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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

„The development of Simon Stephens’
dramatic aesthetic: An analysis of eight selected plays“

Verfasser

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magister der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2013

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuer:

Ao. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Rudolf Weiss

For Dani.

Steffi and Martin.

And my parents Sylvia and Hans.

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1. Introduction

“Stephens is one of the most prolific British playwrights” (Innes 462) and “one of the most important of today’s British dramatists” (Innes 463). Theatre scholar and critic Aleks Sierz states that “[d]uring the 2000s, Simon Stephens emerged as one of the best new writers in Britain” (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xv), whose work – in the words of scholar and writer Dan Rebellato – “establishes him as one of the key playwrights of the decade” (“New Theatre Writing: Simon Stephens” 174).

Over the past fifteen years since his first play *Bluebird*, Stephens has written more than 20 stage plays and has been widely performed in theatres around Britain (see Appendix). According to Blachnio Stephens has become “an established and critically acclaimed author within less than a decade of his debut” (par.1). Stephens is very present in the English- and German-speaking theatre world, as he explains in a recent interview with the blog *Dear Brutus, In Our Stars*:

I’m not writing all the time because I’m in rehearsal all the time. At the moment this time [December 2012], I’ve had 6 fucking plays on this year and that’s just in England, plays in Germany and plays in the USA... (“Interview with Simon Stephens” par.46)

Innes states that “[h]e has also developed an international standing, with some of his plays (most notably *Pornography*) being first performed in Germany” (447). In commercial terms, Stephens is currently one of the most successful British writers. Referring to one of his most recent plays, Stephens says that “‘Curious Incident (of the Dog in the Night Time)’ was probably [his] most successful play to date and over the summer something like over 28,000 people watched it” (“Interview with Simon Stephens” par.9).

Despite his success and popularity in contemporary theatre academic publications about Simon Stephens are rare. To my knowledge, no scholarly study on the work of Simon Stephens has been published to date. There are short sections on Stephens in the recent books by the scholars David Lane, Aleks Sierz, Amelia Howe Kritzer and Little/McLaughlin as well as a chapter on Stephens written by Christopher Innes for *The Methuen drama guide to contemporary British playwrights*. Simon Stephens’ own introductions to the three collections of his plays as well as the articles and essays by Aleks Sierz and Dan Rebellato in scholarly journals are other valuable sources.

My thesis investigates the dramatic work of Simon Stephens, in particular the development of his dramatic aesthetic. It presupposes that Stephens' dramatic aesthetic has evolved or changed from his early plays to the more recent ones. The aim of this paper is to foreground the most important aspects of his dramatic aesthetic as clearly as possible and to analyse in which way the plays contributed to the development of his dramatic aesthetic.

As regards the method, I selected eight of his most successful and controversial plays, spanning the period from his early plays in the late 1990s up to the recent ones. *Bluebird*, *Christmas*, *Hérons*, *Port*, *On the Shore of The Wide World*, *Motortown*, *Pornography* and *Wastwater* will be taken into account. Adaptations of plays by other dramatists such as *A Doll's House*, short monologues such as *Sea Wall*, or plays written in collaboration with other dramatists such as *A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky* are not included.

There are several reasons why this thesis focuses on the plays listed above. *Bluebird* (1998), Stephens' "early breakthrough" (Blachnio par.2), and *Christmas*, written in 1999 and first staged in 2003, are included because they establish some of the typical characters and recurring themes in Stephens' work. Besides, they contrast with the plays written after Stephens' artistic residencies at the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester. *Hérons* (2001) is a crucial play in Stephens' career because it marks a shift in the dramatic aesthetic, and the author was nominated for the Olivier Award for Most Promising Playwright. *Port* (2002) and *On the Shore* (2005), the first plays to be set in Stephens' hometown Stockport, both won prestigious theatre prizes. *Motortown* (2005) was "a storming success" (Sierz, "New Writing A-Z: Stephens, Simon") and his "breakthrough play" (Innes 452). *Pornography* (2007) was hailed as "a quintessential twenty-first-century play in form, content and intention" (Lane 36). Finally, *Wastwater* (2011) was a successful co-production between the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Wiener Festwochen in Vienna, emphasising the influence of Stephens' work on both sides of the British Channel (see Stephens, *Wastwater and T5*).

The analyses are based on the terminology established by Manfred Pfister's book *The theory and analysis of drama*. As no records of the premieres or subsequent performances of Stephens' plays were available, this paper necessarily concentrates on the play texts and their relation to the reader. However, the "external communication

system” (Pfister 3), the performances of the plays and their relation to the theatre audience, is taken into account as well by summarising the critical reception of the selected plays.

2. Simon William Stephens: Biography and career

Simon William Stephens was born in Stockport, Cheshire, a suburb to the south of Manchester, on 6 February 1971. He is married to Polly, with three children named Oscar, Stanley and Scarlet. He currently lives in London’s East End (see Blachnio pars.2 & 8; “Simon Stephens, Esq”; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays*: 2 x).

2.1 Education

Simon Stephens was educated in Stockport. One of his first writing mentors was a school teacher, as Stephens informs us in the introduction to *Plays*: 3:

James Siddely taught me at Stockport School in the late eighties. He was the first teacher actively to encourage me to write. [...]. Our correspondence, with his savage, brilliant understanding of geography and politics and the human condition, informed all these plays. (xx)

Stephens graduated from the University of York in 1992 (see Blachnio par.2; Stephens, “Keynote Address” 19). However, he does not have any academic education in Drama or English. In the introduction to *Plays: 1* he declares, “It’s also important for me to say that I never formally studied playwriting, and certainly never at university” (viii). Interviewed by Harriet Devine for her book *Looking Back: Playwrights at the Royal Court, 1956-2006*, Stephens says that “[i]t was a definite decision not to do an English degree” (257). Instead, he chose another subject out of a simple reason: “I decided to do a degree in History rather than English because I loved literature too much to want to dissect it” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* vii).

2.2 Stephens' way to the theatre

In the introduction to *Plays: 1* Stephens humorously explains the usual routes to the theatre followed by aspiring dramatists:

It is something of a crass simplification but it strikes me nevertheless as true that playwrights come to playwriting through one of two routes. Some are frustrated actors who decide to write themselves a cracking role. In fact, most of Britain's best playwrights could be described like that.

Others are writers who somehow stumble upon theatre as the medium that best articulates what they want to say. I would feel more comfortable being described in this second way. (vii)

In fact, it can be argued that he found his way to writing for the theatre by pure chance. "I've always written. Ever since I was about six," says Stephens in the introduction to *Plays: 1* (vii). However, while he was keen on writing, he did not show any passion for the performing arts when he was a teenager: "Before I was eighteen, I reckon I went to the theatre seven times, at most" (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* vii). Interviewed by Devine, he asserts that "[he] never went to see new plays in the theatre" (256). According to Stephens a number of reasons were responsible for his ignorance of drama. He explains that "when [he] was growing up [he] had no real understanding of, or interest in, the theatre" and that "[he] wanted rather to be a songwriter" (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xi).

Consequently, it was not before Stephens proceeded to university that he developed any fervour for the performing arts. He notes that "a lot of the most attractive girls at York University were aspiring actresses, so [he] used to go and watch them" (Devine 256). Stephens' initiation into the world of drama occurred in a small theatre on the university campus:

It was at York University that I found my way to the theatre [...], a dank little place, on the peripheries of the campus, called the Drama Barn.

While watching plays here, I was struck with quite a simple notion: What if it were possible to create the same sense of toughness and compassion, comedy and brutality that I found in the dramatic work of Bleasdale and Potter, of Lynch and Scorsese, in a dramatic medium that allowed you to lock the doors? What if you were in the same room as Frank Booth or Yosser Hughes and you couldn't get out? What if other people were in there with you? (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2* vii-viii)

Inspired by these memorable experiences, Stephens started writing plays as a student at university, "knowing nothing about playwriting" (Devine 256).

2.3 Early attempts at writing drama

As Stephens has never received any formal education in the dramatic arts, he can be described as an autodidact as far as playwriting is concerned. When it comes to his first efforts to create his own plays by trial and error, Stephens notes that “[he] spent a long time writing plays at university, that were done, and learning from seeing them fuck up, basically” (Devine 257-258). In the introduction to *Plays: I* he says about his first attempts at playwriting, “I am glad I had the chance to fuck up and fuck up again and again” (viii).

Hence, before Stephens achieved his breakthrough with *Bluebird* in 1998, he had composed a large number of plays in several cities in Britain. “It is important to say that *Bluebird* is not the first play I ever wrote. In fact, it is the ninth. At York, for two years in Edinburgh, and then for three years in London after that, I wrote a series of terrible plays” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* viii). Stephens himself seems to be uncertain about the exact number of plays produced during this phase of his life. In contrast to the statement above, he refers in an interview to “all the nine student plays” (Devine 261), and states in another interview that “*Bluebird* was my 8th play not my 1st play” (“Interview with Simon Stephens” par.28).

According to Stephens, some of the plays he created in York were performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1992. Similar to the production of his early plays at the campus theatre in York, Stephens profited considerably by the reaction of the audience to the performances of his plays in fringe venues (see Devine 258). In an interview Stephens says, “I learned a lot from doing my plays in fringe theatres and seeing people leave, not because they were appalled but because they were bored. You just get to know what makes something alive” (Devine 258). Referring to the varying quality of his early plays, Stephens once admits that “[a] couple of them were, rightly, never produced at all” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* viii.). After the graduation from the University of York Stephens moved to Edinburgh and made a living by working in a café. But he has never given up writing plays and has continued to offer his plays to theatres in order to have them produced (see Devine 258). “I just wrote all the time. I made contacts with the university drama department and put a play on there, which transferred to the Traverse for three nights,” says Stephens in an interview with Devine (258).

To my knowledge, the titles and contents of the seven to nine early plays before *Bluebird* are unknown to the public, apart from three plays. Firstly, Stephens – still at

school – wrote an adaptation of *Frank's Wild Years*, a song by Tom Waits (see Devine 257). He says:

I never did anything with it until I went to York, where I started hanging out with these people who'd all been to Harrow or other public schools. I gave them my play, and one of them directed a run of it for about two weeks. Altogether I wrote five other plays at York, and I put them all on in the Drama Barn. (Devine 257)

Secondly, according to the programme text for the Viennese production of *On the Shore of the Wide World* at the Volkstheater, Stephens wrote a play called *Sleep of the Just* (1994), which premiered at the New Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, but remained unpublished (see “Am Strand der weiten Welt” par.3). Thirdly, while he was living in London, writing poetry and managing a bar at Riverside Studios in the mid-1990s, Stephens had an old play called *Bring Me Sunshine* produced (see Devine 258), “a portrayal of human relations with a criminal twist” (Blachnio par.2). Stephens recalls:

Then in 1997 Andrew Braidford, who runs a company called Young Blood at Riverside, asked me if I'd ever written any plays. So I gave him one called *Bring Me Sunshine*, and he invested a lot of his money to take that play, with a company of thirteen actors, to the Assembly Rooms at the Edinburgh Festival in 1997. (Devine 258)

After the Fringe Festival it transferred to the Riverside Studios in London (see Blachnio par.2).

2.4 Beginning of his professional career

After the initial success of *Bring Me Sunshine* Stephens decided to write another play for Braidford's theatre company (see Devine 258). In an interview with Devine (see 259), and in the introduction to *Plays: I* Stephens explains the genesis of this play:

I wrote *Bluebird* in 1997. I was living in north London with Polly, the woman who was to become my wife. After the decision to have a baby, I decided to write about the worst possible thing that I could imagine ever happening to a father. I wrote about a taxi driver who has failed as a father in the most appalling way; about a taxi driver and about London at night, because as a barman I'd come to meet a lot of taxi drivers and travel a lot through London at night. The characters that populate the play are nearly all based on people I've served drinks to at one time or another. (viii-ix)

Andrew Braidford liked the play and suggested sending it to other theatres such as the Royal Court Theatre in London. The Royal Court Theatre, which was situated in the West End at that time, accepted it and produced it in the Upper Circle of the Ambassadors Theatre during the Young Writers Festival in 1998. It was Stephens' first professional theatre production, directed by Gordon Anderson (see Devine 259; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* ix). In her short biography of Stephens Blachnio states that *Bluebird* "premiered [...] to great critical acclaim" and "marked an early breakthrough in Stephens' career" (Blachnio par.2). Stephens says, "It was a complete revelation for me. Not only did it get me reviewed in 'grown-up' papers, but it also got me working with actors of the highest calibre" (Introduction, *Plays: I* ix).

