

■ **John Bennett**  
Liverpool Hope University, UK

# “You base football player” (*King Lear* 1.5.91): the rise and significance of the soccer play as index of identity

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*This article presents an analytical overview of the British and Irish soccer play since 1914. It demonstrates a rise in the incidence of such work in the twenty-first century and suggests reasons for this significant increase. A five part taxonomy is posited, examining the varied roles of person, team, specific game, fictional game and the didactic. A triptych of identity as defined by region, nation and representations of maleness is suggested, and these are shown to be vital tropes of such work. In addition, a consideration of the efficacy of this work as popular theatre is offered, as is the soccer play as a possible vehicle for increasing live theatre attendance in non-metropolitan theatres. John Bennett is Principal Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at Liverpool Hope University.*

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Keywords: audience, Peter Boyden, football, masculine identity, localism, John McGrath, nationalism

In a recent theatre blog, British critic Alfred Hickling asked, “Where are the great plays about football?”<sup>1</sup> He then went on to cite other ‘great’ plays based on the sport of rugby league (David Storey’s *The Changing Room* (1971) and John Godber’s *Up’n’Under* (1984)). Whilst acknowledging, on Hickling’s behalf, that ‘great’ is a highly subjective and contested term, a less Anglo-centric, less football-focussed view of sport in theatre might include David Williamson’s 1997 classic, *The Club* (Australian football)<sup>2</sup> or the Pulitzer Prize winning boxing play, *Great White Hope* (1967) or the more recent *Take Me Out* (baseball, 2002). If the brief is extended to include individual characters driven by sporting ambition and their success/failure therein, then Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* (American football, 1947) or August Wilson’s *Fences* (baseball, 1983) would be worthy of inclusion, as might Tomson Highway’s award-winning *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (hockey, 1989).

But the heart of Hickling's question is concerned with sport and nation; soccer, claims Hickling, is the national game of the United Kingdom, yet appears to be 'neglected' as theatrical subject matter. Aleks Sierz underlines the significance of such athletic prowess as marker of national strength, warning of the possible societal dangers therein: "Sport is central to our acting out of national identity, and football for example is a powerful arena for patriotic sentiment. It is also an area when national pride can degenerate into xenophobia."<sup>3</sup>

This article will address this perception of 'neglect' of the soccer play and consider its role as sub-genre of the sport(s) play, depicting, celebrating and commentating on region, nation and male identity; in addition, it will consider the potential of the sport-based play in attracting an atypical theatre audience. To re-frame Hickling's question: "Where are the plays about football and can any of them be thought 'great'"?

Critical commentary around sport as/is performance is informed by multiple discourses. In 1966, Patrice Pavis "sketched out the relationship between play, ritual, sports, theatre and performance."<sup>4</sup> Richard Schechner later identified specific somatic similarities between two seemingly disparate cultural events, "ballet and football are about movement, contact, lifting, carrying, falling and rushing to and fro,"<sup>5</sup> laying the groundwork for further analysis of sport as cultural ritual. In addition to ritual and the physical aesthetic, Philip Auslander argues that 'liveness' is a crucial term when considering sport as performance.<sup>6</sup> Within the live event of the football play, the use of the recorded game on video provides a documentary element to the narrative and the opportunity to re-live much-loved and revered moments in a club/player's history.

For the purposes of this article, the most significant discourse framing sport in performance is not ritual, physicality or a critique of the live performance event but, as Schechner unequivocally states, the marking (or changing) of identity and the making or fostering of community as functions of performance.<sup>7</sup> As Hickling says in his initial question, and Aleks Sierz underlines, it is the use of sport in theatre as a trope of identity and particularly identity as perceived as a triptych of region, nation and representations of maleness that is of particular interest here.

The critical and cultural analysis of sport in performance in terms of identity is most developed in Australia, where the pioneering work of Richard Fotheringham<sup>8</sup> positions sport and drama as "uneasy playmates."<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr<sup>10</sup> go on to critique and document representations of maleness in Australian theatre—including the sports play, Alan Filewood neatly defining the work as: "*the Boy's Own History of Australian Drama*."<sup>11</sup> In the U.K., Michael Mangan<sup>12</sup> highlights representations of maleness in an impressive overview of masculinity on the Western stage that begins with Dionysus and finishes with David Mamet. Mangan states: "The sporting environment has become a classic topic for studies of masculinity"<sup>13</sup> and *Up'n'Under*, in particular, he describes as depicting the 'rituals of male

comradeship.”<sup>14</sup> It will be demonstrated that location is equally significant in defining a sense of self.

This article takes an overview of some eighty-eight British and Irish plays<sup>15</sup> spanning nearly one hundred years and considers the emergence of the ‘soccer play’<sup>16</sup> as trope of identity and as a particular type of popular theatrical entertainment. Quantitative analysis demonstrates the rise in incidence of these plays and a qualitative taxonomy attempts to categorise this large and seemingly disparate range of work within the proposed identity triptych, and also by reference to thematic content and popular performance efficacy.

