

“Come unbutton here”:

McKellen’s *King Lear* as Dramatic Censorship of the Flesh

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Accompanied by the rumbling crashes of offstage thunder and pulsating waves of pouring rain, Act 3 scene 4 of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* presents the old, disturbed monarch discussing his meeting with the unfortunate Edgar. In order to escape the intrigues of his dastardly brother Edmund, Edgar is now disguised as Poor Tom. Lear’s response to his newfound hovel-bound companion is indicative of the king’s awful decline into age-related dementia. Addressing the disguised and faithful Kent, and the equally faithful Fool, Lear condemns the false trappings of pomp and outward display:

KING LEAR: Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here’s three on ‘s are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! come unbutton here. (*King Lear*, 3.4.99-107)

In 2007, the renowned British actor, Sir Ian McKellen, enacted this scene in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *King Lear*, directed by Trevor Nunn. Nunn first staged his Slavic interpretation at the Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *King Lear* appearing in repertory with Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. That same year, the casts of *King Lear* and *The Seagull* embarked on a national and international tour. In the UK, McKellen performed in the north of England industrial city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, be-

fore travelling to Singapore, Melbourne in Australia, Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand, New York, Minneapolis and Los Angeles in the USA, and back to London. The production was, to all appearances, an international success.

To complement the choice of touring productions, both *King Lear* and *The Seagull* shared similar Tsarist Russian design themes, with the ‘majesty of a dying monarchical regime, reminiscent of the Romanov dynasty before the 1917 revolution,’ becoming the overarching image for Lear’s fractured court¹. This historical nuance was captured by designer Christopher Oram’s perspectival evocation of ‘the colonnaded grandeur of an Imperial Palace,’ which literally and noisily ‘collapse[d] and decay[ed] in unison with the mental collapse and decay’ of the unfortunate Lear. To add to this dangerously kinetic visualization, Nunn presented the Act 3 scene 4 heath scene with watery literality. As I noted in my review at the time, the ‘heavens belch[ed] forth their thunder and torrential rain’ over ‘the cavernous Courtyard space,’ and over some unfortunate front row audience members who were undoubtedly soggy for the remainder of the play². Soaked to the skin by this staged torrential downpour, ‘Lear and his dwindling entourage cower[ed] in response to nature’s elemental forces’³. The ‘primal immediacy’ of this production – the ‘immediacy of experience and fear, of folly and deceit, of humanity and passion, madness and inevitable death’ – offered the perfect tortured backdrop for McKellen’s astonishing portrayal of Lear⁴.

Unfortunately, McKellen’s performance was not the only aspect of the play to attract commercial and critical press coverage. In Nunn’s production, McKellen’s Lear quite literally conformed to an oft-adopted stage direction, written not by Shakespeare or his seventeenth century collaborators, scribes or publishers, but invented by the early eighteenth century Shakespeare editor, Nicholas Rowe. In 1709, Rowe published his six-volume *The Works*

¹ Kevin Quarmby – ‘Review of *King Lear*, RSC Stratford’, June 2007 <http://www.quarmby.biz/reviews/review_Klear1.htm> [accessed 16 June 2012].

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

of *Mr William Shakespear*.⁵ Rowe’s edition is itself the object of self-imposed editorial censorship. As its title-page proudly boasts, Rowe’s collected *Works* offers, quite unbelievably to modern ears, its Shakespeare plays duly ‘Adorn’d with Cuts’⁶. For the Act 3 heath scene, however, it is not a ‘Cut’, but an additional editorial construct that adds visual performative value to Lear’s madness. Rowe inserts a very specific stage direction, immediately following Lear’s line, ‘come unbutton here’. For Rowe, Lear’s passing remark suggests far more than an elderly man’s fumbled unbuttoning of the trappings of aristocratic display. Rowe visualizes this moment with graphic, violent detail, as he describes how the imagined actor playing King Lear begins ‘Tearing off his cloaths’⁷. Whether Rowe had seen such a moment in performance is unknowable, but his stage direction is sufficiently histrionic to imply a theatrically inspired visual origin for his editorial specificity. Subsequent Shakespeare editors have often incorporated Rowe’s suggestion, with the result that actors playing King Lear in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries invariably tear violently at their clothing with a demented physicality only hinted at in the 1608 Quarto and 1623 First Folio texts.

As Judy Kronenfeld argues in her late 1990s study, *‘King Lear’ and the Naked Truth*, Lear’s ‘self-divestment’ of the ‘accoutrements of power’ can be read as a very literal and metaphorical image of one of the ‘central Christian themes’: that of the ‘fall of the mighty from their seats’⁸. For McKellen, the ‘naked truth’ of Lear’s call to ‘unbutton here’ was to become a contentious *cause celebre* for somewhat more secular reasons. No longer a metaphor for a ‘central Christian theme’, McKellen’s ‘self-divestment’ became the object of media comment and unexpected pre-opening night publicity for the shockingly visual totality of the actor’s vulnerable display. As McKellen’s Lear tore down his soaked and besmeared lower garments, he exposed not the traditional under apparel of a mentally challenged and defenceless old king, but McKellen’s full groin and genitals in all their naked glory. King

⁵ William Shakespeare – *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, ed. Nicholas Rowe (6 vols, London, 1709).

⁶ Rowe, *Works*, vol. 1, title-page.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 2516.

⁸ Judy Kronenfeld – *‘King Lear’ and the Naked Truth: Rethinking the Language of Religion and Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 179–82.

Lear's 'uncovered body' manifested itself in an extreme act of onstage (and, subsequently, media) over-exposure.