Before the opening of *Bluebird*, Ian Rickson, the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre, commissioned a new play from Stephens (see Devine 259; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* ix). Stephens blindly accepted the commission: "I didn't even know what a commission was, so I just said, 'Great!'" (Devine 259). Still, at that time Stephens was not a full-time writer yet, but was working as a schoolteacher at Eastbrook School in Dagenham until 2000 (see Devine 259; "Simon Stephens, Esq"; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* ix). Stephens describes the inspiration for his second professional play *Christmas* in the introduction to *Plays: I* (see ix-x), and in an interview with Devine:

I wrote a play about a pub three doors down from my house, this run-down East End pub, and four blokes spending an evening in this pub. And I didn't realise there was another play about four blokes...And then I went to see Conor McPherson's *The Weir* and thought – oh my God. Although it's very different from *The Weir*. So I gave them this play and they rejected it, and I was crestfallen. (260)

Christmas was not produced until nearly five years later at the Pavilion Theatre in Brighton in December 2003 (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* x-xi).

Despite the rejection of his play *Christmas* due to similarities with Conor McPherson's play *The Weir*, Ian Rickson invited Simon Stephens to become the Arts Council Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre for the year 2000 (see Devine 260; "Simon Stephens, Esq"; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: I* x). "This would allow me to quit my teaching job and to write full-time and spend more time with [my son] Oscar. It was an extraordinary gesture of genuine generosity. It changed my career," says Stephens (Introduction, *Plays: I* x.).

At the end of his residency at the Royal Court Theatre Stephens composed his third professional play *Hérons*, which is based on the experiences he had made with teenagers working as a schoolteacher for two and half years before his residency. In 2001 *Hérons* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London (see Devine 261; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* x). In an interview with Devine (see 261), and in the introduction to *Plays: 1* Stephens explains the idea behind the play: “I wanted to write [...] a play that dramatised the kind of life that surrounded me while I was working in Dagenham and living in the East End. I wanted to dramatise working-class teenagers with all of the honesty, cruelty and insight they could display” (x).

After his residency in London Stephens became Pearson Attached Playwright at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester from 2000 to 2001. During his time as a Resident Dramatist Stephens wrote his fourth play *Port*, which is the first play set in his hometown Stockport. Similar to *Hérons*, most of the characters in *Port* are teenagers. It was staged by the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester in 2002 (see Blachnio par.8; “Simon Stephens, Esq”; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* x). The two residencies in London and Manchester exerted a profound effect on his writing, as Stephens explains: “It was in writing these two plays [*Hérons* and *Port*] that I really began to feel, for the first time, any kind of confidence in my capacity to make drama” (Introduction, *Plays: 1* x).

Furthermore, between 2001 and 2005 he was working as a tutor on the Young Writers’ Programme of the Royal Court Theatre, teaching creative writing to aspiring dramatists (see Blachnio par.8; Devine 261; “Simon Stephens, Esq”). Describing his job as a tutor, Stephens says that “it felt like the natural marriage of [his] two heads, being a teacher and being a writer” (Devine 261).

In 2005 Stephens received his third residency and became the first ever Resident Dramatist of the National Theatre in London (see Blachnio par.8; Sierz, Introduction xv; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xii). Since 2009 Stephens has been Associate Artist at the Lyric Hammersmith in London (see Blachnio par.8; Innes 447). Over the past years since his three residencies Stephens has written at least one or two plays per year, among them controversial and thought-provoking pieces such as *Motortown* in 2005, *Pornography* in 2007, and *Punk Rock* in 2009 (see Appendix).

2.5 Overview of Stephens' work: Plays, adaptations, screenplays

"I think as a writer I have a kind of restlessness," says Stephens in the introduction to *Plays: 3* (viii). Indeed, over the past fifteen years, since his first professionally produced and published play *Bluebird* (1998), Stephens has written more than 20 original plays (see Appendix). In terms of his high productivity as a writer Stephens can be described as a workaholic. Stephens says, "I find for now, though, that my interest is always on what I'll write next" (Introduction, *Plays: 3* viii).

All but three plays had their premiere in Britain: *Pornography* (2007) was first staged in Hanover (Germany), *The Trial of Ubu* (2010) in Essen (Germany) and *Three Kingdoms* (2011) in Tallinn (Estonia). Most of his plays were produced in theatres around London such as the Royal Court Theatre, the National Theatre, the Bush Theatre, the Tricycle Theatre, the Lyric Hammersmith, the Hampstead Theatre or the Young Vic Theatre. Other notable theatres where his plays were shown include the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester and the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Five of his plays – *Sleep of the Just*, *Bring Me Sunshine*, *Lullaby Burn*, *Heaven*, and *Supernova* – as well as his *Utopia* episode have been staged, but not been published yet. Three of his plays (*Sea Wall*, *T5* and *Lullaby Burn*) are short monologues, written to be read rather than to be performed onstage. Two of these monologues (*Sea Wall* and *T5*) were combined to a play called *London* in 2012 (see Appendix).

Stephens contributed short episodes to a series of plays twice. *Canopy of Stars* (2008) was part of the epic *Great Game: Afghanistan* series (see Ferris 271), another untitled episode was part of the *Utopia* series (2012), which also featured contributions from the writers Michael Chaplin, Zoe Cooper, Thomas Eccleshare, Alistair McDowall, Dylan Moran, Anthony Neilson, Janice Okoh and Chi Onwurah (see "Utopia" par.7).

Furthermore, three of his plays emerged out of collaborations with other writers. While *Supernova* (2009) was co-written with the young writer Tashan Cushnie, *A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky* (2010) was created with the two prominent writers David Eldridge and Robert Holman (see Blachnio par.7). The musical *Marine Parade* (2010) resulted from collaboration with Californian songwriter Mark Eitzel (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xii).

Apart from original plays, Stephens also wrote new versions of three foreign plays. *I am the Wind* (2011) and *The Doll's House* (2012) are English language versions of the original plays composed by the Norwegian writers Jon Fosse and Henrik Ibsen

respectively. *The Trial of Ubu* (2010) is an English language update of the play *Ubu Roi* by French writer Alfred Jarry. Stephens also produced a stage adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012), a play based on the 2003 mystery novel by British writer Mark Haddon (see Appendix).

His massive writing output for various stages around Britain and Europe induced critic Kate Kellaway of *The Guardian* in 2009 to ask, "...is Simon Stephens the busiest man in British theatre?" (headline). He probably is, because Stephens not only regularly writes in different genres for the stage, but also occasionally for electronic media and film. He is the author of the two radio plays *Five Letters to Elizabeth* (2001) and *Digging* (2003), which were both produced by BBC Radio 4 (see Blachnio par.7), the TV drama *Dive* (2010), co-written with Dominic Savage (see Wilson 20-21), as well as the screenplay *Jackdaw* (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2 short bio*). Besides, he adapted his play *Motortown* as a screenplay (see Innes 454) and developed an original TV series for Channel 4 (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2 short bio*). Stephens currently translates Anton Chekhov from a literal English translation to spoken English as the blog *Dear Brutus*, *In Our Stars* reports in December 2012 (see "Interview with Simon Stephens" par.28).

2.6 Awards and nominations

Simon Stephens has been nominated for and awarded several prestigious prizes during his theatrical career. In chronological order, *Port* won the Pearson Award for Best New Play in 2001, *On the Shore of The Wide World* the Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2005, and *Pornography* the Critics' Awards for Theatre in Scotland for Best New Play in 2008. For *Motortown* (2007), *Pornography* (2008) and *Wastwater* (2011) Stephens received an award for Best Foreign Play by the German theatre magazine *Theater heute*. The annual polls conducted by German critics in *Theater heute* voted him Best Foreign Playwright of the Year in 2008. Moreover, in 2001 *Hérons* secured a nomination for the Olivier Award for Most Promising Playwright and in 2010 *Punk Rock* was nominated for the TMA Awards for Best New Play as well as the Evening Standard Award for Best New Play (see Stephens, *Plays: 2 vii*; Stephens, *Three Kingdoms i*; "Simon Stephens" *Wikipedia* par.4; "Simon Stephens" *Doollee*).

2.7 Inspiration and influences

Simon Stephens draws upon many different sources of inspiration for his plays such as music, British TV dramas, American films, other writers' plays or various job experiences.

Firstly, music serves an influential role. "I listen to music constantly. I'm inspired to write by it," says Stephens in the introduction to *Plays: 2* (xiv). According to Stephens, *Country Music* and the following play *On the Shore of the Wide World* were significantly affected by music, in particular Elvis Costello (see Introduction, *Plays: 2* xiv-xv). In an interview with Harriet Devine (see 257) as well as in the introduction to *Plays: 3* Stephens names his musical idols:

In the eighties it was songwriters like Elvis Costello and Tom Waits and Shane MacGowan more than writers in any other form who attracted me to the possibility of writing. One of the most important songwriters for me at that time was Mark Eitzel who sang and wrote for the Californian band American Music Club. (xi)

For the musical *Marine Parade* Stephens, who always wanted to be a songwriter (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* vii), collaborated with his idol Eitzel, who, ironically, always wanted to be a playwright (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xii). When Ian Rickson, artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre in London, commissioned a new play in 2005, he encouraged Stephens to draw inspiration from alternative rock and punk music. Stephens says, "He wanted me to write a play that had the same acerbic dissonant energy as those bands I'd loved since adolescence, like the Fall and the Butthole Surfers" (Introduction, *Plays: 2* xv). As a result Stephens composed *Motortown*, one of his most violent and shocking plays. Music continues to influence him to date, as Stephens asserts in an interview with Devine: "I still try to find the lyricism of music in the stuff that I write, I think" (257). Stephens is also a musician, former member and co-founder of *The Country Teasers* (see Blachnio par.8; "Simon Stephens, Esq"), "a Scottish art punk band formed in 1993" ("Country Teasers" par.1). Secondly, British television dramatists and American film directors had a considerable effect on Stephens. Referring to the influence of British television drama, Stephens notes:

I'd always wanted to write, but the notion of being a dramatist was not introduced to me as writing for theatre, it was introduced for me as writing for television. British dramatic writing for television in the 1980s, when I was a

teenager, was stronger than it probably ever has been since. Writers like Alan Bleasdale, Dennis Potter, Alan Bennett were all writing for TV. (Devine 256)

Moreover, as a teenager he used to watch a lot of American films (see Devine 256). In the introduction to *Plays: 1* Stephens says, “My adolescence was graced and charged by the TV dramas of Dennis Potter and Alan Bleasdale and the films of David Lynch and Martin Scorsese. It was their work, much more than it was the work of any playwright, that introduced me to the notion of dramatic writing” (vii). Referring to the work on *Three Kingdoms* (2011) in an interview with the blog *Dear Brutus, In Our Stars*, Stephens states that “[he] became very interested in the latter films of David Lynch, of *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* and *Twin Peaks* to an extent *Lost Highway*. Sublime films but very, very frightening because they’re very strange, really strange” (“Interview with Simon Stephens” par.37). Besides, *Punk Rock*, Stephens’ play about a school shooting, was inspired by a film about the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 in the USA, Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xiv). Thirdly, over the past years Stephens’ dramatic oeuvre has been significantly affected by other dramatists and their work. In the introduction to *Plays: 1* Stephens informs us that *Christmas* “came out of reading and rereading *The Cherry Orchard*” by Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov (ix). During the preliminary work for *Port* Stephens read plays by Robert Holman, and for *Country Music* plays by Peter Gill and by Franz Xaver Kroetz (see Devine 262). The last-mentioned German writer as well as his compatriot Rainald Goetz exercised a strong influence on *One Minute*, as did William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* on *Pornography* (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2* xi & xviii). While reading Eugene O’Neill and Peter Gill’s *Cardiff East* inspired the composition of *On the Shore of The Wide World*, studying the classical tragedies of ancient Greek tragedian Euripides provided a valuable source of inspiration for *Harper Regan* (see Devine 262; Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xi & xiii). In an interview with *Dear Brutus, In Our Stars* Stephens mentions English playwright John Osborne, contemporary writers Edward Bond and Caryl Churchill as well as young writers such as Alice Birch, Jack Thorne and Caroline Bird as other influences (see “Interview with Simon Stephens” pars.18 & 25-27). Fourthly, several different jobs and the knowledge of humanity Stephens gained from these working experiences supposedly had the strongest impact on his writing. Stephens says:

The necessary subject of all plays is humanity. Playwrights explore, artistically, what it is to be a human being, with more rigour and detail than the practitioners of any other art. In that sense I learned more about my subject from managing a bar or from working in cafés, and travelling on night buses and working for a mobile disco company and as a Betterware Homecare Catalogue delivery man than I ever would have done on any playwriting course. (Introduction, *Plays: 1* viii)

However, these were not the only employments Stephens had had before he started his professional writing career. Referring to his first published plays, Stephens informs us that “[i]n writing them [he] tried to make sense of what it is [...] to be a schoolteacher or a barman, a DJ in the suburbs of Edinburgh, or a husband” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* xii). In the autumn of 2001, at the beginning of his theatrical career, Stephens held a course in playwriting for inmates at Wandsworth prison for eight weeks. After that he taught criminals in theatre workshops at HMP Grendon in Buckinghamshire. Stephens wrote *Country Music* in response to working creatively with these prisoners (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2* ix-x & xii-xiv).