In addition to identity, another appropriately popular and progressive frame for discussion of the efficacy of the football play, albeit one with an avowedly ‘working-class’ identity perspective, would be John McGrath’s analysis of popular political theatre, most clearly articulated in his seminal work *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience Class and Form*. First published in 1981 and not without its critics,<sup>17</sup> this series of lectures re-written as a manifesto for proponents of popular political theatre contains a list of “fairly generalised differences between the demands and tastes of bourgeois and of working-class audiences.”<sup>18</sup> According to McGrath, these are:

Directness - audience likes to know exactly what you are trying to do or say

Comedy - audiences like laughs

Music - audiences like music in shows, live and lively, popular, tuneful and well-played

Emotion - open to emotion on the stage

Variety - able to switch (from entertainment modes within a single performance) with great ease

Effect - audiences demand more moment by moment effect from their entertainers

Immediacy - closer to the audience's lives and experiences

Localism [of performer]

Localism [of place].<sup>19</sup>

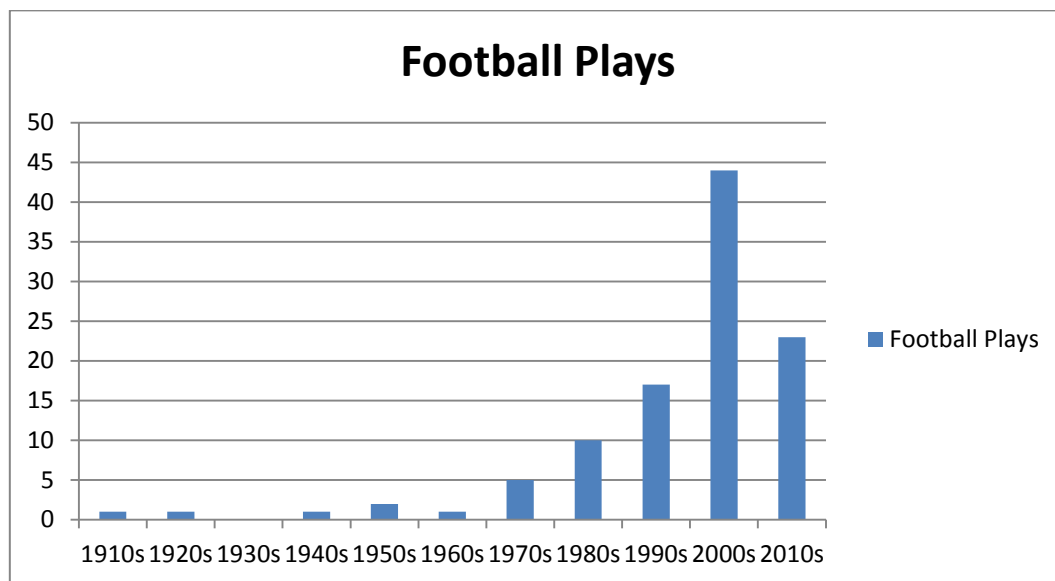
It would be reductive to attempt to map eighty eight plays against all the given criteria; suffice to say that plays with a football theme have a certain ‘directness,’ they tend to leaven a linear narrative with humour, many are musicals in their own right and the use of football chants and songs adds a musical emphasis to those that are not, they are unafraid of displays of sentiment and, with varying degrees of success, strive for a varied style of delivery, most often employing direct address and occasional audience participation.

However, McGrath’s final four: effect, immediacy and the two types of localism, must be seen as the most significant in terms of the characteristics of this sub-genre. Football plays, in any of the five categories proposed in this article, strive to have an ‘effect’<sup>20</sup> and to that end make much of ‘immediacy.’ McGrath defines ‘immediacy’ as subject matter which is ‘much closer to the audience's lives and experiences’<sup>21</sup> and the shared cultural capital of the football

experience can be seen as a function of propinquity. Immediacy is not without its drawbacks and McGrath suggests a crucial caveat that recalls Sierz's warning against xenophobia, that 'immediacy' can "close the mind to the rest of the world."<sup>22</sup>

The same warning could apply equally to McGrath's dual senses of localism; the first concerns the significance of local 'talent' on stage rather than imported 'stars'; "he or she cares enough about being in that place with that audience and actually knows something about them,"<sup>23</sup> but, more significantly, the second is that of place, "the best response among working-class audiences comes from characters and events with a local feel."<sup>24</sup> This is crucially important and many of the plays are celebrations of this aspect of McGrathian localism, they create a sense of identity that borders on the tribal. On the one hand, this can be life-affirming and give a strong sense of belonging and the enjoyment of shared experience (emotion) but McGrath is right to warn that, unless handled critically, localism of place can lead to chauvinism, and, in football terms, hooliganism or, as Nadine Holdsworth warns, "xenophobic tribalism."<sup>25</sup> Many football plays set out to address such problems and consciously attempt to defuse some of the tensions present in historic club rivalries.

### ***Incidence of British and Irish football plays since 1910***



The above graph plots the number of football plays against decades since 1910. The growth of this genre is most marked in the late 1990s and the turn of the century, with the early years of the 2010s already showing a significant proportion (63% - nearly two thirds of all football plays in the UK and Ireland have been produced in the last twelve years). The rise in interest may be because of the general rise in profile of the game created by Rupert Murdoch's Sky

television and the installation of the 'Premier League' in 1992. This commodification might have introduced a new and wealthier audience to football but would not in and of itself create interest in the football play. It is more likely that the Boyden report on Regional Theatre (1992)<sup>26</sup> was the spur to production. The Arts Council for England commissioned an investigation into the aesthetic and financial health of regional theatre. The final report was published in May 2000 and led to the Arts Council conducting further consultation and the publication, in July 2000, of the National Policy for Theatre in England; this document identified eight development targets for all publicly-funded regional producing theatres:

A better range of high quality work

Attract more people

Develop new ways of working

Education

Address diversity and inclusion

Develop the artists and creative managers of the future

An international reputation

Regional distinctiveness.<sup>27</sup>

The report led to regional theatres being required to make work that would "attract more people" and demonstrate "regional distinctiveness" in order to continue to receive public monies. Many theatres located in towns and cities with a strong footballing tradition must have seen this as an opportunity to tap into the sport audience through the celebration of local achievement, whether that was individual, team or historically significant. Clearly then, the rise of the football play in the U.K, in particular, is a function of interventionist artistic policy and regional theatres wanted to be seen to address the issues in Boyden.