In response to this baring of an actor's body as graphic statement about a character's tortured soul, the scholar and social commentator Germaine Greer described the effect of this 'revelation' with impious glee. In her *Guardian* newspaper article (published long before the delayed first night play reviews), Greer observed how:

The most memorable moment, for many of us the only memorable moment, in Trevor Nunn's latest production of *King Lear* is when Ian McKellen drops his trousers and displays his impressive genitalia to the audience. To get the full beauty of this sublime *coup de théâtre*, you have to understand that the 1,000-strong audience is composed of a minority of geriatrics who haven't got out of the theatre-going habit, and a majority of teenaged school-trippers bussed in from various grim hostelrys in the environs of Stratford. Most of the members of the audience don't have English as their first language.⁹

For Greer, the fact that 'Ian McKellen drops his trousers [...] sums up' the Royal Shakespeare Company's 'whole approach' to attracting twenty-first century audiences, as well as international publicity. It seems ironic, to her, that such theatrical nudity is wasted on stalwart though elderly theatregoers, giggling schoolchildren, and foreign tourists who can tick Stratford off their list of 'must-see' UK attractions. Greer is incisive in her emasculating wit.

Jumping to the defence of Nunn's directorial decision (and possibly chagrined at Greer's impudent pre-opening night 'review'), Charles Spencer of the traditionally right-wing newspaper, *The Telegraph*, describes how 'McKellen's magnificent Lear is destined to be remembered for far more than the moment when the old wizard flashes his impressive wand during a brief – and entirely justified – scene of nudity during the storm'¹⁰. Spencer's comment, which skilfully weaves McKellen's *Lord of the Rings* film identity as

⁹ Germaine Greer – 'So Ian McKellen drops his trousers to play King Lear. That sums up the RSC's whole approach', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/may/07/rsc.theatre>> [accessed 16 June 2012].

¹⁰ Charles Spencer – 'Sir Ian acts up a storm as Nunn plays the fool', *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1553256/Sir-Ian-acts-up-a-storm-as-Nunn-plays-the-fool.html#>> [accessed 16 June 2012].

Gandalf the Grey with the saucy sorcery of Lear’s imposing genital spectacle, defends McKellen’s brief self-exhibition with justifying good humour. Similarly, Michael Billington’s *Guardian* review seemingly takes issue with Greer’s scathing comments, with the reviewer claiming that, ‘[o]nly those with dirty minds will be dismayed by McKellen’s nudity’¹¹. Nudity there undoubtedly was, but apart from Greer’s derisive response, and Spencer’s and Billington’s defence of its artistic merit and textual validity, the fact that a British Knight of the Realm chose to expose his genitals when revealing Lear’s self-humiliatingly painful rejection of the trappings of humankind, caused little audience stir other than an occasional puerile snigger.

Despite the publicity surrounding McKellen’s decision to appear naked onstage, performances of the play were greeted enthusiastically and without censure in all nations visited by the touring production. In all nations but one, that is. The exception was Singapore. In this country, McKellen’s performance became the centre of controversy, to the dismay of those Singaporean cultural creatives who sought to make ‘people in the arts community around the world sit up and take notice,’ especially of the play’s host, the Singapore Repertory Theatre or SRT¹². The SRT’s Artistic Director, Gaurav Kripalani, expressing in retrospect his hope of ‘establishing [Singapore’s] reputation as the leading arts capital in Asia,’ saw the RSC tour as an opportunity to forge ‘new partnerships between the Singapore and British theatre scene’¹³. Such ambitious plans appeared doomed, however, given the negative publicity that accompanied McKellen’s RSC arrival.

Kripalani could not have foreseen the political outcry that McKellen’s visit would engender, especially because of the 68 year-old actor’s very public stance against Section 377A of the Singaporean Penal Code, which criminalizes relationships between same-sex couples¹⁴. McKellen refused to mask his

¹¹ Michael Billington – ‘*King Lear* Review’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/jun/01/theatre1>> [accessed 16 June 2012].

¹² Gaurav Kripalani – ‘Response to *King Lear* and *The Seagull* in Singapore’, *The RSC Annual Report and Accounts 2008* <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/annualreport2008.pdf>> [accessed 19 June 2012].

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sebastian Tong, ‘Ian McKellen wades into Singapore gay rights debate’, *Reuters Life!*, 19 July 2007 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/07/19/us-mckellen-idUSSIN7694520070719>> [accessed 20 June 2012].

own homosexuality, publicly taunting the Singaporean authorities by appearing on a state-sponsored morning television programme with his Goneril, Frances Barber, and promoting his far more liberal attitude to openly gay behaviour. When innocently asked by the television chat show interviewer, Suzanne Jung, what he hoped to do in Singapore during his free time, McKellen made the wittily understated (and in his words “rather controversial”) comment that he would be “looking for a gay bar”¹⁵. This wholly unexpected response caused obvious discomfort to his interviewing hosts. Its effect was to launch the RSC’s ‘new partnership’ with the Singapore Repertory Theatre into the dangerous world of local political debate.

Two days later, when asked by Reuters to explain his remark, McKellen defended himself by saying that he “would not come to Singapore and comment on any aspect of its society”¹⁶. As a “gay man,” however, who was invited “with the full cognizance of the [Singapore] government,” it seemed inconceivable to him that the authorities would “not notice that [his] right to have sex [was] inhibited”.¹⁷ Expressing his freedom “to comment on behalf of people who do have to suffer laws which the British Empire invented and left behind,” and claiming it “easier for a foreigner to come in and speak to truth as he sees it,” McKellen nevertheless stated that he will only ever “speak on things” about which he considered himself to be an “expert”:

You won’t hear me talk about my politics, you won’t hear me talk about my vegetarianism, you won’t hear me comment on the Iraq war. You’ll only hear me talk about being gay and being an actor. I am just public on those two issues.¹⁸

In the context of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s first international port of call on their world tour, McKellen’s calm and intelligently expressed plea for the repeal of out-dated imperialist and discriminatory legislation was controversial enough. The resulting news commentary effectively eclipsed,

¹⁵ ‘Sir Ian McKellen on Channel NewsAsia’, 17 July 2007 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VE6ENgkR7M>> [accessed 20 June 2012].