Apart from working and studying, Stephens argues that one also needs to acquire a certain experience of life in order to write for the theatre: “I equally believe that academic study alone will not suffice for anybody. You need to have lived a bit” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* viii). Referring to his writing process in an interview with *Dear Brutus, In Our Stars*, he notes that there is “a pull of material which is your life, which is your sense of what it is to be alive in the world and the two things are important – it’s a sense of your own liveness [sic!] and a sense of the world you are alive in” (“Interview with Simon Stephens” par.3).

3. Dramatic aesthetic

3.1 Two shifts: *Hérons*/Port and Pornography

In the dramatic aesthetic of Simon Stephens' plays, two shifts are apparent. The first shift can be seen in the plays *Hérons* (2001) and *Port* (2002), which Stephens wrote during his two jobs as a Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester between 2000 and 2001. Stephens says about these two plays in the introduction to *Plays: 1*: "They also mark a shift in my work. There is a sense in the first two or three plays in this collection that dramaturgically, technically, I don't really know what I'm doing. It's a sense I'm quite proud of" (xi). In an interview with Devine Stephens explains his approach to writing before and after the residency:

What I know for sure is that during the residency [at the Royal Court Theatre] I changed my approach. When I wrote *Bluebird* and *Christmas* and all the nine student plays, I'd have a sense of place, and a sense of character, and I'd just start people talking. It would be like riffing, it's a musical analogy. I'd get pages and pages of dialogue, and when I thought I'd reached some kind of ending I'd go back through two hundred pages and sculpt the play out of it. But I changed my approach with *Hérons*. (261)

Elsewhere in the interview with Devine he notes that in *Hérons* he paid closer attention to the composition of the dramatic structure and the development of the dramatic action: "I knew I could riff, depend on my instinct, but I thought, right, I'm going to work on the other part of the process, which is structuring and developing a play, crafting a story, 'wroughting' it rather than writing it" (262). As a result, in comparison to *Bluebird* and *Christmas* the setting of time and place in *Hérons* is more varied, the relationships between the dramatis personae are more complex, and the dramatic action is more intense, culminating in a violent climax.

Port continues this new approach after *Hérons*, as Stephens admits: "By the time I wrote *Port*, I was at least starting to plan the structure of my plays a little bit and to figure out how stages work" (Introduction, *Plays: 1* xi). Consequently, the play introduces a number of novelties to Stephens' dramatic aesthetic. *Port* is the first of his Stockport plays and it is the first play to cover a much longer time than the plays before, to focus on a female central character and to employ a spare and non-naturalistic set (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 236).

Secondly, another shift occurred in the writing and staging of *Pornography* (2007), which is significantly influenced by the theatrical tradition of continental Europe. *Pornography* was a play commissioned by the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg and was written with Swiss director Sebastian Nübling in mind (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2* xvii-xix). Compared to his earlier plays, Stephens decided to write a structurally more open and formally experimental text for the director:

He has a remarkable visual eye. He works brilliantly with direct audience address. He also has an instinct for exploding and reworking texts in ways that no director in Britain would dare. [...]. So I wrote him a text that was as open as possible. It not only invites directorial interpretation, it is unstageable without it. There are only a few stage directions and they are frankly impenetrable. There are no character names. It is a play that can be staged in any order using any number of actors. (Introduction, *Plays: 2* xix)

Commenting on the openness of the structure to directorial interpretation, Sierz states that “[i]t is also possible to use actors to create various new relationships between the various voices in the story, or to chop up each scene and interweave it with other fragments” (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvii). Working with German and Swiss theatre practitioners allowed Stephens to explore a theatre culture that is distinctly different to the British one, as he explains: “Theirs is a theatre culture that has no fear of art or formal boldness. It is a theatre culture that values the metaphorical and the visual” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2* xix). The valuable experiences Stephens gained in Germany have exerted a lasting influence on his writing over the past years: “I’ve loved the theatre I’ve watched in Germany. It has nourished me. It sits most directly under *Pornography* but has informed every play I’ve written since” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 2* xix).

To conclude, the two plays *Hérons* and *Port* as well as *Pornography* stand out as exemplary shifts in the development of Stephens’ dramatic aesthetic. The overall development in terms of his dramatic aesthetic is analysed in greater detail in the following sections, providing examples from eight selected plays.

3.2 Dramatic structure

As far as the dramatic structure of Stephens' plays is concerned, it can be observed that Stephens not only utilises a wide variety of structures, but also never repeats the same structure again. Hence, every play demonstrates a unique approach to dramatic structure. The first four plays *Bluebird*, *Christmas*, *Hérons* and *Port* are rather traditional in terms of structure and comprise a succession of several scenes that are linked by the central protagonist, who is present in almost every scene. *On the Shore* and *Motortown* show a development towards more complex structures. Whereas *On the Shore* constantly alternates between the scenes of three generations of the Holmes family, the scenes of *Motortown* are connected by the central protagonist Danny. The more recent plays such as *Pornography* and *Wastwater* employ more experimental structures, including scenes that are not connected by a central character but by a theme or idea.

To begin with, *Bluebird* (1998) consists of an abundance of short, unnumbered scenes. Overall, the central character Jimmy Macneill stars in nineteen scenes with seamless transitions in between scenes, which are indicated by fading or falling and rising light. The first half of the play takes place over the course of fourteen scenes. A new scene is usually defined by a new passenger sitting in Jimmy's minicab. These snapshots of urban night life in London are interrupted only three times by very short scenes in a red phone box showing the character Jimmy alone on stage. The second half of the play depicts four scenes involving Jimmy and his ex-wife Clare Macneill as well as the final image of Jimmy driving lonely into the night. From scene fifteen onwards new scenes are mainly introduced by a change of location.

Hérons (2001) is chronologically Stephens' third play but was staged before *Christmas* in 2001. Similar to *Bluebird*, the secondary text does not indicate any scene numbers. However, after the exposition of the protagonist Billy Lee Russell at the beginning of the play the stage direction notes that "[o]ver the next five scenes the lighting will fall into evening" (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 155). Despite this explicit stage direction it is difficult to determine the accurate number of scenes, because some of the scenes do not require lighting that indicates evening, but lighting for "a new day, perhaps sometime in the afternoon" (209) or for "the morning" (224). Besides, most of the scene transitions are seamless – one character leaves the scene, while the next one enters. Apart from the second scene, the character Billy remains on stage all the time. According to the initial

stage direction this somewhat fluid dramatic structure should be supported by the theatre room's seating, which

should be arranged in such a way as to make it possible for actors to arrive on stage from all angles, even coming from behind the sides of the audience without the audience necessarily noticing their arrival. (154)

Stephens' second play *Christmas*, which premiered after *Hérons* in 2003, uses a rather simple and conventional dramatic structure. It consists of four scenes numbered in ascending order, which are all set in a pub in east London. The scenes are connected by the protagonist and owner of the pub, Michael Macgraw. A new scene in *Christmas* usually involves the introduction of a new character. For instance, in Scene One Macgraw is alone on stage (see Stephens, *Plays: I* 77), in Scene Two he is "joined by Billy Lee Russell" (78), in Scene Three "Giuseppe Rossi enters" (90), and in Scene Four "Charlie Anderson has entered" (100).

Port (2002) consists of eight scenes numbered in ascending order. Notably, for the first time in the development of Stephens' dramatic aesthetic the scenes are interrupted by rather long ellipses, providing *Port* with a more epic structure compared to the other plays before. The constituent parts of the play are well-balanced in length and linked by the protagonist Racheal Keats, who is present in every scene. The scene transitions are indicated by dimming light, which allows the characters to enter or leave the stage and the actress playing Racheal to adjust her appearance for the scene to follow. This means of linking scenes is already clarified in a prescriptive stage direction in the initial secondary text:

The character of Racheal Keats must remain on stage throughout the play. In between scenes we should be able to observe the adoption of nuances of physicality, aspect and dress that the actor employs in order to dramatise her increasing maturity. (Stephens, *Plays: I* 236)

Consequently, *Port* shares similarities with *Hérons* with respect to the fluidity of the dramatic structure. In contrast to *Hérons*, the last scene set in 2002 mirrors the first scene set in 1988, as expressed by the same location, "[a] parked Vauxhall Cavalier in the car park of the flats on Lancashire Hill in Stockport" (237 & 328).

On the Shore (2005) is the first of Stephens' plays to utilise a more complex structure. It consists of four sections labelled with the names of the Holmes family members: Part One is dedicated to Christopher (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 3), Part Two to Alex (see 50), Part Three to Alice (see 84) and Part Four to Peter (see 107). The four people

represent two generations (parents and children) of the Holmes family. The oldest generation, the grandparents Charlie and Ellen Holmes, are not included in the labels of the sections, although they appear at least once in each of the four parts. Part One and Two comprise twelve scenes each, Part Three eight scenes and Part Four ten scenes. Overall, the play is composed of 42 scenes, which are numbered in ascending order in the respective sections. However, the structural division not only depends on the alternation between different character groupings, but also on the introduction of a new location and/or a leap forward in time. The scenes do not represent self-contained dramatic units, but they seem to overlap, as the stage direction suggests:

The actors should enter the stage for their first entrance in each part and remain on stage until their final line of that part. Scenes can play across any actor that remains on stage regardless of whether or not they are present within that scene. (Stephens, On the Shore 2)

Besides, scene transitions are not indicated by changing lighting, as “[l]ights should only fall completely between each part, not between each scene” (2).

According to theatre scholar and writer Dan Rebellato *Motortown* and *Pornography* employ “increasingly complex theatrical forms” (“Stephens, Simon”). *Motortown* consists of eight scenes which are numbered in ascending order. The scenes are connected by the linear development of the protagonist Danny, who is present in every scene.

The extreme simplicity of this plot in just eight scenes is bleak, with no complicated psychological analysis, and expressed in short declarative sentences, all of which emphasises the brutality of the action. And this simplicity is accentuated by the use of only first names for the characters, which also helps to universalise the drama. (Innes 453)

A new scene is usually introduced by a new location and a new character meeting Danny. However, the setting of the scenes only becomes clear in the primary text, as the scenes lack introductory stage directions. Other essential features are the scene transitions.

Pornography was heavily influenced by the events surrounding the terrorist attacks on London on 7 July 2005, known as 7/7. The play is set in “a week in London straddling the 2012 Olympics announcement, Live 8, G8 [summit] and the 7/7 bombings” (Lane 35). In a short section of *Rewriting the nation* theatre scholar Sierz examines the “experimental attitude to structure” (59) and gives *Pornography* as an example (see 62). The play comprises seven scenes numbered in descending order, starting with Scene

Seven and ending with Scene One. This numbering reminds critics of a countdown to the bombings (see Innes 456; Sierz, *Rewriting the nation* 62; Sierz, Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvi). Stephens explains the inspiration for the structural division of his work: “The play is built around seven parts, each part inspired by one of the seven ages of man, that stoical medieval philosophy so forcefully articulated by Jaques in [Shakespeare’s] *As You Like It*” (Introduction, *Plays: 2* xviii). Famously, the seven ages of man are depicted by the character Jaques “in a haunting speech, which begins ‘All the world’s a stage’” (Sierz, Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvi). Innes adds that it is “in its original context a speech about the meaninglessness of life” (456). Scene Seven of *Pornography* corresponds to the age of “the infant”, Scene Six to the “whining school-boy”, and Scene Five to “the lover” (*As You Like It* 2.7). Scene Four complies with the fourth age, which is called “a soldier” (*As You Like It* 2.7), and represents the monologue of the suicide bomber travelling from Manchester through Stockport to London. While Scene Three correlates with the age of “the justice”, Scene Two refers to old age: “The sixth age shifts into the lean and slipper’d pantaloons” (*As You Like It* 2.7). Scene One equals extreme old age, the “second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” (*As You Like It* 2.7). Referring to the last scene, Innes states that it is “a list of mini-biographies, with number forty-three being blank, one for each of the real victims of 7 July 2005” (457). Whereas the bombing is not mentioned in the first six scenes of the play, it is alluded to twice in the last scene, in the mini-biographies number twelve and number forty-two (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 276 & 279; Innes 455-456). As there is neither a central character nor a linear plot, the scenes are connected by a theme or idea, as Stephens explains:

Each of the seven parts dramatises a story of transgression. The transgression of suicidal mass murder sits in the same spectrum, albeit on a far more extreme position on that spectrum, as do the others in the play. (Introduction, *Plays: 2* xviii)

Apart from the theme of transgression, Sierz adds that “coherence is achieved through recurring images, such as quotations from Coldplay’s ‘Yellow’, having a drink of alcohol or getting information from the media” (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvii). The scene transitions are marked by the repeated stage direction “*Images of hell. They are silent*” (Stephens, *Plays: 2* 215, 222, 230, 249 & 275). Notably, this stage direction is missing between Scene Four (the monologue of the suicide bomber) and Scene Three (see 255-256) as well as between Scene Three and Scene Two (see 267). In

Sierz' opinion, "the sheer unexpectedness of the play's structure perfectly reflects the shocking events that characterised that astonishing week in July 2005" (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvii).