Although the statistical evidence that there has been an increase in the number of football-themed plays in the United Kingdom and Ireland is unequivocal, the experiences of individual theatres staging these plays is varied and complex. The Watford Palace Theatre has produced three football plays since 1997 and remains committed to the sub-genre as a means of making work that is artistically fulfilling, commercially viable and extends audience 'reach.' The Resident Director of the theatre, James Williams, explains:

Two of the three performances of *Hello, Mister Capello* sold out (and subsequently there was general consensus that we should have offered more performances). I can certainly offer you anecdotal evidence of non-theatre-goers coming to see the play (as a participatory piece that encouraged participation from all sections of the Watford community, this

also had a big impact on the types of audience we attracted for the piece).<sup>28</sup>

Williams believes that this particular style of work extends the demographic of the theatre. He goes on to say: "From the day I joined the theatre staff full time in 2006, I raised the idea of doing another football play, as it seemed an obvious way of reaching new audiences in the town."<sup>29</sup> This theatre's particular commitment to the football play continues as it recently co-produced Tom Wells' comedy, *Jumpers for Goalposts* (2013).

Another venue that has produced three football plays in recent years is Live Theatre in Newcastle. *You Couldn't Make It Up* (February 2009) and its rapid sequel, *You Really Couldn't Make It Up* (July 2009), used verbatim theatre techniques to highlight management problems at Newcastle United Football Club. Both were box office successes for the theatre, the former running for six performances and playing to 97% capacity and the latter fourteen performances at 89%.<sup>30</sup> A spokesperson for the theatre stated that: "Our primary target market for this play was Newcastle United fans with an interest in cultural activity. It certainly appealed to Live Theatre's traditional audiences as well as engaging with new audiences."<sup>31</sup> Box office data reveals that one in five attending *You Couldn't Make It Up* were first-time visitors to the theatre and 28% attending *You Really Couldn't Make It Up* had not been to Live Theatre Newcastle before.

The clear winner in the league table of football-themed theatre production is the north west city of Liverpool with thirteen such plays premiering there. They include examples of each suggested type but a particularly strong celebration of the 'local' is evident. The Royal Court Liverpool has produced three and they played to an impressive 36,444 people in total over the course of each run. Kevin Fearon, Managing Director of the Royal Court, makes several interesting points regarding the nature and selective appeal of these plays:

We haven't presented plays about football. We have presented plays about supporting a team, and rivalry. I know several Evertonians<sup>32</sup> who would not come to see *Shankly* or *You'll Never Walk Alone* because they were about Liverpool.[...] I would say that at the same time as football plays attract football fans who are new to theatre, it also has an alienating effect on some of the existing theatregoers. Football is such a beast and it conjures up a variety of images some of which would be negative for non-footballing folk.[...] The regional aspect of the shows is also important. It reinforces our statement that we are of this city and not embarrassed to put on work about our city even if it points towards parochialism.<sup>33</sup>

So for the Royal Court there is a strong sense of regional identity invested in this work. Fearon is also clear that the staging of the local team play, the 'Home Win,' is a calculated risk that will both attract the supporter of that team and repel the rival fan and, in addition, may deter some of their regular audience. This appears to be a risk worth taking for the Royal Court Liverpool:

To refer back to your premise that football shows can bring in a new audience. Yes they do but they put some people off but just for the one production. But in the long run some of those new attenders who have come through our doors for the first time will come back because the experience was good one. So overall they do build audiences—which is the holy grail.<sup>34</sup>

Watford, Newcastle and Liverpool are towns/cities with a strong footballing tradition and it is tempting to think that this localism accounts for the success of football plays at such venues; however, the picture is more complex. Birmingham is England's second largest city, has a significant football background as the birthplace of the football league (1888) and is home to three well known football clubs.<sup>35</sup> A spokesperson for Arts and Tourism in the area described the reception of one football play:

*A League Apart* was a musical play about the League cup final in 1963 Birmingham versus [Aston] Villa. I would say that it didn't achieve great sales, nor attract atypical theatre-goers. We have also staged other shows such as *Fever Pitch* here and they have proven difficult to sell."<sup>36</sup>

It may be significant that, despite this one bespoke local football play and the generic attraction of football fandom as examined in *Fever Pitch*, Birmingham does not appear to have the critical mass of Watford or Newcastle or the particular fascination for the football play in Liverpool. Similarly, Middlesbrough (only forty miles south of Newcastle) produced one play at the local university in 2011 (*The Boro's 37 Minutes*), a history of Middlesbrough football club from 1986 until 2004. This production seems to have done little by way of achieving a new audience: "Our experience is that there is no crossover between theatre audiences and football supporters."<sup>37</sup> This set of responses suggests that, for the football play to succeed in artistic and commercial terms there needs to be a sense of the town/city as having football 'in its blood' and then, crucially, enough productions of 'good' football plays to generate interest, popular approval and critical mass.