¹⁶ Tong, *Reuters Life!*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

however, a far more insidious and ideological act of dramatic censorship that illustrated the power of this Asian government to dictate the artistic and moral taste of their nation. In Singapore, and in Singapore alone, McKellen was forced to ‘cover up’ his genitals so as not to offend local sensibilities. The ‘flashing of the old wizard’s impressive wand’ was deemed unacceptable according to Singaporean legislation that made any publicly staged nudity an offence if viewed by underage minors. And an underage minor, in Singapore, is defined as anyone under the age of eighteen years.

As Lyn Gardner was to explain in her *Guardian* online ‘Theatre Blog’, Singapore’s strictly enforced legislation prohibited anyone below the age of eighteen from attending a performance, watching a movie or television programme, or even reading literary material that the authorities deemed immoral or corrupting¹⁹. For a nation that elected to ban the American television series *Sex and the City*, because of its subversively pornographic content, McKellen’s full frontal ‘Tearing at his Cloaths’ was totally unacceptable. Upon learning that McKellen was to reveal his genitals, Singapore’s governing arts body, the Media Development Authority or MDA, imposed an ‘18+’ censorship rating on the production. This decision, made in advance of the RSC’s arrival, effectively branded *King Lear* a ‘public entertainment’ that was ‘wholly or in part [...] of an indecent, immoral, offensive, subversive or improper nature’²⁰. Only those over eighteen years of age were deemed sufficiently mature not to be corrupted by McKellen’s proposed ‘indecent’ display.

Singapore’s MDA was and remains a formidable force in Singaporean cultural expression, with absolute and inviolable responsibility for vetting all scripts and staged productions in advance of performance. It likewise has powers, under Singapore’s Public Entertainments and Meetings Act, to cen-

¹⁹ Lyn Gardner, ‘Should we censor plays for overseas audiences?’, *The Guardian: Theatre Blog*, 15 June 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/jun/15/shouldwecensortouringprodu>> [accessed 20 June 2012].

²⁰ Singapore Government, ‘Public Entertainments and Meetings Act, Chapter 257 (1958), Revised 31 July 2001’, Section 14.1.b. <<http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p?page=0;query=DocId%3A17811b84-08c4-44ff-95e8-cdbdf6d31e2c%20%20Status%3Ainforce%20Depth%3A0;rec=0>> [accessed 20 June 2012].

sor or ban outright any theatre (or other) performance deemed ‘contrary to the public interest’²¹. To ensure their directives are followed to the letter, the MDA demand that local ‘Licensees’ of a performance offer guarantees that certain standards of decency are met. As the RSC’s official sponsors, Kripalani’s Singapore Repertory Theatre was the official ‘Licensee’, obliged to ‘ensure that performers [did] not carry out indecent acts or make any vulgar gestures, actions or remarks during the performance’²². More significantly, however, the SRT had to ensure ‘that the performers [were] not indecently attired’²³. As an ‘indecently attired’ performer in Nunn’s production, McKellen and his onstage nudity limited admittance to Singapore’s 1,800-seat Esplanade Theatre to adult Singaporeans only. A significant percentage of the population were effectively refused entry to this much anticipated and heavily publicized cultural event, in advance of the RSC’s arrival at its sole Asian tour venue²⁴.

To a Western theatre company, for whom freedom of theatrical expression travels hand-in-hand with the commercial reality that ‘nudity sells seats’, the MDA’s response must have seemed alien and counterintuitive. In consequence, the imposition of the ‘18+’ rating, as Gardner notes with wry understatement, ‘caused a spot of bother for the RSC’²⁵. The ban guaranteed ‘that more than a thousand children who [had] booked for the performances [would] be unable to attend’²⁶. As noted in one Asian media report, ‘tickets [that] were sold out weeks in advance at prices ranging from S\$30 to S\$400 [between €20 and €250], drawing a wide range of spectators, including high school students,’ would now no longer be valid²⁷. Faced with the likelihood of significant financial loss, and the problem of returning money to Singapo-

²¹ *Ibid.*, Section 14.1.d.

²² *Ibid.*, Section 14.1.b.

²³ MDA ‘Licensing Conditions for Drama/Play/Performance Art’ <<http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/Appendix%20-%20Plays.pdf>> [accessed 20 June 2012].

²⁴ Pawit Mahasarinand, ‘Crazy for LEAR: The Royal Shakespeare Company’s performance of *King Lear* enchants Singaporean audiences’, *The Nation* [Bangkok], 8 August 2007 <http://nationmultimedia.com/2007/08/08/entertainment/entertainment_30044140.php> [accessed 22 June 2012].

²⁵ Gardner, *Guardian*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Mahasarinand, *Nation*.

rean teachers and parents who had bought *King Lear* tickets far in advance of the MDA rating decision, the RSC reportedly ‘bowed to pressure’²⁸. McKellen, so Gardner announces with colloquial ambivalence, would ‘now keep his togs on’²⁹. It was not the threat of government sanction that forced McKellen to wear undergarments when performing in Singapore. Neither was it the potential furore over the actor’s proudly proclaimed homosexuality. Instead, it was the commercial threat for a theatre company unwilling to jeopardize the box office receipts from an expensive world tour because of artistic decisions that were incompatible with local sensibilities. Money, not cultural sensitivity, was the deciding factor that forced McKellen to ‘keep his togs on’.