Wastwater is an elliptical triptych: The play consists of three scenes numbered in ascending order. As there is no central character linking the scenes, *Wastwater* is mainly structured by the proximity of the three locations. The thematic division is alluded to in a speech by Sian in Scene Three, when she interrogates Jonathan:

SIAN. Which part of air travel do you find most unsettling –
departure, flight or arrival?

JONATHAN. Flight. I don't like the turbulence. It didn't used to
bother me. Now I find it horrible. When the plane just drops
like that. Why are you asking me these, these are very strange
questions. (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 55)

Scene One clearly deals with a departure: the foster mother Frieda says goodbye to her foster son Harry, who is about to leave home in order to catch a plane travelling to Canada (see Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 3). Scene Two is a flight with turbulences: the arts teacher Mark and the police officer Lisa, both married, are having an affair. At a meeting in an airport hotel Lisa reveals her past as a drug addict and porn movie actress and wants Mark to have sadomasochistic sex with her (see 20). Scene Three is set before the imminent arrival of a child: in a deserted warehouse the maths teacher Jonathan meets Sian, who trades in child-trafficking and sells the nine-year-old girl Dalisay Bituin to him (see 42). Scene One and Scene Two are linked by a recurring piece of music, namely 'Habanera' from Bizet's *Carmen* (see 3 & 27), as well as overlapping biographies: In Scene One Harry informs us that his friend Gavin was killed in a car accident (see 11-12). In Scene Two Mark reveals that "[f]our and a half years ago the best student [he] ever taught was killed in a car accident. He was a boy called Gavin Berkshire" (34). Scene One and Scene Three are connected by the fact that Frieda is not only Harry's foster mother, but also used to be Sian's (see 8-9, 51 & 57). Scene Two and Scene Three show only a very loose connection: while the police officer Lisa reveals that she works in "child protection" (29), Sian hands an unprotected child over to Jonathan (see 63-64). At the end of the scenes, just before the characters are able to touch each other, the stage direction "*Sudden black*" (19, 41 & 64) indicates an abrupt scene transition.

3.3 Setting

3.3.1 Place

As regards the location of his plays, Stephens calls them “city plays” (Introduction, *Plays: I* xi). In fact, his plays mainly oscillate between the two poles of the Greater London area and the Greater Manchester area. Most of Stephens’ plays are set in and around London, where he is currently living, or in and around Stockport, his hometown to the south of Manchester. Referring to his first collection of plays, Stephens admits that he explores “the relationship between Manchester and London” in his plays (Introduction, *Plays: I* xi), and that in writing them he tries “to make sense of what it is to be raised in Stockport and to live in London” (Introduction, *Plays: I* xii).

Stephens’ first professionally produced play *Bluebird* (1998) already mirrors this relationship between Northerners and Londoners. Most of the play’s action takes place inside a minicab in London. Other locations in London include a red phone box, a parking space, the protagonist’s old house and a cemetery (see Stephens, *Plays: I* 3, 10, 47 & 67). Significantly, the protagonist Jimmy Macneill, a taxi driver, is “Manchester-born” (Stephens, *Plays: I* 3). Jimmy’s situation resembles Stephens’ situation as a Northerner living and working in London.

Similar to *Bluebird*, the following play *Christmas* also contains references to London and Manchester. The play is set in a small, shabby pub in east London. Its owner and bartender, Michael Macgraw, is a Londoner with Irish roots (see Stephens, *Plays: I* 77). One of his customers, Charlie Anderson, is a Mancunian working as a postman in London (see Stephens, *Plays: I* 128).

In *Hérons* (2001) Stephens returns to the east London area again. Similar to the first two plays, the action is confined to a small area of the city. The stage directions indicate that “[t]he events take place in the present day around the lock of the Limehouse Cut and the Lee River in east London” (Stephens, *Plays: I* 154). The location of *Hérons* is closely connected to the development of the central characters, as Kritzer puts it:

The liminality of this spot, natural and man-made, part of the community but isolated from its social structures such as the police and school officials, signifies the transitional state of the adolescents who frequent it. (112)

Hérons is the first of Stephens’ London plays without a reference to Manchester.

In contrast to the plays described above, *Port* (2002) and *On the Shore of the Wide World* (2005) are both set in Stephens' hometown Stockport. As far as the variety of locations is concerned, they differ from the first three plays, as they utilise more than a single, unified location. The stage directions in *Port* refer to several places in and around Stockport, such as the flats on Lancashire Hill, the café of Stepping Hill Hospital, the L section of the bus station in Stockport town centre, the garden of a nursing home in Offerton, the staffroom of the Gateway's supermarket on Heaton Moor Road, a hotel room in the Fir Tree Hotel in Edale, Derbyshire, and the beer garden at the front of the Elizabethan Pub in Heaton Moor (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 237, 251, 266, 281, 290, 302, 314 & 328).

Similarly, *On the Shore* is also set in several places around Stockport: a bus from Manchester to Stockport, the houses of the Holmes family, of Susan Reynolds and of John Robinson, the derelict Bluebell Hotel in Edgely, a footbridge overlooking the motorway, the platform of Stockport station, a café in the centre of Stockport, a taxi on the way from Stockport station to Sarah Black's home, a bridge over the motorway and a hillside in Buxton (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 3, 6, 9, 13, 30, 67, 81, 97, 107 & 125, 129).

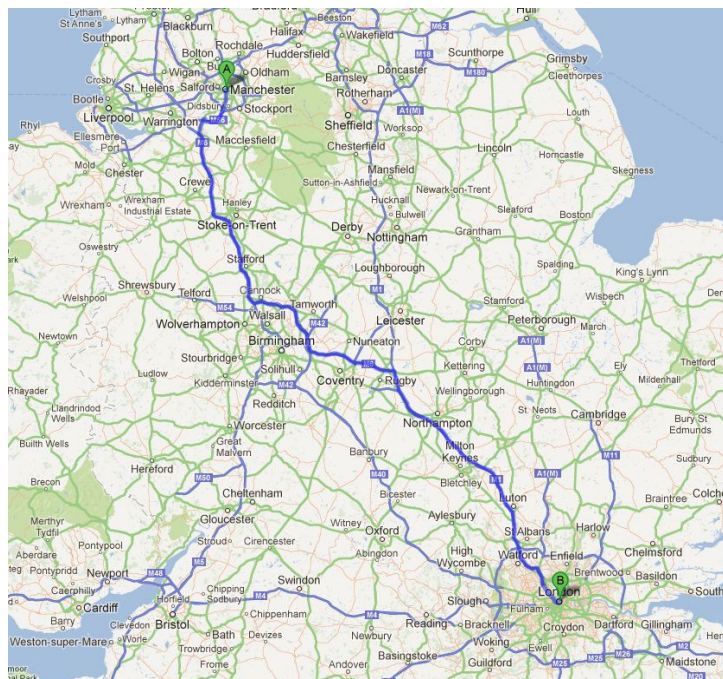


Fig. 1: The M6-M1 corridor (dark blue line) connecting Manchester (A) and London (B) (see “Manchester, Vereinigtes Königreich nach London, Vereinigtes Königreich”).

In the introduction to *Plays: 3* Stephens comments again on the setting of his plays: “I have thought for a few years now that my plays take place along the M6-M1 corridor” (xvii). The M6 and the M1 are two long motorways that run across England and connect Manchester and London (see Fig. 1 above). Notably, in *On the Shore* the 18-year-old Alex Holmes and his 17-year-old girlfriend Sarah Black leave Stockport and travel along this corridor by train in order to stay at Paul Danziger’s place in London (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 81-83). Alex’s route reveals similarities with Stephens’ biography:

It is the route I have taken in my life, leaving Stockport at eighteen to settle in London pretty much eighteen years ago. I return again and again to London and to Stockport and the plays seem to consider again and again the differences between those places. (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 3* xvii)

In *Motortown* (2006), *Pornography* (2008) and *Wastwater* (2011) Stephens returns to settings in and around London. Like *Christmas* and *Hérons*, *Motortown* is set in east London. In the play the soldier Danny returns from his base in “Basra” (Stephens, *Plays: 2* 158 & 193) to “Dagenham” (166 & 191). This suburb of London houses a large automotive factory of the Ford Motor Company, which emblematically represents the run-down of the British industry. In Scene Three the arms dealer Tom notes that “[t]he factory’s almost completely closed up now” (162). And in Scene Seven the teacher Justin mentions it only briefly (see 191). As there are no stage directions, the setting of the scenes is revealed in the primary text. The locations alluded to in the play include Lee’s apartment in Dagenham, a local bar or café, a local arms dealer, Canning Town in London, a local area called Goresbrook, Foulness Island and a hotel called Northview (see 143, 148, 153, 157, 167, 174, 181 & 190). Like *Port* the play has a circular development, as the last scene is set in the same location (Lee’s apartment) as the first one. Similar to *Hérons*, there are no references to Manchester or Stockport in this play.

Most of *Pornography*’s action takes place in and around London. However, the exact setting of the scenes is not clearly indicated, as Lane explains:

There is no specific physical setting, only a broadly temporal one: a week in London straddling the 2012 Olympics announcement, Live 8, G8 and the 7/7 bombings. There is no central protagonist except at a stretch, London itself. (35)

In Lane's opinion "the openness of the text reflects the fractured and disintegrating urban landscape, populated with fluid identities and uncertain futures" (36). In the introduction to *Plays: 2* Stephens admits that the text arose out of "an interest in dramatising a world that seems to be more atomised and fractured than it has been in the past and subsequently scorched by a need and an inability to connect" (xxi). Subsequently, Stephens justifies the choice of London as a backdrop for *Pornography* by saying that he thinks of "nowhere else where that atomisation and that fracturing is more palpable" (Introduction, *Plays: 2* xxii). In the middle of the play, in Scene Four, Stephens places an inner monologue by a suicide bomber travelling to London. As scholar and theatre critic Alex Sierz notes, "significantly, the suicide bomber in Scene Four travels from Manchester not Leeds" (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvi) in order to fulfill his destructive mission. Three of the real suicide bombers of the 7/7 terror attacks in London were from Leeds.

Finally, *Wastwater* (2011) comprises three scenes set on the edges of Heathrow Airport in Greater London. Scene One takes place in "[a] greenhouse on land adjacent to a large garden of a converted farmhouse outside Sipson in Middlesex" (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 3), Scene Two in "[a] room at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Heathrow Airport" (20), and Scene Three in "[a] deserted warehouse on the periphery of Heathrow Airport" (42). Heathrow represents a dubious place of transitions – of departures, informal meetings and arrivals. Like the lake Wastwater, the airport and its surroundings are "never completely out of the shadow" (33). There is only one reference to Manchester in this play: in Scene Three Jonathan says that his father "was the managing director of a retail distribution company. They were based in Warrington, outside Manchester" (59).

3.3.2 Time

As regards the setting of time, it can be observed that Stephens' plays have evolved from using simple time structures at the beginning of his career to using more epic, complex and experimental time structures in the more recent plays.

The first two plays *Bluebird* and *Christmas* take place over the relatively short time of a single night. While in *Bluebird* the time frame is alluded to in the primary text (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 44), the setting of *Christmas* is indicated by the secondary text after the list of characters: "The play is set over the course of one night [...]" (Stephens,

Plays: I 76). The accurate time of the play is revealed in the stage direction of Scene One: “*An advent calendar with sixteen windows open*” (77). However, later the bartender Michael Macgraw opens the seventeenth window on his advent calendar, so he must have forgotten to open it at the beginning (see 82). In Scene Three the character Giuseppe Rossi indicates that it is already after midnight by saying, “One more week, boys, and it’s Christmas Day” (100). In the end Macgraw opens the eighteenth window of his advent calendar (see 147). The scenes of *Bluebird* and *Christmas* are in chronological order with short ellipses between them. According to the stage directions, Scene One in *Christmas* is set in “*early afternoon*” (77), Scene Two “*later that afternoon*” (78), Scene Three “*one hour later*” (90), and Scene Four again “*one hour later*” (100).

In *Hérons* the stage directions indicate that “[t]he events take place in the present day” (154). The action of the seven scenes stretches over a few days, which are not clearly defined. While the first four scenes do not contain any definite description of time or date in the secondary text, the fifth scene is set in “*early afternoon*” (Stephens, *Plays: I* 189) and the sixth scene on “*a new day, perhaps sometime in the afternoon*” (209). Later in the sixth scene the protagonist Billy Lee Russell specifies that “[i]t is Friday” (220). The stage direction of the seventh scene just states that “[i]t is the morning” (224). Apart from the first scene, which is ambiguous and might be interpreted as a prolepsis to the climax in the sixth scene, the scenes follow the natural chronological order. Similar to the first two plays, short ellipses occur between the scenes of *Hérons*.