There is clear evidence of rising numerical mass in the sheer volume of plays produced since 1914 and it is possible to consider the British and Irish football play of the last one hundred years as falling into one of five categories:

- the individuated 'testimonial play' with a clear regional emphasis;
- the local team 'home win';
- the nationalistic, time and place specific 'match of the date';
- the imagined team or player in 'fantasy football' considering questions of perceived identity;
- the broader life lessons that might come from 'football coaching—such as questions of 'hegemonic masculinity.'<sup>38</sup>

Rather than describe in detail many plays that are, as their *raison d'être*, specifically local and therefore unlikely to be well-known outside that region, it

is more helpful to give summary by type and examine how each category considers issues of popular theatre, identity and claims to 'greatness.'

### *The Testimonial*

As the name suggests, the testimonial play, like the testimonial game offered as a reward to a favoured, long-serving player, is a public tribute to a particular individual and as such might be thought of as biographical theatre. This sub-group of football plays is self-identifying through the eponymous hero. In American football terms, *Lombardi* (2007), the story of the famous Green Bay Packers coach that opened in Wisconsin and then went on to a commercially successful run on Broadway in 2010/11 could be included in this category, as could Jack Hibberd's *The Les Darcy Show* (1976) about the Australian boxing legend. The narrative of the testimonial play usually follows a straightforward *bildungsroman* plot-line:

*Dancing Shoes: The George Best Musical* tells of George's life from his childhood in Belfast, through to his move to Manchester (and brief return due to homesickness) and on to his rise to superstardom. [...] Like George's life, the highs are high and the lows are low.<sup>39</sup>

These are the most 'tribal' of the soccer plays and the attraction for an audience here is likely to be a personal fondness for, or strong identification with, the main character and their team or teams. Invariably, the testimonial play will include projected video recordings of some of the 'greatest hits' from the career of the central protagonist and these are, equally invariably, greeted by rapturous applause from a supportive audience, some of whom may well be decked out in the appropriate club colours.

The critical response to these plays, as with many in this sub-genre, is difficult to determine. Some have a strong regional profile and attract partisan praise and support in the local press. Usually originating in a geographically relevant location, Belfast for *The George Best Story*, Liverpool for *The Shankly Show* (2008), the story of legendary Liverpool Football Club manager Bill Shankly, for example. These productions have a limited appeal when it comes to touring, therefore national news coverage is sporadic and, when it does occur, invariably critical:

As much a sentimental trip down memory lane as a tribute to Shankly, the show was surely an inspiration to Liverpool fans, even if theatrically it was little more than mediocre.<sup>40</sup>

There is something of a critical consensus here and this perhaps gives an initial explanation for the lack of awareness of or appreciation for the football play; it is perceived as not very effective theatre; but such criticism misses the point. These are 'testimonial plays' and like the testimonial matches granted to loyal team members, they are played by different rules. These are calculatedly one-sided, invariably emotive depictions of a 'great man' that have a limited, local appeal



and provide an important validation of local identity. It is interesting to note that only eight plays qualify as testimonials, making this the smallest group in the survey.

### *Home Win*

Similar to the testimonial play, the 'home win' story takes as its focus the team rather than the individual player and, as such, might be thought to contain a more progressive, collective message than the solo, entrepreneurial trajectory of, say, *The George Best Story*. The audience for these shows is equally likely to be self-selecting and eager for an unquestioning, hagiographic representation of 'their' team. Whereas the testimonial tends to be written by a playwright with an interest in the life story of the central figure, writers of the 'home win' tend to be ardent fans with a particular and often life-long affection for the club. Stylistically, these productions utilise match footage in a manner similar to the testimonial play but they tend to be bigger projects with a larger cast, often having live music and some audience involvement; they are unlikely to tour beyond the immediate vicinity of the club. Structurally, they usually take the form of an uncritical, linear narrative and are sometimes anchored by an 'Everyman' figure who bridges the stage/auditorium divide in classic popular theatre style. These plays are about a passion for the game evidenced by players and fans alike and, as such, they tend towards the unapologetically emotive. This aligns them with the popular political theatre work of John McGrath: "[...] a working-class audience is more open to emotion on the stage than a middle-class audience who get embarrassed by it. The critics label emotion on stage mawkish, sentimental, etc."<sup>41</sup> Jo Kelly, a regional critic, defends this approach on the grounds of personal identity:

Of course, *You'll Never Walk Alone* is sentimental. Reliving Liverpool [football club's] history is like flicking through the family album for many fans. [...] Writer Nicky Allt manages to capture what it is to be a Liverpool fan for many and, for them, it's probably well-nigh impossible to be "over-sentimental" about it.<sup>42</sup>

The plays are important events for the theatre staging them as they not only have the potential to 'attract more people' but demonstrate a regionalised 'cultural democracy' that may help foster an identity for the audience and the host town. As regards critical reception and representation within the press and the academy, the 'home win' football play is practically invisible, more so than the testimonial play. Regional press coverage, when given, is invariably supportive and uncritical but national opinion, if proffered at all, is rather more circumspect:

The majority of the show is an awkward amalgam of stand-up, slide presentation and interactive supporters' helpline; its forced humour betrays its hurried conception. [...] *Confessions of a City Supporter* remains resolutely a play about Hull City. It goes down a storm in front of a home

crowd prepared to whoop at every reference, but I doubt it would pick up many points away.<sup>43</sup>

Nearly one-in-five of the plays could be categorised as 'home win' and, with the notable exceptions of Watford and Brighton, there is a preponderance of northern English towns and cities, demonstrating a theatrical allegiance to the 'national game' that does not appear to be replicated in the south of the country. It is doubtful that Hickling would categorise a testimonial or a home win play as 'great' but that is to miss the point of these unselfconsciously, celebratory local works and their importance in underpinning local identity whilst remaining conscious of the very real dangers of chauvinism.