Significant for Gardner’s appraisal of this ostensibly insignificant instance of localized government interference was the fact that cutting the ‘offending action’ seemed by far ‘the most sensible option,’ especially as it seemed ‘absurd to deny [Singaporean] children the opportunity to see the production in all its glory because of a tiny section when McKellen [could] be seen in all his’³⁰. If *Lear*’s ‘divestment’ could be ‘cut so easily,’ Gardner muses, ‘perhaps it’s not really integral to the production and maybe shouldn’t be there at all’. Of far greater significance, so she cautions, is the fact that, ‘whichever way you look at it,’ the MDA’s rating, and the RSC’s compliant response, represents a ‘form of censorship’³¹. It is the word ‘censorship’ that causes this Western journalist her ‘twinge of uneasiness,’ especially when used to force McKellen into dressing appropriately for his Asian hosts. If theatre companies and directors are forced to alter or adapt their productions to accommodate the cultural, political or religious sensibilities of particular audiences, should this excite in all of us a ‘twinge of uneasiness,’ especially as this suggests censorship based on self-regulation, and motivated solely by financial security and reward?

Certainly, twenty-first century religious and cultural sensitivity, and the associated self-censorship by theatre companies eager to preserve their box-office profits, are suggested by several recent UK productions. Only two

²⁸ Gardner, *Guardian*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

weeks prior to this conference, London's fringe venue, the Arcola Theatre, sent a mailshot to its subscribers, of which I am one. The message announced the June/July 2012 performances of Penny Arcade's controversial 1990 play, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*³² As a publicity statement, the email added Penny Arcade's comments that the 'kind of censorship that two decades ago was rampant in America and is still rampant today, has infected the whole world'³³. 'When I performed in Britain 20 years ago,' Arcade continues, 'the British press was shocked by how narrow-minded America was':

They were stunned by the fact that no American newspaper, or radio or television show, dared use the title [*Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*], except for the [alternative New York weekly] *Village Voice*. From the *Times* to the *Guardian* to local British newspapers, the title 20 years ago was not an issue in the UK. This year I was a guest on the Jo Goodman [TV] show on BBC1 and before I went on the air the producer took me aside and said, "I am afraid we can't say the title of your show on the air, BBC rules." Jo Goodman and I spent the rest of the show speaking about the censorship that has crept into Britain. Twenty years ago there was no Born Again Christian movement in Britain. Now it is everywhere. (Arcola, *ENews*)

At first glance, Penny Arcade's scathing comments confirm a lack of religious sensitivity or any self-censorship on the part of the Arcola Theatre. That is, until the Arcola's publicizing email itself is taken into consideration. Possibly with a sense of irony, or perhaps unsure whether their subscribers might be offended by the mailshot, the theatre offered a decidedly innocuous email Subject line, which merely read: 'Arcola – Censored'.

The Arcola Theatre's apparent caution is certainly understandable in the light of Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee's 2003 National Theatre production, *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, a British musical that was accused of blasphemy by the homophobic UK pressure group, 'Christian Voice'³⁴. Despite its suc-

³² Arcola Theatre, 'Arcola – Censored', Private promotional email to subscribers from arcolatheatre@arts-mail.com (22 June 2012).

³³ Arcola Theatre, 'ENews Promotional Advertisement for *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*, 22 June 2012 <http://download.arcolatheatre.com/SHARE/e_news/News2012/ENews220612.html> [accessed 22 June 2012].

³⁴ Stephen Green, 'Lords let BBC off the hook', *Christian Voice: Blog*, 3 March 2005 <<http://www.christianvoice.org.uk/?p=2337>> [accessed 22 June 2012].

cessful London run, the musical’s subsequent national tour was foreshortened when regional theatres bowed to commercial pressure from religious complainants. Finally, *Jerry Springer: The Opera* was threatened with private prosecution by a group of evangelical Christians when the BBC planned its airing on terrestrial television³⁵. Indeed, the broadcast received over 50,000 complaints, which suggests that the failed prosecution attempt was not as unpopular as commentators might suggest³⁶. Similarly, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s 2004 production of *Behzti* (*Dishonour*), produced by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in Britain’s Midlands, contained a scene that depicted physical and sexual abuse and murder in a fictive Sikh temple. *Behzti* was forced to close following violent clashes outside the theatre. Some members of the local Birmingham Sikh community, offended by the play and its portrayal of their faith, effectively silenced Bhatti’s creative voice. The decision was apparently taken, however, to ensure that audiences were not permanently discouraged from buying tickets for Birmingham’s principal regional venue. Religious complaint could foreshorten, or close completely, productions deemed too sensitive, volatile or offensive. Commercial rather than moral constraints seem the deciding factors in these self-censoring closures.

As Penny Arcade’s comments about the American suppression of her play in the 1990s suggest, the USA has an even longer history of self-imposed censorship brought about by religious or political pressure. The effect of this on British dramatic imports is reflected in the New York transfer of Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner’s *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, originally produced at London’s Royal Court Theatre in 2005 and a successful transfer to London’s West End. The play was scheduled for its 2006 opening at the Off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop. Concern was raised, however, not because of any erotic or anarchic content, but because of religious and political issues that threatened the financial security of the receiving theatre. Because *My Name is Rachel Corrie* was openly critical of Israel’s political stance towards Palestine, the New York Theatre Workshop, having polled the local

³⁵ BBC News, ‘Legal threat over Springer opera’, 3 June 2005 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/4606085.stm> [accessed 22 June 2012].

³⁶ Vanessa Thorpe, ‘F*** you, says BBC as 50,000 rage at Spr*g*r’, *The Observer*, 9 January 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/jan/09/broadcasting.religion>> [accessed 22 June 2012].

community, decided not to alienate many of its patrons, a significant proportion of whom is Jewish. The play's transfer was cancelled, although a new venue at Greenwich Village's Minetta Lane Theater was found later that year. Fear of financial loss yet again took precedent over artistic 'freedom of expression', with self-interest and self-censorship offering the only pragmatic avenue to preserve the New York Theatre Workshop's economic solvency.