In contrast to the three plays discussed above, *Port* is the first play to employ a more epic and complex time frame. The initial stage directions state that the play is set “between 1988 and 2002” (Stephens, *Plays: I* 236), covering important episodes in the life of protagonist Racheal Keats, which are scattered over almost fifteen years. The eight scenes of *Port* are presented in chronological order with regular ellipses of two or three years in between scenes: Scene One takes place in 1988 (see 237), Scene Two in 1990 (see 251), Scene Three in 1992 at “*approaching night-time*” (266), Scene 4 on “*a beautiful day*” in 1994 (281), Scene Five in 1996 at “[e]arly-evening autumn light” (290), Scene Six in the “*last night of the millennium*” in 1999 (302) and Scene Seven in 2002 “[t]owards the end of summer” at “*ten o’clock at night*” (314). Scene Eight is set in 2002 at “*four o’clock in the morning*” (328). In the last scene Racheal says, “I saw

Danny last week” (331), referring to a meeting with Danny in Scene Seven. Hence, Scene Eight is set approximately one week after Scene Seven.

Likewise, *On the Shore* is also set over the course of a longer period of time. The initial stage direction announces that the play “takes place over a nine-month period in 2004” (Stephens, *On the Shore* 2). The scenes are presented in chronological order with ellipses of a few months in between scenes, beginning in February 2004 in Part One (see 3), followed by May 2004 in Part Two (see 50) and August 2004 in Part Three (see 84). Part Four takes place after a shorter ellipsis, namely two weeks after Part Three (see 107). Theatre scholar Alex Sierz notes that *On the Shore* “examines three generations of a Stockport family over nine months, a time pregnant with meaning” (*Rewriting the nation* 167). The play treats – among other themes and subjects – the recovery of the Holmes family from the death of the teenager Christopher Holmes. In contrast, the period of nine months symbolises the usual duration of a pregnancy until the birth of a new life. The fictional time of the play is paralleled by the pregnancy of the character Susan Reynolds. In Scene Eight of Part One Susan is “in the very early stages of pregnancy” (Stephens, *On the Shore* 30), in Scene One of Part Three she is “much more noticeably pregnant” (84) and in Scene Three of Part Four she is “very heavily pregnant now” (111).

Motortown contains eight short scenes, which run in chronological order. Apart from the list of dramatis personae and a stage direction concerning the décor, the scenes are not preceded by any secondary text indicating the time. The primary text suggests that there are only short ellipses between the scenes. In Scene One the protagonist Danny gets up and is served breakfast by his brother Lee (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 143-152). While the following scenes lack hints to the exact time of the plot, Danny admits in the last scene of the play that he had “one hell of a day” (203). Thus, it becomes clear that the narrative is set within 24 hours.

From the eight plays discussed in this paper *Pornography* is arguably the most experimental one as far as the treatment of time and chronology is concerned. *Pornography* comprises seven scenes, which, according to the initial stage direction, “can be performed in any order” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 214). Consequently, this leads to the dissolution of the chronology of a linear plot and represents “a kind of taunting of more conventional, cause-and-effect storytelling” (Edgar 114). Playwright David Edgar

gives *Pornography* as an example of a structure with “double and disconnected time” (112) and explains the underlying principle:

[T]he five separate stories (some in monologue) are linked by the fact that they occurred in the twenty-four hours between London winning the 2012 Olympics and the 7 July bombing attacks on the London Underground in 2005. Stephens invites the director of the play to distribute the lines and order the scenes in any way they like, suggesting that he has abdicated from providing a meaningful connection between them, and that, possibly, he regards them as random. (114)

Wastwater shows similarities with *Pornography* as regards the dissolution of the cause-and-effect relationship between the scenes. *Wastwater* is a triptych play, with three short episodes set on the periphery of Heathrow Airport. While Scene One takes place on “June 25th., 9 p.m.” (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 3), Scene Two and Scene Three are both set on “June 23rd., 9 p.m.” (20 & 42). Although the year is not indicated in the stage direction, Scene Two and Scene Three can be interpreted as parallel scenes. They are linked by the same stage direction, “*It’s raining heavily outside. The rain stops*” (20 & 42), and the intertwined biographies of the characters in the scenes. Scene One is preceded by a very similar stage direction: “*It’s raining heavily. He [Harry] watches it. It stops*” (3). Despite the obvious similarities of the setting, Scene One takes place non-parallel to the other scenes, as the date shows. Scene Two and Scene Three can be characterised as analepses in relation to Scene One, as they occur exactly two days before the first scene. Alternatively, seen from the opposite angle, Scene One represents a prolepsis in relation to the following two scenes, as it takes place two days after the following two scenes. Similar to *Pornography*, it would be possible to stage the three scenes in any order.

3.3.3 Historical background

Stephens wrote most of his plays in the new millennium, which was significantly influenced by the events surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States of America in 2001. An echo of that significant event is found in *Motortown*, when Paul tells the protagonist that “[t]hey don’t let you take anything onto planes anymore, Danny. Did you know that? Since 9/11” and that these attacks are “[t]he best heist film Hollywood never made” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 169).

While his earlier plays treat minor problems, his more recent plays demonstrate Stephens' sharp sense for controversial issues and current sensibilities. Huber, Rubik, and Novak note that his writing process relates to "major political occurrences such as the London suicide bombings of 7/7" (12). Indeed, the terrorist attacks on London in 2005 significantly informed at least two of his plays, *Motortown* and *Pornography*. *Motortown* was written in just four days, starting on 6 July 2005, the day before 7/7 (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays*: 2 x). Stephens explains the genesis of the play: "*Motortown*, conceived over six months but written over four days, is the play I was writing on 7 July 2005 when four bombs exploded on the London transport system" (Introduction, *Plays*: 2 xvii). The play deals with the British participation in the second Iraq war, its alienating effect on a soldier called Danny and the anti-war movement. Innes informs us that Stephens wrote *Pornography* "just three weeks after the 7 July 2005 bombings" and that "[i]n many ways it is a companion piece to *Motortown*. Both are examinations of British society, centered on an absence: the war in Iraq, and there the bombing itself, which is only ever mentioned circumstantially" (455). Like *Motortown*, the play was inspired by the events in the week before the bomb attacks on London, as Sierz explains:

The background of the action is the week in July 2005 which began with the Live 8 series of benefit concerts that took place on 2 July up and down Britain, followed by the G8 summit of the world leaders in Gleneagles, Scotland, the winning of the bid to stage the 2012 Olympics by the UK on 6 July, and the explosion of the 7/7 bombs in London the day after. (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xv)

Moreover, Stephens not only wrote about the British participation in the Iraq war, but also about the country's role in the Afghanistan war. This war forms the basis for *Canopy of Stars*, a short episode Stephens contributed to the *The Great Game: Afghanistan*-series (see Sierz, *Rewriting the nation* 85).

Punk Rock was influenced by the Columbine High School massacre in the United States of America in 1999. Stephens transformed the setting to "the library of the Sixth Form of a fee-paying grammar school in Stockport" (Stephens, *Punk Rock* 4). According to Sierz the critical reception of the play has changed over the course of time:

When the play opened in September 2009, critics saw its evocation of the Columbine school massacre as mirroring the trial of Matthew Swift and Ross McKnight, who were then accused of planning a similar atrocity in Manchester. When they were acquitted, however, the play seemed to be less a mirror of

reality than a vividly written fantasy about schoolboy fantasists. (*Rewriting the nation* 55)

One Minute treats the abduction of a schoolgirl, inspired by the case of Milly Dowling in 2002 (see Stephens, *Plays*: 2 xi). The play was revived at the time of the Madeleine McCann case in 2008. While *Harper Regan* deals with paedophilia and sex trafficking, *Wastwater* touches upon pornography and child trafficking (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays*: 3 xi-xiii).

3.4 Dramatis personae

3.4.1 Origin and class background

As regards the choice of characters in Stephens' plays, theatre critic Aleks Sierz characterises the author as "a comprehensive chronicler of both working- and middle-class life in the new millennium" (*Rewriting the nation* 130). This view certainly holds true, as Stephens usually depicts all sorts of common people with a working-class background in his plays. Lane states that Stephens has "a belief in the kindness of the human spirit, and a political perspective expressed through the personal struggles of everyday people" (33).

The taxi driver Jimmy Macneill in *Bluebird* is a middle-class turned working-class ex-novelist. While Jimmy experiences a social descent, his ex-wife Clare Macneill, a teacher, demonstrates upward social mobility by marrying a heart surgeon (see Stephens, *Plays*: 1 52-55). Jimmy's passengers have varied class backgrounds. For instance, Robert Greenwood is a "balding, drunken, upper-middle-class, fat man of fifty" (4), Angela Davies is "a prostitute of indistinguishable age" (10), Richard Wright is a "Scottish engineer on the London Underground" (20), Andy Green is a "[s]ix-four, brick-shithouse-built bouncer" (28), and Janine Williams is "a smartly dressed, middle-aged, manic depressive former teacher" (38).

Christmas deals with four working-class men: the 38-year-old pub owner and bartender Michael Macgraw, the 29-year-old builder Billy Lee Russell, the 68-year-old hairdresser Giuseppe Rossi and the 35-year-old postman and former cellist Charlie Anderson (see Stephens, *Plays*: 1 77, 90, 113, 119). In the introduction to *Plays*: 1 Stephens expresses his concerns about the traditional working-class man: "It struck me

that it [the pub] worked accidentally as some kind of metaphor for the disappearance of the traditional working-class man. A sector of society that [...] had become redundant without even realising it” (ix).

While Stephens’ first plays focused on working-class adults, *Herons* is his first play about “working-class teenagers” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* x), set in east London. In the initial stage direction the protagonist Billy Lee Russell is described as “*Fourteen years old. A dirty, scruffed mop of hair. Wears a thin and old Adidas jacket and a Nike Air baseball cap*” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 153). The character Adele Kent “*wears her school uniform still. She wears it unruly*” (153). The stage direction for Aaron Riley and Darren Madden explains that they “*dress in a similar fashion. They are all tracksuits and jerky movements*” (154). The teenage characters in *Port*, which is set in Stockport, have a similar class background. In the first scene the eleven-year-old protagonist Racheal Keats “*wears a blue Adidas tracksuit top over her school uniform*”, and her six-year-old brother Billy Keats “*wears a huge battered Kappa coat over his*” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 237).

After *Port* Stephens opens his dramatic writing to a wider variety of characters. Sierz says that “[l]ike *On the Shore of the Wide World*, Stephens’ *Harper Regan* (2008) shifted its gaze onto more middle-class families and their familiar anguish” (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xv). *On the Shore* treats three generations of the Stockport-based family Holmes. Like Clare Macneill in *Bluebird*, the family members show an upward social mobility, as they have worked their way up from working-class to (lower) middle-class status. In Scene Six of Part One the father Peter Holmes talks about his profession: “I don’t paint houses. I’m not a painter-decorator. I restore buildings. It’s different” (Stephens, *On the Shore* 27). In Scene Four of Part Three Peter recalls the career of his father Charlie Holmes: “I remember, before you started up on your own, [...] you used to work in the mill” (91). Earlier in the play Peter’s son Alex Holmes informs us that his grandfather Charlie “used to run Dad’s company” and “[s]old it to him” (40).

Stephens’ next play *Motortown* focuses more on working-class characters again. Sierz lists the former soldier Danny, the anti-hero of *Motortown*, and Jamie, the protagonist of *Country Music*, as typical examples of a specific type of underclass people (see *Rewriting the nation* 231). As Sierz puts it:

If every decade throws up a new type of fictional hero, [...], who would fit the bill in 2000s new writing? The most obvious is the underclass yob, who was so popular a stage figure and so important an articulation of respectable fears about crime. Often too poor, or too lacking in style, to aspire even to the trappings of chavdom, this foul-mouthed lowlife, with or without the trademark hood, appeared in play after play. (*Rewriting the nation* 231)

Elsewhere in his study *Rewriting the nation* Sierz characterises Danny as a brutal chav, as he states that “[c]havdom has rarely been so intense, or so intensely appalling” (131). The only characters in *Motortown* that do not fit in this scheme are Justin and Helen, a posh middle-class or upper-class couple from “Chalk Farm”, a residential area that is “very expensive” (Stephens, *Plays: I* 189). Justin works as “a schoolteacher” (194) and Helen manages “a television production company” (195).

Stephens’ recent play *Wastwater* comprises all sorts of working-class and middle-class characters. The stage direction in Scene One informs us that 22-year-old Harry and his foster mother Frieda live in “a converted farmhouse outside Sipson in Middlesex” (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 3). The primary text in Scene Two reveals that Lisa is a “police officer” (28), working in “child protection” (29), and that Mark is an arts teacher (see 21 & 26). In Scene Three the primary text informs us that Jonathan was a maths teacher and that Sian is a criminal woman participating in illegal child-trafficking (see 42-64).

Apart from their class backgrounds the characters in Stephens’ plays are frequently described as losers of the capitalist system, as poor people from the margin of society, or as psychopaths who cannot cope with their lives and the people that surround them. In the introduction to *The Methuen drama book of twenty-first century British plays* Sierz points out that

Herons (2001), *Port* (2002), *One Minute* (2003), *Christmas* (2004), *Country Music* (2004) and *Motortown* (2006) together look at life’s brutal losers and desperate victims but always with hope, honesty and humour (xv).