### ***Match of the Date***

A significant proportion (25%) of the British and Irish football plays concern themselves not with one man or one team but with one famous game; these can be thought of as 'match of the date' works utilising a real, usually contentious sporting encounter.<sup>44</sup> Plays in this category focus on one game of great significance for two national rather than regional sides; such nation-state bilateralism allowing a more political agenda to come to the fore. Plays in this group would include Dermot Bolger's *In High Germany* (Ireland v. Germany 1988 European Football Championship), for example. Testimonial and home win plays are predominantly tribal in rivalry and apolitical in the traditional sense. Match-of-the-date plays tend towards a national/international focus, often featuring colonial, imperialist or racial tensions in their narrative. Dramatic explorations of national tensions should come as no surprise here as Nadine Holdsworth points out:

The vast majority of theatre practices that engage with the nation, directly or obliquely, do so to respond to moments of rupture, crisis or conflict. [...] theatre often deploys its content, formal properties and aesthetic pleasures to generate a creative dialogue with tensions in the national fabric.<sup>45</sup>

These plays are high profile events with a particular resonance concerning nationhood. Sectarian tensions between Northern Ireland and the Republic feature heavily and Marie Jones' *A Night in November* is a rare double example of a female playwright writing in the sports genre and a football play that attracts significant critical and academic comment. Consider this speech from half-way through the play:

KENNETH as ERNIE: They've got blood in their nostrils Kenny, Fenian<sup>46</sup> blood, worse than that foreign Fenian blood and what's even more despicable than that mercenary Fenian blood ... here they come, here's our boys ... (Chants.) Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland, come on lads show them Papish bastards how to play fut ball ... luk, luk, there's Billy (Shouts.) Billy Bingham<sup>47</sup> for king (Sings.) We love you Billy, we love you, so just tell them bastards where to go ... that's our boys the Billy boys, no

problem ...Luk at them, luk at them dirty Fenian scum ... BOO! (Ernie sings.) God save our gracious Queen etc. etc.<sup>48</sup>

Ireland's celebrated theatre critic, Fintan O'Toole, described *A Night in November* as: "probably the most successful Irish play of the last 18 months" but was very critical of the idealised representation of Irish mores:

I have never seen a play that required a Dublin audience to put less on the line, to expose so few of its assumptions and prejudices to the risks that engagement with a piece of theatre ought to entail [...] it buys into every soft-focus cliché ever invented about what it means to be Irish. And in doing so it sells short the great theatrical skills that go into its making.<sup>49</sup>

National(ist) tensions inform the story-lines of many of the 'match of the date' plays and Roy Williams's *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* is another high profile example of the football match as site and metaphor for racial discrimination and race as identity or, as Sierz puts it: "Support for the England team as index of identity."<sup>50</sup> Set in a public house showing the England versus Germany World Cup Qualifier of 2000 on a large screen television, the play revisits the last international game at the iconic Wembley stadium before it was demolished to make way for a new venue:

When I started the play, I knew I wanted to set it around a real match and I knew that game was coming up [...] And I just put all these people in a confined space and watched them do battle. In a way, they're all battling for what they perceive to be their England and that's what the debate is about. And it's still going on today with all the questions about asylum-seekers—what kind of England do we want?<sup>51</sup>

Williams' intelligently argued, complex narrative on race and nation may well qualify for that elusive 'great football play' title. Being a National Theatre production there was considerable press coverage, virtually all of it positive. Benedict Nightingale called it a "talented, troubling piece,"<sup>52</sup> Michael Billington thought it "noisily effective,"<sup>53</sup> and Charles Spencer "remarkable."<sup>54</sup> This work even achieved academic recognition and figures as an example of the 'ambivalent and hybrid'<sup>55</sup> nature of national identity and the dangers of national chauvinism as discussed in Nadine Holdsworth's *Theatre and Nation*: "The play questions what it means to be English in the new millennium by acknowledging inner-city racial discord, casual racism and one character's bigoted opinion."<sup>56</sup>

Clearly, plays in this category tackle multiple social agendas and could be thought of as political theatre. As such, they are far higher profile than any of the other football plays discussed and more likely to be published, revived and tour beyond their logical geographic roots.

### ***Fantasy Football***

The trend for 'actuality' in the football play is fairly recent and 'Fantasy Football' is the most popular narrative style for the early football play. George

Munro's *Gold in His Boots* (1947) told the story of a gifted provincial Scottish footballer and the problems faced when working in a corrupt, sectarian environment. The implicit critique of capitalist models of production and consumption, coupled with a strong regional and national narrative, made the play a logical choice for revival by John McGrath's 7:84 Theatre Company during the 1982 Clydebuilt season of neglected Scottish working-class plays. But the most successful example of the 'Fantasy Football' play arrives some twenty years later, noisily, and with a cast of ninety.