In their 2007 book, *Theatre Censorship*, David Thomas, David Carlton and Anne Etienne argue that, unlike those in America, European theatre companies should feel free from such religious or political creative censorship because of the 1953 European Convention on Human Rights. Article 10, Section 1 of the ECHR states that, '[e]veryone has the right to freedom of expression,' including the right 'to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers'³⁷. Unfortunately, as the book's authors explain, Article 10, Section 2 adds that, the 'exercise of these freedoms [...] may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary [...] for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, [and] for the protection of the reputation or the rights of others'³⁸. Although the ECHR offers the fundamental right to human expression, this right must 'inevitably be tempered,' so Thomas, Carlton and Etienne argue, 'because of the pressures of a multicultural society, which is itself the product of globalization'. The result is a culture of 'covert censorship', of which *Jerry Springer* and *Behzti* seem possible examples³⁹. The internationalization of society demands a sensitivity towards, and acceptance of, cultural diversity, which in turn empowers minorities to make 'new demands for protection from insult and affront'⁴⁰. If, however, globalization offers the opportunity for international cultural exchange, as the 2012 'Globe To Globe' season at Shakespeare's Globe London has undoubtedly proved,

³⁷ David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, *Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 259; See *The European Convention on Human Rights and its Five Protocols*, 1950–1966, Section I, Article 10: Sections 1 and 2 <<http://www.hri.org/docs/ECHR50.html#C.Art10>> [accessed 17 June 2012]

³⁸ Thomas, *Censorship*, p. 259.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 235–6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

might the attendant multiculturalism that such exchange inevitably engenders offer an explanation, if not an actual excuse, for a British touring company like the RSC kowtowing to the Singaporean government’s moral edicts? Globalization and multiculturalism would thus stand accused of offering these same minorities a determining voice that far outweighs their actual presence in the wider community.

Given that American and British theatres are, in the twenty-first century, aware of the political and religious implications of staging contentious drama that might offend minority sensitivities, it seems odd that the RSC did not foresee the likelihood of censorship long before their touring company’s arrival in Singapore. Of significance appears the fact that the MDA’s principal concern was not any threat to Singapore’s religious beliefs or political sovereignty, but rather the corruption of the nation’s youth. Local codes and moral standards dictated that those deemed too young should not be exposed to the nakedness of any actor. Eighteen might seem relatively mature in a Western theatrical context, but in Singapore, eighteen seems the obvious transition point between childhood and adulthood. Indeed, eighteen is even the age when, according to the MDA’s licensing code, citizens can be ‘admitted’ to a ‘drama/play with performance by transvestite(s)’. Even here, Sir Ian would fall foul of Singaporean legislation if he repeated his popular British pantomime role of Widow Twankey, the cross-dressing comedy ‘mother’ he played in the London Old Vic’s 2004 and 2005 Christmas productions of *Aladdin*. Presented specifically as children’s entertainment, and traditionally incorporating male and female transvestite roles, the pantomime is an example of difference in audience taste and moral expectation.

It would be too easy, however, to accuse the Singaporeans of overreaction. In their own public consultation on media censorship rules, the MDA’s ‘Censorship Review Committee’ Report of 2003 recognized how ‘[p]arameters of acceptable expression in content vary from country to country, due to different cultural, economic and political set-ups’:

While content on pornography and deviant sexual practices such as paedophilia and sexual violence are clearly unacceptable to most, others like race and religion, violence, sexual content and nudity, homosexuality and coarse language are less clear-cut. Even within Singapore, while some segments of

our society may find the existing parameters too confining, others have cautioned against loosening up. We have to set our own parameters taking into consideration the general values of the community.⁴¹

These 'general values' dictated the intransigence of the Singaporean decision, and defined the weight of pressure brought to bear on the bare display of McKellen. Because, as the MDA report claims, the 'majority of Singaporeans are comparatively conservative,' and despite some 'segments' of society being 'critical of such a conservative position', the principal concern of the MDA was to ensure that a 'stricter control' was imposed on 'sexual content and nudity,' especially when 'such content is intended for public space, easily accessible to the young'⁴².

Although the MDA sought to 'strike a balance' between those who do 'not find content depicting sex and nudity offensive, and those that do,' with the 'context' of any 'depiction of non-exploitative sex and nudity targeting adults' accorded '[g]reater weightage,' they continued to condemn any public performance of nudity 'easily accessible to the young'⁴³. With an innocent irony that only those who saw McKellen's naked display can appreciate, the MDA concluded that, 'Singaporeans are mature enough to decide what is best for them, and censorship should be kept to the bare minimum'⁴⁴. Fundamental, however, is their belief that 'violence, sex, nudity and coarse language, targeted at young persons, should be tightened up': 'The young, being impressionable, may be easily influenced by the content that they are exposed to'⁴⁵. Because of 'impressionable' young people, McKellen was forced to wear an undergarment rather than suffer being equally 'exposed'.

Since youthful impressionability was the sole motivating force for Singapore's act of creative censorship, might late twentieth and early twenty-first century disputes in British theatres show a similar concern for the nation's young people? One significant instance of attempted censorship offers evi-

⁴¹ MDA, 'Censorship Review Committee Report', 2003 <http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/Public/public_Consultation%20with%20Committees_CRC2003.pdf> [accessed 21 June 2012], p. 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 20 & 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

dence for a less age-related, more morally evangelizing attitude not just to nudity, but also to far more graphic and sexually nuanced theatrical expression. In the 1980s, the UK’s National Theatre found itself embroiled in a potentially costly and artistically damaging legal dispute. At the time, I was acting at the National in Sir Richard Eyre’s 1982 debut productions of *Guys and Dolls*, *Beggar’s Opera* and *Schweyck in the Second World War*. During the lengthy rehearsal period for the first of these plays, presented in the vast Olivier Theatre space, the actors and technicians were fully aware of the National’s recent brush with UK censorship laws. The Olivier was where Howard Brenton’s new play, *The Romans in Britain*, had opened in 1980. As Michael Billington reminisces in his 2007 study, *State of the Nation*, Brenton’s *The Romans in Britain* represents a barely masked analogue for late 1970s political events, it drawing a ‘direct parallel between the Roman invasion of Celtic Britain in 54 BC and the contemporary British presence in Northern Ireland’⁴⁶. The play’s first Act contains ‘a brief scene’ of simulated homosexual male rape⁴⁷. The young Druid priest, played by Greg Hicks, is discovered bathing by the Roman centurion of Peter Sproule, who proceeds to attempt anal intercourse. The scene is certainly contentious enough for the British police to have visited the production no less than three times over the course of its October 1980 to March 1981 run. Nevertheless, they reportedly found no basis for proceeding with any legal action⁴⁸.