Stephens says about the intentions of his play *Herons* that he “wanted to write a play about the British poor” (Introduction, *Plays: I* x). Similar to the plays listed above, *Bluebird* also stars a poor character. When Jimmy Macneill tells his ex-wife Clare that he has slept in his car for the past four and a half years, he also admits:

JIMMY. It’s a good life, Clare. I own two bags which I keep in the boot of my car. One is full of clean clothes. The other is full of dirty clothes. I own an Otis Redding cassette, a very fucking damn good copy of the A-Z of London

and a dog-eared edition of *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad that Alice bought me one year for my birthday. (Stephens, *Plays*: 1 50)

Later in the play Jimmy makes a gift to Clare and gives her a suitcase with 100,000 pounds in cash inside. It is the money Jimmy saved up by driving a taxi for four and a half years, in order to clear the guilty conscience he has had since the accidental killing of his daughter (see 69-70). Jimmy confirms that he is satisfied with his poor condition and does not care about money anymore by saying, “I have no need for it. It is about as useful to me as a suitcase full of drawing pins. Or envelopes. Or shoelaces” (70). *Motortown* contains a long speech by Paul, the man who converts Danny’s replica gun into a live arm, expressing his hatred towards the British poor:

PAUL. You want to know the truth about the poor in this country? They are not cool. They’re not soulful. They’re not honest. They’re not the salt of the fucking earth. They’re thick. They’re myopic. They’re violent. They’re drunk most of the time. They like shit music. They wear shit clothes. They tell shit jokes. They’re racist, most of them, and homophobic the lot of them. They have tiny parameters of possibility and a minuscule spirit of enquiry or investigation. They would be better off staying in their little holes and fucking each other. And killing each other. And the girls are so vapid. You know the type? All brown skin and puppy fat and distressed denim on their arses and ponchos.
(Stephens, *Plays*: 2 171-172)

Among the underclass people in Stephens’ plays there are sometimes characters that also show psychopathic behaviour. The protagonist of *Motortown*, the ex-soldier Danny, is a good example. As Rebellato notes, he is “driven mad by the discrepancy between the certainty of the insurgents against whom he had been fighting, and the valueless sprawl of the country he came home to” (“New Theatre Writing: Dennis Kelly” 606). In the final scene of the play Lee tells his brother Danny that “[p]eople were frightened you would have battered them. On account of you being a psychopath” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 206). According to Sierz, this statement in the play has influenced the critical reception of *Motortown* considerably: “More than one reviewer commented on the fact that Stephens, by revealing that Danny was psychotic at school, weakens the central argument that war has brutalised Danny” (*Rewriting the Nation* 131).

Apart from *Motortown*, *Hérons* and *On the Shore* also contain hints to psychopathic character traits. When the unemployed Charlie Russell presents his gun to his son Billy Lee in *Hérons*, he mentions that “[s]ometimes I just take it out. Think about all the

people I could shoot. Y'know what I mean?" (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 165). In Scene One of Part Two of *On the Shore* Alex Holmes and his girlfriend Sarah Black meet their friend Paul Danziger, a drug dealer from London, in the derelict Bluebell Hotel in Stockport. Paul notices "[a]ll t'fucking wood in here! Imagine this place and it's on fire!" (Stephens, *On the Shore* 54) After the return from her stay with Paul in London, Sarah calls him a "wanker-psycho" (116), and Alex tells his grandfather Charlie that his best friend Paul is going to "get sent to prison for burning a house down" (119).

3.4.2 Figure conception

In the introduction to *Plays*: 3 Stephens notices, "My plays, it strikes me, are as populated by seventeen-year-olds as they are by alcoholics and dead children" (xiv). Apart from these character groupings, fathers, mothers and wives also play a crucial role in Stephens' dramatic aesthetic, as will be analysed in detail in the following sections.

3.4.2.1 Alcoholics

Firstly, the characters in Stephens' plays frequently show the habit of heavy drinking. It can be argued that this figure conception is strongly connected to his autobiography. Stephens notes in the introduction to *Plays*: 1 that his father was "an alcoholic who died before he was sixty" (xii), and that his first professional plays "span the period of [his] dad's illness from alcoholism to his eventual death from cancer in January 2001" (xi). In *Bluebird*, Jimmy's first passenger in his minicab is a drunken man called Guvnor, described as "[a] thin man, maybe wearing shorts and a Hawaiian shirt and sucking a can of Special Brew through a straw" (Stephens, *Plays*: 1 3). The second passenger Robert Greenwood is also characterised as "drunken" (4) and the ninth passenger Billy Lee tells Jimmy that he has been "drunk for a week now" (36). Significantly, Jimmy Macneill killed his daughter Alice in a drink-driving accident five years ago, after he had been fired (see 64-65). After the accident Jimmy tried to ease his guilty conscience by drinking, as he recalls:

JIMMY. I went to stay at the Great Northern Hotel in
King's Cross. Spent my days watching television with the
curtains closed. Drinking. I just wanted to die then. I found
myself talking to Alice. [...].
One time I drank so much
that I actually almost blinded myself. (Stephens, *Plays*: 1 65)

Stephens dedicated his second play *Christmas* to his father G. N. Stephens (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 74). It deals with the bartender Michael Macgraw and three guests in a run-down pub in east London. In the initial stage direction Micheal is described as a “*tired-looking, fractured man in his late thirties. He is hung-over, inches away from being still drunk*” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 77). The three guests in the pub, Billy Lee Russell, Giuseppe Rossi and Charlie Anderson, seem to be problem drinkers. Over the course of the night, they reveal their personal problems in melancholic confessions and try to numb their sorrows with alcohol. For instance, Billy Lee Russell confesses that a conversation with his mother about his dead father has stirred his emotions and says: “It does my head in. I think I’m going to get fucking really quite drunk tonight. Ruined my cunting week” (87).

In *Herons* Billy Lee Russell’s mother Michelle is characterised as an alcoholic. Theatre scholar Innes explains that “[a]s in Stephens’s other plays, alcoholism is a key element, with Billy describing his mother as ‘a wino. A pisshead. A cruel drunken bitch’, who arranged to have his father badly beaten” (448). This image of Billy’s mother Michelle is reinforced, when Billy meets her and tells her that “[w]hen you were on the drink, Mum, you did so many things that were just disgusting. Despicable” (218). However, in *Herons* consuming legal and illegal drugs is not only widespread among adults, but also among teenagers. For instance, the stage direction before the climactic confrontation between Billy and Scott’s gang says that “[t]he lights rise again with Aaron, Darren and Scott sat around the stage. Still drinking. Still smoking. Darren rolls a scrawny joint” (221).

Similar to *Herons*, the teenagers in *Port* also have to cope with a family member with a drinking problem. In Scene Five, the protagonist Racheal Keats talks to her friend Danny Miller about her “mental picture” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 295) of her father Jonathan Keats:

RACHEAL. When I do that with my dad I can only ever see
him down the pub. I can’t imagine him in our flat. At all. I
can’t get it in my head. In the pub. Or in hospital.

DANNY. In hospital?

RACHEAL. In the café there. Don’t matter. It got to the
point when I couldn’t actually stand the way they smelled.
The way the flat smelled. The way our dad ate apples. Did
my head in. (295)

Six years later, in Scene Seven, Racheal meets Danny again in a beer garden of a pub. Their conversation shows that Jonathan is still a drinker:

DANNY. How's your dad?

RACHEAL. He's all right. Bit drunk. Can be a bit of a fuckhead.

DANNY. You staying with him?

RACHEAL. For the time being. It's all right. I don't see much of him. He sleeps quite a lot of the time. (323)

Port seems to establish the character of the father as a drunkard in the fictional world of Stephens' plays, as *On the Shore* as well as *Motortown* feature similar father figures. Charlie Holmes is characterised as a heavy drinker in the primary text of *On the Shore*. In Scene Ten of Part Two Peter talks to his mother Ellen about his father's alcoholism. He accuses her that she "accompanied Dad as he drank his brain into mush and his guts into fuck and [...] his business into [...] a pitiful, shitty state" (Stephens, *On the Shore* 78). Ellen explains in detail how Charlie's addiction influenced her life:

ELLEN. I come home and there are four-packs of cider hidden in the cupboard. He thinks I can't find them. This is eleven o'clock in the morning.

PETER. That's completely irrelevant to me.

ELLEN. He puts them in the drawer. He thinks he's hiding them from me. He gets up in the middle of the night and I hear him drinking in the bathroom with the light off! He thinks I don't realise! And the way he's been talking. He's been dreadful, Peter. The things he says you wouldn't believe. And if he turned up to work and he was drunk and if he said to a client the kind of things that he says to me –

PETER. Don't you fucking cry on me. (79)

However, in Scene Four of Part Three Peter supports his father's drinking habit, when Charlie is in hospital, presumably for a cancer treatment. According to the stage directions Peter delivers "*a plastic bag with six cans of strong cider in them*" (93) to Charlie's room. Commenting on alcoholism in his third collection of plays, Stephens also refers to another character in *On the Shore*: "The plays are drenched in alcohol. It is striking that the first action a character plays out in these plays is Alex [Holmes] opening a can of lager on a bus" (Introduction, *Plays*: 3 xv).

Like *Port* and *On the Shore*, *Motortown* also features a drunken father. In Scene Five the protagonist Danny talks to Marley, his ex-girlfriend from school, about his parents.

MARLEY. You hate them?

DANNY. I do a bit. My dad mainly. Drunken fucking

contradictory wanker. I find him completely ridiculous. I hope I get to bury him. (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 176)

Danny's father does not participate in the action as a character, but he shows similarities with Charlie Holmes in *On the Shore*, as both fathers smoke secretly (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 22; Stephens, *Plays*: 2 208).

3.4.2.2 Failed and/or absent fathers

It can be observed that many of the father characters in the selected plays are absent due to various reasons or have failed in one or the other way in their lives. The first play *Bluebird* is a good example of a father who has failed in the most terrible way. Jimmy Macneill overran his seven-year-old daughter Alice with his car and subsequently ran away from his marriage (see Stephens, *Plays*: 1 40). His ex-wife Clare is upset that he did not get in touch with her in the past five years:

CLARE. All this time, James. Where the hell have you been?
 You just disappeared.
 JIMMY. I didn't disappear. I've been around.
 CLARE. You didn't phone. You didn't write. Five years and
 I didn't get a single sodding word from you and then all of a
 sudden you turn up and you tell me that you want to see me. (49)

She tried to contact him, but he had moved out of his flat (see 49). Later they talk about the road accident that killed their daughter and Clare accuses Jimmy of having been absent when she needed him the most:

CLARE. It was very cowardly of you to leave like that.
 JIMMY. I know that.
 CLARE. I had to deal with everything, Jimmy. On my own.
 I had to deal with packing her clothes away. I had to throw
 some of her stuff out. I wanted to keep it all. But some of it
 was just ridiculous. [...].
 I got all of her things that I
 couldn't keep or sell into a box and I took them to a skip
 and I threw them away and you weren't there. You weren't
 there, Jimmy, and I find it hard to forgive you for that. (62-63)

Christmas treats the topic of fatherly failure and absence similarly. In Scene Four the bartender Michael Macgraw tells Giuseppe Rossi that he is not allowed to see his son Danny: "I got a letter from the solicitor this morning. They knocked me back" (Stephens, *Plays*: 1 103). Subsequently, he admits that he has not seen Danny for seven years and that he is neither allowed to speak to him nor to his mother (see 104).

ROSSI. Do you speak to him on the telephone?

MACGRAW (*up at ROSSI*). As from this morning, Seppo, that is actually against the law. Can you fucking believe that? (105)

When Charlie Anderson, another guest in Michael's pub, asks Michael why his wife took his son away, he gets upset and does not explain it to him. Hence, the reasons for the separation of father and son remain unknown (see 107). Another absent father in *Christmas* is Billy Lee Russell's. In Scene Two Billy informs Michael that his mother has recently revealed to him who his real father was and that his father died before he was born (see 85-86).

RUSSELL. It would appear that it was twenty-nine years ago, on Christmas bloody Eve, that this fuckwit who was apparently my old man popped his fucking clogs. I never knew that. (85)

In the following conversation Russell admits that the secret about his absent father has been a heavy burden all his life: "I've been asking her [my mother] as long as I can remember. Who's my dad? Where's my dad? Why the fuck don't I have a dad when every other cunt that I know does?" (86).

Of course, the figure conception of the failed or absent father sometimes overlaps with the figure conception of the father as an alcoholic. For instance, in *Port* the drunkard Jonathan Keats has failed, as he is not able to keep the family together but instead locks them out of their flat. In Scene One Racheal, Billy and their mother Christine sit in a parked Vauxhall Cavalier and stare at the fifth-floor flat (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 237).

RACHEAL. It is though, int it? Mental and that. You reckon he's in there?

CHRISTINE. Course he is.

RACHEAL. Lights off. Door locked. Sitting in there?

CHRISTINE. I could hear him.

RACHEAL. I hate it when it goes like this.

