to the English in the second person. This is how Balogun chooses to portray this moment, making use of a mocking tone and loud volume to imply that he doesn't see the value in being English anymore. He wants to disassociate from the label as much as possible. Delroy, more enraged, goes on to state: "all of this, this day that I have had, this sh*t that we are living in needs to come down. "That's why! F*cking Great Britain, is

¹² <https://saltertonartsreview.com/2020/11/the-covid-diaries-40-national-theatre-death-of-england-delroy/>

¹³ Death of England: Delroy, Page 20

¹⁴ Death of England: Delroy, Page 31

someone having a laugh here?"¹⁵ bluntly showing the audience how Delroy views this country and its inherit racism as systematically broken. Balogun performed this with an angry tone of voice and loud volume to show that Delroy has reached his wits end with the way he has been treated. Balogun's casting in Delroy was interesting as he was initially the understudy for Giles Terera (Who fell ill before opening night but went on to play the role in *Death of England: Face Off*). Furthermore, Balogun had served multiple prison sentences before for the possession and selling of illegal substances¹⁶. Having been left by the police and his own mother and father to fend for himself and his three sisters¹⁷, Balogun begun to steal and rob to live. It wasn't until he found work in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art's dinner hall that he discovered theatre and begun to pursue it professionally. Balogun's experiences with prison, together with a sense of abandonment by the government after they arrested his mother, provide a genuine connection to the emotions felt by Delroy as he is jailed and can't be there for his son. Furthermore, from the audiences perspective, the knowledge of Balogun's past experiences shone through in his performance. The experience of the performer allowed for an added layer of authenticity that contributed to Dyer and Williams' intention of using theatre as a vehicle to portray something as personal as someone's relationship with their country.

The final production in the trilogy, titled *Death of England: Face to Face* was impacted by the ongoing restrictions of the Covid pandemic and was subsequently

¹⁵ Death of England: Delroy, Page 32

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-43560517>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-43560517>

filmed in the Lyttelton Space of the National Theatre and released on the 25th November 2021. The play features both Michael and Delroy (Now played by Neil Maskell and Giles Terera respectively) together in a flat, debating the events of the previous productions while also monologuing to the audience about the events of a fight both are found in. While the first production dealt with English culture, and the second production dealt with Race, *Face to Face* deals with the two coming together in the form of the personal relationship. This is shown most vividly by the dialogue adopted by Dyer and Williams, whilst also retaining moments of monologue to reflect the characters internal struggles. Indeed, I found that the use of monologue represented the ongoing personal debate on the political themes of these productions. Whilst the term 'British' suggests a national debate, Dyer and Williams, together with Spall, Balogun, Maskell and Terera, use this theatrical convention to represent the equally personal relationship we all have with identity and its national connotations. This production represents the aftermath of a person losing their connection with their country and explores how that effects personal relationships. One such moment in the production comes from Delroy's retelling of Michael's racial disrespect towards Delroy's mother. He recounts: "I mean, he called my mum a 'black b*tch', in front of me... and I did nothing"¹⁸ which was staged by Dyer with Terera and Maskell sitting side by side, both dressed in their old school uniforms by designer Sam Harley (as this is a story from their past being retold) with Maskell holding a football. Firstly, the costume design seemingly acts as symbolism towards the innocence behind Michael's racist remarks, as it is implied by Delroy that Michael at the time didn't understand the severity of the statement. Secondly, Maskell holding the football when repeating the phrase links to the conversation on football culture

¹⁸ Death of England: Face to Face, Sky Arts

and its association to racism that I had mentioned in my analysis of *Death of England*. The mere presence of the prop shows the prominence that football culture had in Michael's life growing up around Alan and his overt racial abuse towards players in the game. As Delroy continues the story he expresses his distaste for the way that British people are brought up to act, in which he states "That's what this country does to you, innit? Makes you weak... Our 'Great Britain'". Terera's use of a sarcastic tone on the "Great" in Great Britain works particularly well to show how little faith Delroy has for his country, a country that through his personal relationships and treatment by social institutions, has left him feeling weak. I have spent less time in analysis of this third instalment, due to the health situation of the time making a live performance impossible, but Dyer and Williams still managed to conclude their trilogy by providing the audience with an apt finale to the story while also factoring in the political issues of the time, integrating Covid-19 regulations into the storyline. Dyer and Williams' conclusion answers my initial question not by representing the events of someone losing faith in their country, but instead representing the aftermath of this, something of which many people in the UK begun to feel after several years of political controversies.

When initially coming to study and write this paper over the course of eight months, I set myself a question that I had no firm idea of how to answer. My scepticism stemmed from the additional question: Could a theatrical production truly explore something so widespread by reflecting on the experiences of two men? Well, yes! In the first production we see the character of Michael, as portrayed by Spall, attempt to reject the legacy of his fathers' beliefs, breaking free of that influence and questioning the ideas that Alan associated with his national identity. Dyer and

Williams used the universal language of football, which in Britain affects so many all over to explore this widespread issue in an entirely personal and relatable event. In their second production, reflecting a summer of radical social upheaval, Dyer and Williams' added an exploration of racial identity from the perspective of a black man who feels wronged by a government he voted for through unlawful arrest. Finally in *Face to Face*, Dyer and Williams bring these two characters together to face the complexities of their relationship with their country and each other head on, reflecting the ongoing national debate between the component nations of Britain itself. Dyer and Williams two characters both experience their country's identity slowly change around them and are left to ponder together what it means for their own sense of self and the relationship between them. Like me, Michael and Delroy struggle with what it means to be British in the 21st Century, but through this innovative trilogy spanning two of the most socially significant years in the entire political union, I am left with a sense of hope in what this identity may in future become.

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