Brenton’s play might have remained a somewhat obscure and anomalous political analogy had it not invited the attention of the self-proclaimed moral and religious crusader, Mrs Mary Whitehouse. For some years, Mrs Whitehouse had vociferously condemned the decline in public morals she perceived as manifesting on stage, on film and on television. Her response to *The Romans in Britain* was, as a UK citizen, to make a private prosecution under Section 13 of the UK’s Sexual Offences Act of 1956⁴⁹. Under the head-

⁴⁶ Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber, 2007), p. 305.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴⁸ Howard Brenton ‘Look back in anger’, *The Guardian*, 28 January 2006 (2012) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/jan/28/theatre.stage>> [accessed 12 June 2012].

⁴⁹ Mark Lawson ‘Passion play’, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2005 (2012) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/oct/28/theatre>> [accessed 12 June 2012].

ing entitled '*Unnatural offences*', which defines it as 'felony for a person to commit buggery with another person or with an animal', Section 13 describes it as 'an offence for a man to commit an act of gross indecency with another man, whether in public or private, or to be a party to the commission by a man of an act of gross indecency with another man, or to procure the commission by a man of an act of gross indecency with another man'⁵⁰. This specific Section of the 1956 Act, and its reference to 'procuring an act of gross indecency', was associated, somewhat ironically for any Shakespeare scholar, with Section 4 of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, 'for the Punishment of idle and disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabonds'⁵¹. It was intended to prevent any 'Person wilfully exposing to view, in any Street, Road, Highway, or public Place, any obscene Print, Picture, or other indecent Exhibition'⁵². The play's director, Michael Bogdanov, was thus branded by Mrs Whitehouse as the wicked 'procurer' of this supposed 'act of gross indecency'. His 'indecent Exhibition', 'wilfully' exposed to view on the Olivier stage, made him no better than other 'idle and disorderly' rogues and vagabonds.

Mrs Whitehouse, somewhat surprisingly, had elected (or been advised) to ignore the 1968 Theatres Act, Section 2 of which stated that 'a performance of a play shall be deemed to be obscene if, taken as a whole, its effect was such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who were likely [...] to attend it'⁵³. Her decision most likely was in response to Section 3 of the same Act, which states that if, in the 'opinion of experts,' the 'performance of a play' could show 'artistic, literary or other merits,' and might arguably be staged for the 'public good,' a 'person shall not be convicted of an offence'. Bogdanov could readily have claimed artistic or directorial license if prose-

⁵⁰ The National Archives, 'The Sexual Offences Act, 1956 c. 69 (Regnal. 4_and_5_Eliz_2)' <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1956/69%20/pdfs/ukpga_19560069_en.pdf> [accessed 13 June 2012].

⁵¹ The National Archives, 'Vagrancy Act, 1824 c. 83 (Regnal. 5_Geo_4)' <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1824/83/pdfs/ukpga_18240083_en.pdf> [accessed 13 June 2012]. See also Francis Bennion, 'Prosecution of *The Romans in Britain*' (1981) <<http://www.francisbennion.com/pdfs/fb/1981/1981-018-a002-prosecution-of-the-romans.pdf>> [accessed 12 June 2012].

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The National Archives, 'Theatres Act, 1968 c. 54' <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/54/pdfs/ukpga_19680054_en.pdf> [accessed 13 June 2012].

cuted under this Act, as long as he found ‘experts’ to testify on his behalf. The same defence was feasible under Section 4 of the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, which offered identical ‘expert’ protection⁵⁴. Under the Sexual Offences Act, however, no such defence was possible. Bogdanov stood accused of a ‘gross’ sexual misdemeanour as if his intention from the outset was sexually to manipulate and/or abuse his actors into performing an outrageous act in public, or to titillate or scandalize his audiences by exposing them to scenes of same-sex erotic activity.

Mrs Whitehouse’s own sensitivities ensured that she herself had not actually seen the play. It was left to her solicitor, Graham Ross-Cornes, to provide testimony of the offence in his prosecution evidence, after attending a performance of *The Romans in Britain*. Following his visit, Ross-Cornes claimed that he had seen the actor’s erect penis as the onstage attempted rape occurred. Mrs Whitehouse’s solicitor found his statement rebuffed, however, by Bogdanov’s defence team. Ross-Cornes was shown to have watched the play from the back row of the Olivier Theatre stalls, at a distance of some 30 metres from the front edge of the stage.⁵⁵ The purchase of a cheaper theatre ticket seemed more important than a close-up view of the supposed ‘gross indecency’ in question. Bogdanov’s own legal counsel, the formidable Lord Hutchinson, graphically demonstrated how the same effect of an erect penis could be achieved by the actor approaching Greg Hicks from behind with his thumb extended forward from his clenched fist, while holding it in front of him at groin level. A supposedly ‘erect penis’, though not magically done with mirrors, was a stage illusion all the same⁵⁶. Whether through humiliation or exasperation, the prosecution counsel refused to proceed on Mrs Whitehouse’s behalf. The action was withdrawn, with both sides claiming moral, if not absolute legal victory. It was left for Mrs Whitehouse, however, to pay the £14,000 costs of the case, a significant blow to the campaigner’s coffers, as well as her reputation. It is noticeable, however, that, as an ‘unnatural offence’ between two men, the ‘act of gross indecency’ Mrs

⁵⁴ The National Archives, ‘The Obscene Publications Act, 1959 c. 66 (Regnal. 7_and_8_Eliz_2)’ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1959/66/pdfs/ukpga_19590066_en.pdf> [accessed 13 June 2012].