CHRISTINE. So do I. (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 245)

In *Motortown* Danny's drunken father has failed, as it is suggested that not Danny's nature is responsible for his psychopathic behavior, but his nurture (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 206). While fatherly failures can be passed on over generations, *On the Shore* treats the notion that parenting has improved from generation to generation, which is expressed by the opinion of the alcohol addict Charlie Holmes. In Scene Five of Part Four Charlie explains the improvement of the relationship between father and son in their family to his grandson Alex:

CHARLIE. I'll tell you something. Peter is a much, much better dad to you than I was to him. And if you ever have a kid I bet you a thousand pounds that you'll be a better dad to your kid than Peter is to you. But I was a better dad to Peter than my dad was to me. You might say I couldn't have been any worse. But even so. It counts. (Stephens, *On the Shore* 123)

Wastwater marginally deals with absent fathers as well. In Scene One Harry asks his foster mother Frieda what her father was like. Frieda admits that she hardly knows her father:

FRIEDA. And we never saw him at all. He worked abroad a lot of the time, which was unusual in those days. I remember his hair mainly. He had hair that was terribly stubby. It was uneven and a horrible brown colour. He had eyes as hard as wood. After he died my mum confessed that she loved him far more than she loved us. (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 8)

Similarly, the foster children Harry and Sian also lack a father figure. They have been brought up by the foster mother Frieda. Neither their real parents nor the foster father is mentioned in the play. It is implied that Sian stayed in several foster homes, as she says that Frieda was her "second foster mother" (51). Frieda tells Harry that Sian "used to hate it here. She hated the darkness. And the quiet. And how green everything was. I think she was very unhappy while she was here, I'm afraid" (9).

3.4.2.3 Failed and/or absent mothers

Similar to the role of fathers discussed above, the absence or failure of mothers has significantly influenced many characters in Stephens' plays as well. For instance, in *Port* Christine Keats leaves her family and her children Racheal and Billy behind. In Scene One the protagonist Racheal Keats already feels that her mother does not want to live with them in Stockport anymore. Racheal repeatedly asks her mother whether she is going to leave them (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 248-249). At the end of Scene One Christine insists that they will stay in Stockport:

CHRISTINE. (*still menacing*). We're not going to Disney World Florida. We're not going to countryside. We're not going anywhere. Jesus. Do you think? Do you really think that if I wanted to bugger off from here then I'd take you wirr us? I'm not daft, am I? Am I daft? No. No I'm not. Bloody dead weight, you two. Int you? Pair of yous. I'd piss off on me tod. Leave you two to fuckhead.

RACHEAL. Mum, don't.

CHRISTINE. We're not going. All right? We're staying put.
 You hear me? Do you?
 RACHEAL. Yeah. (250)

However, in the following scene, which takes place two years later, Racheal tells Ronald Abbey, a friend of the family, that Christine left them fourteen months ago and that they have not heard anything from her since then (see 256-257). In Scene Four, which is set six years after the first scene, Racheal tells her grandmother Anne “[t]hat she’s gone away and she never even said goodbye or nothing. She just left” (284). Anne informs Racheal that her daughter Christine has never contacted or visited her either (see 284).

In *Hérons*, after his violent abuse by Scott’s gang, Billy Lee Russell talks to his friend Adele Kent about the history of abuse in his family and the reason why he is living with his father.

BILLY. One time, when she’d been on the drink, she hit me.
 She beat me up. She did. She got my head by my hair, this
 is, what, when I was nine years old. She got my head by my
 hair and she smacked it against the radiator in our front
 room until I was sick and until my head started to bleed. So
 I rang my dad up and told him what happened and he came
 to get me. And now he looks after me. Danny and Leanne
 were too young to come with us. (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 214)

As indicated in the quote above, in *Hérons* the figure conception of the failed or absent mother also overlaps with the figure conception of mothers as alcoholics. Similar to *Hérons*, in *Wastwater* Harry and Sian’s real mother is also absent. They were both raised by their foster mother Frieda (see Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 17 & 51).

3.4.2.4 Dead or absent wives

Stephens’ plays *Christmas*, *Hérons* and *Port* deal with the absence or death of wives. For instance, several characters in *Christmas* recall, in their drunken confessions, the separation from or the loss of their wife. Firstly, the pub owner Michael Macgraw lives separated from his wife and is not allowed to see his son Danny (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 103-107 & 142). Secondly, the hairdresser Giuseppe Rossi reveals that his wife Barbara died three years ago (see 117 & 129). Speaking to Charlie Anderson, he says: “Barbara, a beautiful English girl. I was married to her for forty years. More. Forty-two years. [...]. It wasn’t a painful death. It was gentle. She was old. She was sleeping” (129).

Thirdly, the postman Charlie Anderson informs the other guests that his wife, whom he had met in Michael's pub, died eight months ago (see 135-136). In contrast to Rossi's wife, Anderson's wife was brutally killed:

ANDERSON. So we're burgled. She comes home too early. Finds them in the bedroom. They get scared. Smash her face up with the crowbar that they've used to break the key on the door. Stamp four times on to her ribcage. Leave the house without anybody noticing. Somebody notices, eventually, that the front door of the house has been left wide open for three hours and phones the police to investigate. (134)

The complete absence of women in *Christmas* and the dominant masculinity of the play are also closely connected to the theme of misogyny, as expressed in a conversation between Rossi, Macgraw and Russell about marriage:

ROSSI. Would you get married again, Michael? Do you ever think about it?
 MACGRAW. I think about it all the time, Seppo. I think I would look to wed an Irish girl next time. Maybe that'd take me back home, eh? Get me back to Wicklow.
 ROSSI. There's nothing bad about that idea.
 MACGRAW. Never make that mistake again. Fucking English women.
 RUSSELL. There's nothing wrong with English women.
 MACGRAW. There fucking is. They're fucking mad. Every last one of them.
 RUSSELL. Fuck off.
 MACGRAW. Every one of them. Total fucking dur-brains. (98)

Similar to Michael Macgraw in *Christmas*, Charlie Russell lives separated from his wife Michelle Russell in *Hérons*, as does Jonathan Keats in *Port*, since his wife Christine Keats has left the family.

3.4.2.5 Dead children

In the introduction to *Plays: 2* Stephens notes that "[a]ll five of these plays [*One Minute*, *Country Music*, *Motortown*, *Pornography*, *Sea Wall*] revolve in different ways around the violent death of children" (xxii). However, dead children can also be found in his earlier plays. Notably, his first professional play *Bluebird* deals with the tragic death of Alice Macneill, the seven-year-old daughter of the protagonist Jimmy Macneill (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 43). In *Hérons*, the teenager Racheal, a friend of the character Adele Kent, was drowned in the canal by the twenty-year-olds Ross Cooper and Berg

Kempton as well as four other people (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 180 & 198). Similarly, in *Motortown*, the black teenager Jade is kidnapped and murdered in cold blood by the ex-soldier Danny (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 187-188). In the first scene of *Port*, Racheal Keats recalls the death of her classmate Sarah Briard:

RACHEAL. She got smacked by a car. She was ten. Imagine that. Imagine being ten and you're dead. That's dead sad that is, int it? All the stuff she wanted to do, all that stuff. She's never, ever going to do that now. Not none of it. Wanted to play for Man U and everything. Fucking thick cow. As if you play for Man U and you're a girl. I never liked her. She was fat. (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 248)

In terms of dramaturgy, the most significant death of a child occurs in *On the Shore*, as it directly influences the narrative that follows the tragic incident. Sierz notes that “[a]t the end of section one, fifteen-year-old Christopher is killed in a road accident. The incident casts a deep shadow over the rest of the play” (*Rewriting the nation* 167). Consequently, the family members try to recover from this tragedy in the following parts of the play. Interestingly, the deadly accident is not shown on stage, as it happens in the ellipsis between Part One and Part Two of the play. In Part One, which is labeled ‘Christopher’, the character Christopher is introduced and characterised in several scenes with his brother, parents or grandparents (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 13, 20, 35 & 42). In Scene Four of Part Two, approximately in the middle of the play, the death of Christopher is revealed by his father Peter Holmes in a conversation with Susan Reynolds: “My boy, Christopher, my youngest. He was out on his bike. On the – Just by the – going down the A6. There was. He was hit by a car. He was killed” (65). This information usually creates a powerful impact upon the audience, as Stephens notes: “The death of Christopher Holmes is revealed slowly and would always produce a gasp from the audiences in the second part of *On the Shore*” (Introduction, *Plays: 3* xvi).

3.4.2.6 Teenagers

While *Christmas* does not contain any teenage characters, *Bluebird* refers to a few teenage passengers in Jimmy's cab: the fourth passenger is the nineteen-year-old prostitute Angela and the following passenger is a nameless, fifteen-year-old girl, who recites a poem (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 10 & 19). *Hérons* and *Port* are Stephens' first plays to feature teenagers as protagonists. Concerning the figure conception of *Hérons* Stephens explains in the introduction to *Plays: 1*:

I wanted to dramatise working-class teenagers with all of the honesty, cruelty and insight they could display. I wanted to capture their vibrant, violent language. I wanted to write a play about the British poor that was as hopeful and poetic as it was tough. (x)

In *Hérons* the fourteen-year-old protagonist Billy Lee Russell is bullied by a gang of fifteen-year-olds (Scott, Aaron, Darren), because Billy's father Charlie called the police after he had observed the murder of Racheal by Scott's brother Ross Cooper and another man called Berg Kempton. According to Innes *Hérons* shows "a reversal of the usual father-son relationship" (448), because the teenager Billy tries to protect his father Charlie from Scott, Ross and Berg, who want to take revenge.

Port features a teenager as a central character as well and tells the coming-of-age story of eleven-year-old Racheal Keats in Stephens' hometown Stockport. Stephens explains in the introduction to *Plays: 1* that "[l]ike *Hérons*, teenage characters dominated. Unlike *Hérons*, in *Port* they grew up; in *Port* they became adults" (x).

In *On the Shore* two of the four main parts of the play are labeled with the eighteen-year-old Alex Holmes and the fifteen-year-old Christopher Holmes. They represent two of the six main characters. Alex' seventeen-year-old girlfriend Sarah Black and the nineteen-year-old Paul Danziger, a drug dealer from London, are minor characters in the play.

3.5 Themes and motifs

Simon Stephens admits that he "seem[s] to return to those same obsessions" (Introduction, *Plays: 3* xix) and in the introduction to *Plays: 1* he states that "[...] these plays [*Bluebird*, *Christmas*, *Hérons*, *Port*] reinvestigate the same themes again and again" (xi). Stephens focuses on a number of themes, which are sometimes closely related to his figure conception. The themes and their relation to the characters of the plays will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

3.5.1 Broken/dysfunctional families

Stephens' plays frequently deal with the theme of broken or dysfunctional families. "If the family set-up is sometimes interrogated fearlessly, its absence is mourned," says Stephens in the introduction to *Plays: 3* (xviii). This theme is strongly linked to the figure conception of the absent and/or failed father and mother respectively.

For instance, the family Russell in *Hérons* is a typical example of a broken family set-up in Stephens' plays. The protagonist Billy Lee Russell lives with his father Charlie Russell due to his mother's alcoholism and violent abuse (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 167). Charlie is unemployed, lives in a run-down flat on an estate and lacks ambition, as the following conversation shows.

BILLY. Did you go down the dole?
 CHARLIE. Yeah.
 BILLY. And did you tell 'em about the water bill?
 CHARLIE. Yes.
 BILLY. 'Cause we don't need to pay that. They shouldn't even be sending us that.
 CHARLIE. I told 'em.
 BILLY. Was there anything going? Any jobs, was there?
 CHARLIE. I didn't get a chance to have a look?
 BILLY. You what?
 CHARLIE. I didn't have time.
 BILLY. What do you mean you didn't have time? What takes up your time, Dad? What have you been doing all day?
 CHARLIE. Billy, son, just fucking, just give it a break, will you? (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 167)

As Charlie is not able to fulfill his role as a father, Billy takes the role of the caretaker and protector, when Scott and his violent gang threaten them. Billy says, "I want him to be all right. I want him to get over everything that Mum did to him. And I want him to get over, to just get over finding Racheal" (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 215).

Similarly, *Port* shows dysfunctional family relationships as well. In Scene One Racheal's father Jonathan Keats locks the whole family out of their flat (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 237). Scene Two reveals that Racheal's mother Christine Keats abandoned the family fourteen months ago and that her grandfather Gordon Keats is dying in hospital (see 256-260). In the fourth scene Racheal visits her blind grandmother Anne Dickinson in the nursing home and asks her for help. She wants to borrow money in order to pay the deposit for her new flat. They start to argue about it and Racheal abuses Anne by stuffing chocolate in her mouth. Anne does not recognize Racheal and mistakes her for

her daughter Christine Keats. Racheal does not receive financial support from her grandmother and is left alone with her criminal brother Billy Keats (see 281-290).