*Zigger Zagger* (1967) was commissioned by the founder of the National Youth Theatre, Michael Croft. A *bildungsroman*, the play takes an episodic approach to the examination of the life of a "football hooligan." Although the play never specifies which 'city' the city fans support, giving the piece the potential for performance in any urban environment hosting a team of note, the inspiration was the oldest club in the British premier league, Stoke City, and Terson was a life-long supporter. Despite its intentional anonymity, the play follows the trend of regional identity seen in other works discussed thus far and Croft describes Terson as, "body and soul a writer of provincial life."<sup>57</sup>

The most striking element of the *mise-en-scène* of *Zigger Zagger* is the positioning and use of the vocal and physical enthusiasm of a large cast of (predominantly) young men. As Croft elaborates:

I got the answer—so obvious and logical—play the whole thing as though at a football match in front of a crowded stadium. [...] The stadium could form a permanent setting for the play. It would enable the chorus to be continuously present, Greek-style, either to comment on the action or to take part in it—or simply to lift up its heart in song whenever required.<sup>58</sup>

Part Greek tragedy, part musical, part Brechtian critique of wasted potential, entirely original, *Zigger Zagger* is probably one of the most effective youth-focussed plays, football or otherwise, of the late twentieth century. Its omission in many overviews of British Theatre can only be due to the play's dated innocence in regard to football fandom, as well as a lack of revivals outside of the 'school play' circuit and a consistent critical myopia as regards amateur theatre.

The play intersperses songs and chants from the terraces with naturalistic scenes from the life of its central protagonist, Harry Philton. Harry is a failure at school and his role models are the Mephistophelian leader of the City football fans, Zigger Zagger and the deeply tedious, social-climbing brother-in-law Les. The latter, when describing 'great' works of literature to Harry, reveals more than he intends: "You want to get on to the classics Harry. *The Reader's Digest* bumper volume, where they've taken the classics and stripped them down to pure ... got rid of all the trimming so you're left with pure classic."<sup>59</sup>

Placing hegemonic masculinity under scrutiny, the final scene of the play sees Harry Philton despondent after ritual humiliation involving the 'blacking' of

his genitals as part of his initiation as an apprentice. He is then confronted by the good and bad 'angels' of Zigger and Les:

LES: They've tested you, that's all they wanted. See what you were made of, that's all. Now they know you're a lad of spirit they'll be satisfied. Make you one of them.

ZIGGER: Humiliation is their condition of entry, Harry. You have to conform to their ways. They ask for your conformity. We ask for nothing but your voice, Harry. Come back to the stand.<sup>60</sup>

And Harry makes his decision, turning to Les and accepting a life of quiet compliance and 'digested classics' as the vast male chorus behind him attack his perceived betrayal and chant 'Has Been' and 'Hang Up Your Boots.'

The unique strength of the 'Fantasy Football' sub-genre is that it avoids the tribalism and partisan identification that inevitably comes with 'real' players, teams and games and allows a focus on the wider social ramifications of the sport and associated identities. The imagined teams and confrontations provide a broader canvas on which to draw more complex questions of masculine and feminine constructions as well as the achievement of a particular kind of personal fulfilment in Western post-industrial society.

### ***Football Coaching***

The final category in this suggested taxonomy (and the largest, as it is one in three of all plays considered) is the 'Football Coaching' play. This is a very broad grouping of plays that concern themselves with the lessons that may be learnt from the game or the following of the game of football. Typically, this sub-genre of plays has representations of maleness as a focus and, following Hickling's dictum that the 'best football plays tend to avoid players and focus on the fans,' considers the game from the perspective of the male and (sadly only occasionally) female amateur player or quasi-professional obsessive follower. Williamson's appropriately named *The Club*, with its lessons about loyalty versus materialism, would qualify as an Australian example,<sup>61</sup> as would Cree playwright Tomson Highway's previously mentioned and equally acclaimed 1989 hockey play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* for Canada—a postcolonial tale of First Nation fight back coupled with powerful feminist lessons in re-appropriation.

Robert Farquhar's *God's Official* (2000) is one of the best-documented and most notable British plays in this category. The play was written for Liverpool actors and opened to a local audience but Farquhar is keen to point out the capacity of the piece to have wider appeal: "I would hope that the play would work perfectly well played in any major regional accent, e.g: Mancunian, Glaswegian, Geordie, etc."<sup>62</sup>

*God's Official* premiered at the Unity Theatre, Liverpool in 2000 and then played that year's Edinburgh Festival. Robert Thomson's review acts as a useful plot summary:

Degsy and Cliff are two Scouse football fanatics who take relegation to heart and plan retribution on the person responsible. Dismissing the notion that it is only a game, forgetting the fact that it is teams that lose matches, they kidnap the ref—a Bible-bashing no-mark who demonstrates his mastery of the pitch by turning a threat into an opportunity.<sup>63</sup>

This is a very positive review in the same manner as Donald Huttera's piece in the *Scotsman* a week before. However, both reviews have a telling coda that typifies the critical marginalisation of the football play as a vehicle for wider social debates. Thomson concludes by saying: "Non-footie fans (which, unfortunately, probably make up the majority of Fringe-goers) might consider it a bit of football fluff, though undoubtedly well-crafted"<sup>64</sup> and Huttera signs off with equally faint praise: "Both production and script lack the resonance that tips theatre-going over into an indelible experience. Still, this study of male hysteria is full of enjoyable mockery and muscle."<sup>65</sup>

Both reviewers fail to engage with the deconstruction of the male psyche present in the text and fall into the trap so often experienced by 'comic' writers whereby the deeper social 'resonance' is not fully registered or considered as the play is seen as nothing more than funny, or, worse still, a 'sporting comedy.'