⁵⁵ Lawson, ‘Passion play’.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Whitehouse sought to condemn seemed less concerned with the moral corruption of children or young people, and more with preventing the staging of a homosexual encounter under the aegis of dramatic art.

Many would say that the *Romans in Britain* case would never have been heard if not for the 1968 Theatres Act, which was introduced 'to abolish censorship of the theatre and to amend the law in respect of theatres and theatrical performances'⁵⁷. Prior to the Theatres Act, the power of censorship rested with the Lord Chamberlain, an aristocratic Privy Councillor at the royal court answerable only to the monarch, whose powers once matched those of the Singaporean MDA. Sir Robert Walpole's 1737 Licensing Act confirmed the statutory powers of the Lord Chamberlain, thus giving him a constitutional seal of approval⁵⁸. Although several Parliamentary attempts were made to curb the Lord Chamberlain's influence, outright censorship remained this royal appointee's prerogative for over two hundred years. Indeed, commercial theatre managers actively supported the Lord Chamberlain's role, since their adherence to his censoring directives meant they were safe from private prosecution⁵⁹. It is no overstatement, however, to claim that the 1968 Theatres Act, which abolished the Chamberlain's role as censor, was the direct result of performances at the Royal Court Theatre of Edward Bond's play, *Saved*, with its infamous baby-stoning scene⁶⁰. Like *The Romans in Britain*, *Saved* was not accused of corrupting the young, especially since the 'young' were never its intended audience. As the British actor and House of Lords peer, Laurence Olivier, stated in his 1965 letter to the editor of the left wing Sunday newspaper, the *Observer*, '*Saved* is not a play for children but it is for grown-ups and the grown-ups of this country should have the courage to look at it'⁶¹. Like Brenton in 1980, Bond was writing specifically

⁵⁷ National Archives, 'Theatres Act'.

⁵⁸ Thomas, *Theatre Censorship*, p. 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ For original documents relating to the *Saved* controversy, see Dominic Shellard, Steve Nicholson and Miriam Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets: British Stage Censorship and Readers' Reports from 1824 to 1968* (London: British Library, 2004), pp. 165-9. An excellent overview is offered in Nicholas de Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2000).

⁶¹ Laurence Olivier, 'Letter to the Editor', *Observer*, 21 November 1965, p. 11.

for an audience of ‘grown ups’, able to recognize the political analogy in his drama.

It was not nudity, but an act of staged violence against an implied though imaginary infant in an onstage pram that broke the British theatre censor’s stranglehold on the moral state of the nation. This radical shake-up of censorship may have empowered the theatre companies by offering free rein to outrageously staged sexual and political material, but it also opened the door to private prosecutions by the likes of Mrs Whitehouse. *Saved*, and the relative freedom it engendered in the 1968 Theatres Act, likewise influenced the development of radical ‘In Yer Face’ dramas such as Sarah Kane’s 1995 play *Blasted*, which represents an onstage male-on-male anal rape that makes *The Romans in Britain* seem decidedly tame. As Kane was to pronounce after the controversy that greeted her debut play, “There isn’t anything you can’t represent on stage,” a statement that set the tone for experimental and mainstream drama as British theatre entered the new Millennium⁶².

The relative ‘freedom of expression’ that dramatists, directors and actors enjoy in the UK, at least with regard to sexual content, ensured that, apart from the Singaporean glitch, McKellen was free to bare his body, even in conservative America. Nevertheless, two years later, an instance of ‘covert censorship’ demonstrated a far more insidious ideology at play. America’s Public Broadcasting Service (or PBS) aired *King Lear* in their 2009 ‘Great Performances’ season. Although not overtly censored, the nudity that the Singaporean authorities found so offensive was cleverly removed, with PBS television cameras filming the unfortunate Lear from the waist upwards. Was this an act of political or artistic censorship? Or was it an understandable response to right-wing attacks against the perceived ‘liberalism’ of the PBS?

As John H. Houchin argues in his *Censorship of the American Theatre*, the ‘state of nudity’ as an act of ‘public indecency’ has, since the early 1990s, been the subject of considerable legal and political debate⁶³. This stems from the US Supreme Court’s traditional view that censorship is only justifiable on the grounds of ‘obscenity’, with obscene ‘material’ constitutionally defined as

⁶² Quoted in Ken Urban, ‘An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane’, *PAJ, A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23:3 (2001) 36–46 (p. 39).

⁶³ John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 244.

that which appeals ‘to a prurient interest in sex,’ is ‘patently offensive, and [is] without redeeming social value’⁶⁴. Calls to drop the ‘social value’ criteria in favour of an ‘indecent standard’ led to several conflicts over the censorship of nudity on ‘public indecency’ grounds instead⁶⁵. In 1991, for instance, the US Supreme Court upheld Indiana State Legislation that made it a misdemeanour to appear naked in a public place⁶⁶. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia defended this decision, claiming that there is no evidence that American society had ‘ever shared that Thoreauvian “you-may-do-what-you-like-so-long-as-it-does-not-injure-someone-else” beau ideal – much less for thinking that it was written into the [US] Constitution’:

Our society prohibits, and all human societies have prohibited, certain activities not because they harm others but because they are considered, in the traditional phrase, ‘*contra bonos mores*,’ i.e., immoral.⁶⁷

Censorship for immorality and potential indecency appeared, by 1991 at least, to represent the new federal attitude to nudity. When, then, the PBS focused quite specifically on the upper torso of McKellen, they were filming in accord with their own ‘Editorial Standards and Policies,’ based on the 1967 US ‘Public Broadcasting Act’ and 1992 ‘Telecommunications Act’⁶⁸. Claiming to be ‘committed to serving the public interest by providing content of the highest quality that enriches the marketplace of ideas, unencumbered by commercial imperative,’ the PBS ‘Standards and Policies’ guidelines highlight ‘Editorial integrity,’ ‘Quality,’ ‘Diversity’ and ‘Local station autonomy’ as the ‘four fundamental principles’ that guide their decision-making⁶⁹. The PBS advice on how to uphold ‘these core principles’ with regard to ‘Objectionable

⁶⁴ Owen M. Fiss, ‘The Censorship of Television’, *Northwestern University Law Review*, 93:4 (1999): 1215–38 (pp. 1220–21).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1221.

⁶⁶ Supreme Court of the United States, *Barnes v. Glenn Theatre, Inc., et al.*, 21 June 1991, quoted in Houchin, *Censorship*. P. 244.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁶⁸ Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), ‘Public Broadcasting Act 1967’ <<http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/>> [accessed 24 June 2012].

⁶⁹ Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), *Editorial Standards and Policies* (31 May 2005; updated 24 June 2011) <http://www.pbs.org/about/media/about/cms_page_media/35/PBS%20Editorial%20Standards%20and%20Policies.pdf> [accessed 18 June 2012].

Material’ is that, although ‘controversial or sensitive material,’ namely ‘extreme violence, racial epithets, strong language, nudity, sexism,’ might be included in programming, ‘good taste must prevail’⁷⁰. As for ‘[q]uestions of taste,’ these ‘cannot be answered in the abstract,’ but must be ‘resolved’ when ‘specific problems arise’:

If PBS concludes that the exclusion of such material would distort [...] or impair the content’s artistic quality, PBS may accept the content provided it carries appropriate notice to the viewer. Conversely, PBS may reject content that, in its judgment, needlessly contains objectionable material that compromises the content’s quality or integrity. (PBS ‘Editorial Standards and Policies’ 2005; updated 2011)

The PBS’s option to ‘reject’ – ostensibly to censor – ‘objectionable material’ appears in direct response to contemporary debates about the perceived left-wing political leanings of its governing body. A 2005 Congress enquiry into the PBS demanded a report from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting or CPB, the federal funding organization that offers significant tax-payer dollars to the PBS. The report includes testimony from US citizens who comment on their perception of the PBS with surprising candour. One New York resident claims to be “a recent returnee to PBS,” after many years of “being so disgusted with the extreme left of many of its shows”⁷¹. The anonymous writer now sees the PBS as no longer “controlled by the normal and mostly left-leaning media”. Less complimentary is the Massachusetts resident who sees a “consistent marked liberal bias” in the PBS, with its “liberal advocacy group” mentality effectively preventing it from being “a balanced and objective organization”. Whether in response to ‘left-leaning’ social conscience, or the perceived liberalism of the PBS’s stance with regards to welfare, voting rights and religious freedom, these testimonies confirm a perception at least that the PBS had its own left-leaning liberal agenda when broadcasting ‘objectionable material’.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Section L.

⁷¹ Corporation for Public Broadcasting, ‘Report to Congress by CPB in response to Section 19 of the Public Telecommunications Act of 1992 (Public Law No. 102–356), 2005’ <http://cpb.org/open/2005/2005_cpb_ottpAnnualReport.pdf> [accessed 22 June 2012].

With the spotlight of Congress directed on its broadcasts, the PBS was perhaps understandably cautious about the filming of *King Lear*. Following their own guidelines, the PBS rated the RSC's 27 March 2009 television broadcast as a 'Parental Guidance' or PG production. PBS guidelines that accompany the 'Parental Guidance' rating suggest the broadcaster's belief that the 'program may contain some material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children,' whereby '[m]any parents may want to watch it with' them⁷². With McKellen's naked genitalia skilfully relegated to below the metaphorical belt of the camera lens, the adult themes and violent situations in Shakespeare's tragedy were free to be watched by adult and supervised child alike. 'Covert censorship' of McKellen's nudity, however, appeared to conform to moral standards first suggested and enforced by Singapore's censoring authorities.

As if to confirm the similarity of concern between the PBS and Singapore censors, who sought to shield young viewers from corrupting influences on the TV screen or on stage, the RSC's Singapore sponsor, Kripalani, wrote retrospectively about the RSC's visit with *King Lear*. Kripalani describes how the 'audience loved the show and members of our audience are still asking what we might be doing with the RSC next':

It was a wonderful opportunity for us to learn. I would love our company to have an illustrious history as rich as the RSC's one day, and for the kids who come to watch our shows to leave the theatre as inspired as I was when I first went to Stratford-upon-Avon. (RSC 'Annual Report', 2008)

With the drive for theatre companies to attract the 'kids', the future adult ticket purchasers that Kripalani so obviously seeks to inspire, and to benefit from the lucrative 'educational' market of advance group-booking ticket sales, theatre companies are being forced to adopt self-censorship, or suffer 'covert-censorship' curtailment to survive financially now, and in the years to come. It is not political or religious sensitivity, but an educationally driven marketplace that represents the principal threat to freedom of theatrical ex-

⁷² Public Broadcasting Service, 'Parental Ratings Guidance Notes, 2011' <http://www-tc.pbs.org/producing/media/producing/cms_page_media/1/Parental%20Ratings%201.2011.pdf> [accessed 22 June 2012].

pression. This same educational marketplace panders to the consumerist ideals of the young at the expense of artistic innovation. Theatre companies, directors, actors and playwrights might be adapting their productions, performances and texts to suit the religious, political and moral demographic of their venues. They are doing so for purely economic, rather than ideologically sensitive reasons.