### **Conclusion**

One look at the audience crowding into the Citizens [Glasgow, Scotland] tells you Des Dillon's *Singin' I'm No a Billy He's a Tim* is reaching the parts that other theatre can't reach. [...] It has enjoyed a second sell-out tour of Scotland, with dates lined up in Northern Ireland later in the year. All this while passing under the theatre establishments' radar. You couldn't call it sophisticated but the production is good fun. Dillon's key gag is to throw two football fans from either side of Glasgow's sectarian divide—Catholic Celtic, Protestant Rangers—into a police cell on the day of an Old Firm<sup>66</sup> match. Tim and Billy<sup>67</sup> (nobody said this was subtle) have to negotiate a path between their desire to see the game and their inbred hatred of each other. In the process, they realise the foolishness of their bigotry.<sup>68</sup>

Mark Fisher's review of Des Dillon's 2009 football coaching play captures many of the arguments of this article. Sport plays in general and football plays in particular are emerging fields and as such they seem to have passed, for the most part, unnoticed through the detection devices of the academy as well as "under the theatre establishments' radar." Football plays generally follow McGrathian characteristics of popular political theatre although McGrath would take exception to the 'unsophisticated' label here, arguing as he does for a better understanding of the popular audience's particular appreciation of comedy and variety.<sup>69</sup> The potential to attract ("reaching the parts") a different type of

audience is apparent, although this is not universally applicable and some football plays are clearly more successful than others. Equally the potential to address progressive ideals—the “foolishness of their bigotry”—is addressed in what might be thought of as the best of them.

The football play, in any of the five proposed categories, makes a statement about identity and then interrogates this identity, its roots, plurality, ‘foolishness,’ representations of maleness, suppositions and challenges to chauvinism; allowing the more effective of these works the status of popular political theatre as well as the chance to claim that elusive ‘great football play’ title. It has been shown that, at a national level, Williams’ *Sing Yer Heart Out Fer the Lads* stands out as an example of the efficacy of the football play in addressing issues of belonging and race. It is possible to add Terson’s much earlier, less-revived but equally ground-breaking *Zigger Zagger* as an example of the theatrical power of the form of the football play as well as its ability to address questions around personal identity—profound ‘who am I’ questions are posed to the central character, Harry Philton.

A third challenger in the ‘great football play’ stakes could be one of a number of locally successful but less well known testimonial or home win plays. As predominantly regional works, these plays are even more marginalised and receive little coverage in the national press or by the academy. The Royal Court Liverpool’s *You’ll Never Walk Alone: The Legend of Liverpool Football Club* (2012) is an important example of the mythologising power of the local football play, the potential to use a club’s linear history as a broader lesson, albeit one with the limited and rarefied appeal of a particular team. Hickling’s *diktat* that the best football plays are about the fans again holds true here: “It’s through the eyes of ordinary supporters—a family of Reds<sup>70</sup> who come to Anfield to spread their grandfather’s ashes in the goal mouth—that the tale unfolds. [...] Audiences can expect giant video screens and plenty of music.”<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, the Royal Court Liverpool receives no state funding and therefore had nothing to gain by complying with the recommendations of the Boyden Report in regard to ‘attracting more people’ or creating ‘regional distinctiveness’ yet they still see this type of work as achieving the ‘holy grail’ of larger audiences of a broader demographic. A Boyden-inspired emphasis on ‘regional distinctiveness’ sees a refreshing re-engagement with localism and the chance for a celebratory indulgence that does not appear to be replicated in London; there is a marked absence of work representing the many clubs of England’s capital city.

In the increasingly global world of soccer, it remains to be seen if such a local focus can be maintained—Liverpool FC is owned by an American conglomerate, Fenway Sports—and whether this will force a sense of local identity as embodied by the star player or the home team football play to be eternally nostalgic rather than forward-looking.

The Royal Court Liverpool aside, there is little doubt that the rise of the incidence of the football play in the UK can be attributed to Boyden but the

success, the striving for 'greatness' in the testimonial, the home win, the match-of-the-date, the fantasy football or the football coaching play comes from a willingness to build critical mass, to stage a variety of football plays rather than the 'one-off' commission that may deter as much as it attracts. The football play at its best successfully interrogates identities: local identity with/in the local star and/or team, national/racial identity as scrutinised in crucial national games and personal identity through questions of obsession, maleness/femaleness, and familial loyalty in the didactic plays.

### Dedication

To the memory of the 96 Liverpool Football Club fans who died at Hillsborough Stadium in 1989 - innocent victims of institutionalised injustice.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Hickling, "The Guardian theatre blog." Accessed September 28, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/sep/26/great-plays-football-theatre>.

<sup>2</sup> "An enactment of masculinity," Alan Filewood, book review of Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr, "Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s," *Transnational Literature* 2,2 (May 2010): n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen, 2011), 230.

<sup>4</sup> Patrice Pavis, "Approaches to Theory/Criticism," *The Drama Review* 10 (Issue 4 1966): 43.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: an introduction* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 51.

<sup>6</sup> As will be seen, many football plays make use of video screen technology, mirroring the initial sporting encounter - "spectators at many sporting events now watch significant portions of the games they are attending on video screens," Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a mediatised culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Schechner, 46.

<sup>8</sup> "The book shows that sport has been a prominent theme in contemporary plays and is often used as a means to criticise Australian Society at large." Richard Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Back Cover.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr, *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (Bern: Rodopi, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Filewood, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Michael Mangan, *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Mangan, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Mangan, 217.

<sup>15</sup> The full list, including authors, venues and mapping of plays within the proposed taxonomy is available on request.

<sup>16</sup> A 'soccer play' is defined as a live theatrical work that has, as the prime driver of the narrative, the game of or a predominant interest in soccer. With apologies to North American readers, the terms 'soccer' and 'football' are used interchangeably.

<sup>17</sup> "McGrath secured notoriety by passionately arguing against misjudged notions of universal art and by attempting to define the nature of, and the characteristics central to, successful



communication with working-class audiences." Nadine Holdsworth, *Naked thoughts that roam about: reflections on theatre* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), xxi.

<sup>18</sup> John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: audience, class and form* (London: Methuen, 1981), 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> McGrath, 54–59.

<sup>20</sup> McGrath, 57.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> McGrath, 59.

<sup>23</sup> McGrath, 58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre and Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Boyden, *A Review of the Roles and Functions of the English Regional Producing Theatres* (London: Peter Boyden Associates, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> [www.artscouncilengland.org.uk/theatreassessmentbrief](http://www.artscouncilengland.org.uk/theatreassessmentbrief). Author's emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> James Williams. Personal email August 15, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> James Williams. Personal email August 15, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Data supplied by Live Theatre, Newcastle, personal email August 15, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Wendy Barnfather, Operations Director, Live Theatre Newcastle, personal email, August 15, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Everton are also a premier league Liverpool team and there is considerable domestic rivalry between the two clubs.

<sup>33</sup> Kevin Fearon, Managing Director, Royal Court Liverpool. Personal email August 21, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Birmingham City, Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion.

<sup>36</sup> Diane Scruby, Marketing and Promotions Manager, Solihull Arts and Tourism, personal email August 15, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> David Lindsey, Theatre Manager, Middlesbrough Theatre, personal email August 15, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> "Hegemonic masculinity is that form or model of masculinity which a culture privileges above others, which implicitly defines what is 'normal' for males in that culture and which is able to impose that definition of normality upon other kinds of masculinity." Michael Mangan, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Maher, *Daily Mail*, August 19, 2011, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Lynne Walker, *Independent*, April 28, 2008. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/the-shankly-show-liverpool-olympia-liverpool-816478.html>.

<sup>41</sup> McGrath, 56.

<sup>42</sup> Jo Kelly, *Liverpool Daily Post*, October 6, 2011.

<http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/culture/arts/theatre-review-liverpool-fc-history-5444474>.

<sup>43</sup> Alfred Hickling, *The Guardian*, September 24, 2004.

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/sep/24/theatre3>.

<sup>44</sup> This is a conscious pun on the long-running BBC1 sports programme, *Match of the Day*.

<sup>45</sup> Holdsworth, *Theatre and Nation*, 6-7.

<sup>46</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'Fenian' as 'informal, offensive (chiefly in Northern Ireland) a Protestant name for a Catholic.'

<sup>47</sup> Billy Bingham (1931 - ) was manager of Northern Ireland football team from 1980–1993. There is an intentional echo of the protestant king William of Orange (1650–1702) in this chant, known in Northern Ireland as 'King Billy.'

<sup>48</sup> Jones, 2000, 70.

<sup>49</sup> Fintan O'Toole, *Critical Moments* (Dublin: Carysfoot Press, 2003), 159.

<sup>50</sup> Sierz, 151.

<sup>51</sup> Roy Williams in Aleks Sierz, "What Kind of England Do We Want? Roy Williams in Conversation with Aleks Sierz." *New Theatre Quarterly* 22, 2 (2006): 119.

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- <sup>52</sup> *The Times*, May 3, 2002. [http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.hope.ac.uk/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p\\_product=UKNB&p\\_theme=aggregated5&p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=0F92085C8A6C71B3&p\\_docnum=1&p\\_queryname=1](http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.hope.ac.uk/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=UKNB&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=0F92085C8A6C71B3&p_docnum=1&p_queryname=1).
- <sup>53</sup> *Guardian*, May 3, 2002. <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/may/03/artsfeatures8>
- <sup>54</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2002. [http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.hope.ac.uk/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p\\_product=UKNB&p\\_theme=aggregated5&p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=0F35A2406B210F9B&p\\_docnum=4&p\\_queryname=4](http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.hope.ac.uk/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=UKNB&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=0F35A2406B210F9B&p_docnum=4&p_queryname=4).
- <sup>55</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>56</sup> Holdsworth, 23.
- <sup>57</sup> Michael Croft in Peter Terson, *Zigger Zagger and Mooney and his Caravans* (London: Penguin, 1970), 21.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>59</sup> Peter Terson, *Zigger Zagger and Mooney and his Caravans* (London: Penguin, 1970), 100.
- <sup>60</sup> Terson, 121.
- <sup>61</sup> Richard Barrett's *The Heartbreak Kid* (1987) and David Martin's *The Young Wife* (1962) could also be included here, further demonstrating Australia's more developed engagement with the sport play.
- <sup>62</sup> Robert Farquhar, *God's Official: a fantasy football fable* (London: Josef Weinberger, 2002), introduction.
- <sup>63</sup> Robert Thomson, "Review: *God's Official: a fantasy football fable*," *Glasgow Herald*, August 23, 2000, 38.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>65</sup> Donald Hutera, "Review: *God's Official: a fantasy football fable*," *Scotsman*, August 17, 2000, 33.
- <sup>66</sup> Any game between Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers is referred to as an 'old firm match.'
- <sup>67</sup> Billy and Tim are derogatory nicknames for Protestants and Catholics respectively.
- <sup>68</sup> Mark Fisher, "Review: *Singin' I'm No a Billy He's a Tim*," *Guardian*, June 9, 2009.
- <sup>69</sup> McGrath, 54 and 28.
- <sup>70</sup> A reference to the colour of the Liverpool football club team shirts, not political allegiance.
- <sup>71</sup> Nicky Allt talking to Catherine Jones, *Liverpool Echo*, September 5, 2011.