In *On the Shore* the family network is disrupted by the death of Christopher Holmes and the move of Alex Holmes to London. Sierz comments that “[f]or each generation of the Holmes family – sixtysomethings Charlie and Ellen, thirtysomethings Peter and Alice, and their teenage children Alex and Christopher – the family is problematic” (*Rewriting the Nation* 167). After his brother’s death Alex does not feel comfortable anymore at home (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 60). In the first scene of Part Three Peter Holmes flirts with the customer Susan Reynolds, when he renovates her house (see 84-87). And Peter’s wife Alice Holmes considers having an affair with John Robinson, the guy who drove the car that killed her son Christopher (see 102-106). Ellen and Charlie’s relationship is troubled due to Charlie’s alcoholism and occasional violent behaviour (see 34-35 & 78-79). Despite their individual problems with the family, all the family members are reunited in the last scene, as they lay the table for the Sunday roast dinner together (see 133). Sierz concludes that “[t]he British family, despite its moments of masculine violence or emotional cowardice, somehow survives the worst. Love might shrink, but most people are decent” (*Rewriting the nation* 168).

In *Motortown*, Danny returns from a tour of duty in Basra and goes to live with his brother Lee, but he does not visit his parents. His brother Lee tells him that their parents saw him on television on *Newsnight*, that they videotaped it and that they were proud of him. He adds that his parents noticed a change in his appearance and behaviour (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 146-147). In Scene Eight of *Motortown* it is suggested that Danny’s behaviour is not only the result of his service in the Iraq war but also of his upbringing in a dysfunctional family. Sierz explains that

Stephens has deliberately not written Danny as a victim of brutality – if he shows how war brutalises men, he also shows how brutal men discover themselves during war. Danny’s deprived background, and his own family, are the cause of his problems. (*Rewriting the nation* 131)

Danny’s alienation from his family is emphasised in Scene Five, when he remarks that he hates his parents, especially his alcoholic father (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 176).

3.5.2 Alienation

Another crucial theme in Stephens' plays is the alienation of the characters from their immediate surroundings. Referring to "alienation", Daemmrich and Daemmrich explain that "[t]he literary theme captures the writers perception of the effect of society on the individual; it also expresses the opposition of authors to oppressive social forces and a depressing cultural climate" (24). In most of Stephens' plays it is the urban environment that is responsible for the perceived alienation. "Perhaps most consistently, he has a sense of the urban landscape as a force that shapes our lives for better or worse," says Lane about Stephens (33). He adds that "the characters that inhabit them [the cities] have troubled relationships with their locations" (Lane 33). As a result, many characters in Stephens' plays repeatedly express the wish to escape from the place they are living in. "I think I'm drawn to stories of flight, to people trying to get out," says Stephens in an interview with Devine (264).

For instance, in the last scene of *Christmas* the protagonist Michael Macgraw shows Billy Lee Russell a black bin bag full of unpaid bills and admits that "[t]here's about seventeen thousand pounds worth of debt in here" (Stephens, *Plays: I* 144). Michael Macgraw's last actions before he closes the pub hint at his unexpressed intention to leave everything behind, as the stage directions reveal:

[Michael] returns with a sports bag full of clothes. He places the sports bag on the bar and rifles through it. Pulls out a passport. He checks the date on the passport and returns it to the bag. He goes over to the till. Empties all of the money from the till. Puts the notes in his wallet and the change in his pocket. (Stephens, *Plays: I* 146)

However, the open ending is ambiguous, as shortly before the lights fall he "*lowers the bag back on to the bar. Unzips his coat again*" (Stephens, *Plays: I* 146). It is not clear whether he is really going to leave or not.

In *Port*, the sense of Racheal's alienation from the world that surrounds her in Stockport is quite strong as well. In the first scene she already tells her mother Christine her wish to abandon the city:

RACHEAL. We could go now. We could just leave. Wouldn't need no bags or nothing. Nothing like that. Just start driving. Go to Grandad's and not come back. Go to country. Go to Disney World Florida. Couldn't we though, Mum? I reckon that'd be a top idea. (Stephens, *Plays: I* 250)

While in the first scene the reasons for Racheal's need to leave remain unclear, she explains them in a conversation with Chris in Scene Three, which takes place approximately four years later.

RACHEAL. Always rainin' here. Always fuckin' leatherin' it.

CHRIS. –

RACHEAL. Fuckin' hate it.

CHRIS. (*laughs briefly*) –

RACHEAL. Don't you, Chris?

CHRIS. (*smiles*) What?

RACHEAL. Don't you hate it here?

CHRIS. (*thinks, sniffs*) S'arright.

RACHEAL. S'fuckin' never. S'fucking cheap. Grotty. Shit buildings. Stinks. (*She belches hugely and then giggles.*)
(Stephens, *Plays: 1* 267)

Sometime later in the conversation Racheal notices that “[a]ll the transport routes come through here. Every single fuckin' type” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 269). She explains to Chris that these transport routes are signs of flight from Stockport:

RACHEAL. Yer got yer A6 for yer cars. Yer got yer viaduct
for yer trains. M62. River fuckin' Mersey. Flight paths down
Ringway. 'S mental. Planes have still got the wheels down
when they come over here. Every cunt's trying to get out.
(Stephens, *Plays: 1* 270)

In Scene Seven, which takes place ten years after Scene Three, Racheal meets her old friend Danny in the beer garden of a pub. She tells him that she has just returned from a ten-months-stay in York. Racheal managed to fulfill her dream of living somewhere else, but not permanently (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 314-315). Hence, in the last scene she reiterates her wish to leave in a dialogue with her brother Billy:

RACHEAL. Billy, I think I might go away again.

BILLY. Right.

RACHEAL. But for a long time this time. Not just a few
months. For years. And maybe, go, maybe even leave the
country even. Go and live somewhere else completely.
(Stephens, *Plays: 1* 336)

Just before the final blackout, there are signs of hope that her dreams might be fulfilled in the future, as Racheal watches the sunrise over the hills. However, similar to *Christmas*, the open ending does not clarify whether Racheal's longing for improvement in her life will be successful (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 338). As regards *Port* and *Christmas*, Lane concludes that “Stockport and inner-city London become

constrictive environments threatening to choke the inhabitants' attempts to improve their lives" (33).

Similar to Racheal Keats in *Port*, Billy Lee Russell in *Hérons* has troubled relationships with the east London area he is living in. Billy names several reasons for his estrangement. Firstly, he is shocked about the violence of older pupils in his school and the rude behaviour of teachers: "I've seen teachers talk to kids as though they are worthless scabby shit. Bully them. Humiliate them" (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 178). Secondly, he is angry about the way people treat the environment. When Billy gets to know Adele Kent, a girl from school, he talks with her about the terrible condition of the location:

BILLY. I come down here, Adele Kent, and there is litter,
pissy fucked litter everywhere. And it's kids that have
left it.

ADELE. Billy.

BILLY. Even here. Even the surface of the water. The place
looks like it's fucking ripped up. People don't care. Do they?
Even about trees and that? People just, why do they, just
fucking, the way people treat trees around here is
despicable!

ADELE. What has that got to do with anything?

BILLY. (*concluding*) It's not just me. (178)

Thirdly, Billy is frightened of Berg 'Bergsie' Kempton, who serves a prison sentence due to the murder of the teenager Racheal King. Billy's father Charlie witnessed Berg Kempton and Ross Cooper committing murder and phoned the police. Thus, Billy and Charlie are repeatedly threatened by Scott Cooper, who delivers a message from his brother Ross saying that he wants to stab Charlie. Billy talks with his father about his fear: "Dad, are you scared about what's going to happen when Bergsie gets out? Because I am. I think we should think about going, Dad" (194). Billy substantiates his plans to leave in a dialogue with Adele: "Going away. We're going away. Me and our dad. We're going to leave here and go down and live by the sea" (196). Subsequently, he tells her about his modest ambitions:

BILLY. I want to go out to the sea. Into the ocean. With my
dad. I want to see dolphins swimming, real dolphins
swimming in the ocean. And I want to be able to ride on a
roller coaster. A big fucking proper one. In like Disneyland
and shit. I'd fucking love that. (201)

When Scott Cooper threatens Billy again and reminds him of Ross and Berg's plans to take revenge, Billy tells him that he and his father might move to "Southend" (205) or

“Portsmouth. Or Brighton, or Cornwall or somewhere, anywhere, somewhere by the sea. Somewhere where there’s water” (206). The end of *Hérons* shows similarities with *Port*. After the defeat of Scott in the climax of the play, Billy Russell reiterates his dreams of leaving as well:

BILLY. Dad, I’ve decided. I’m going. When the summer comes. When school’s finished. I’m leaving. I just, I just am.
 CHARLIE. I see.
 BILLY. I can’t stay here for ever, Dad. It’s just too difficult.
 CHARLIE. I know.
 BILLY. You can come with me if you want to but I’m definitely, I’m just definitely just going.
 CHARLIE. Right.
 BILLY. I’m going to go to Southend, I think. Or Brighton. Or Portsmouth. Somewhere where there’s sea. (232)

Similar to the ending of *Christmas* and *Port*, the open ending of *Hérons* does not reveal whether or not Billy is really going away. In the last line of the play Charlie Russell just says, “Yeah, let’s go home” (232). Kritzer concludes that “[t]ranquility returns in the final scene, but with it a painful sense that Billy’s coming of age has turned tragic” (113).

Apart from *Port*, in *On the Shore* the members of the family Holmes want to escape from Stockport as well. In Scene Four of Part One fifteen-year-old Christopher and eighteen-year-old Alex Holmes meet at the derelict Bluebell Hotel. Christopher says to Alex, “I think you’re too good for that place, you know?” (Stephens, *On the Shore* 14), and adds that he “could leave work. Leave home. Leave Stockport. See the world” (15). When Alex meets his friend Paul Danziger in the Bluebell Hotel he invites Alex and his girlfriend Sarah Black to live with him in London. Paul lists several reasons why he left Stockport behind and moved to London.

PAUL. It’s a bit mental being back, you know?
 ALEX. How’s it mental?
 PAUL. It’s like going back in time. All them folk. Still here with their little jobs and their little houses and their little mortgages and their little children and all that. Makes my head feel like it’s bursting. (54)

In Scene Three of Part Two Alex Holmes tells his mother that he wants to move to London, because he feels estranged from his home and the city he is living in with his family: “I don’t know if I can bear it at the moment. Round here. I feel sick all of the

time” (60). His mother Alice Holmes reacts angrily and confesses that she wants to leave too.

ALICE. I think I'd like to go and live somewhere else. Too. But not
London. God! I'd go on my own. Go and live somewhere in
the sun. Go to Spain. Pick oranges. What would you say if
I did that? (Stephens, *On the Shore* 62)

Despite his mother's objections Alex leaves for London on a train together with Sarah (see 80-83). Similar to Racheal's stay in York in *Port*, Alex and Sarah's escape to London is not permanent. They return from London to Stockport after a few months (see 107-111). However, it's not only the teenagers that want to leave Stockport. In Scene Three of Part One Ellen informs her husband Charlie Holmes about her idea to leave Stockport as well: “We could buy something. Do something unusual. Speak to Alice about the house. Sell up and go somewhere we've never been to before” (12).

The theme of alienation does not only dominate the plays selected for this paper, but also many more works by Stephens: “Alex Holmes' itch to leave Stockport is as pronounced as Cissy's in *Punk Rock* and Sally's desire to get out of Brighton in *Marine Parade*” (Stephens, Introduction, *Plays*: 3 xvii).

Pertaining to *Motortown* and *Pornography*, Lane states that “[t]he urban environment is a malevolent force provoking deeply unsettling reactions” (33). In *Motortown*, the arms dealer Tom notices that “[t]he factory's almost completely closed up now” and that “[t]he whole of Chequers is all completely burnt out. All of it. The whole fucking street” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 162). In the first scene the protagonist Danny talks with his brother about the army base where he was trained: “I wish you'd come. To Pirbright. To see me. It was an amazing place. Better than anywhere round here by miles” (156). And in the last scene, which mirrors the first scene, Danny remarks that “[i]t's horrible round here. They should set it on fire” (203). These are all signs for Danny's alienation from his home country after his return from Iraq. For instance, in Scene Seven Danny remarks, “I come back home. It's a completely foreign country” (200). Sierz explains that “[a]s a working-class lad, Danny is a study in furious rage: often inarticulate and alienated, he is boiling with resentment, at a multicultural society that he has fought for, but that doesn't appreciate him” (*Rewriting the nation* 130). Danny is filled with hate for all sorts of people. For instance, when he kidnaps Jade in Scene Six he tells her: “I hate students” and “I fucking hate sixth-formers. All fucking iPods and crappy T-shirts with band names on” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 181). While Danny tortures her, he goes on to

say, “Course you come back. Go up London. Fucking burkas all over the place” (186). After the murder of Jade, Danny fully reveals his racist and misogynist thoughts about British society in an extended speech:

DANNY. They’re French exchange students. They’re Australians in London wrecked on cheap wine and shite beer. They’re Hasidic Jews in swimming pools. They’re lesbian cripples with bus passes. They’re niggers, with their faces all full of their mama’s jerk chicken [...]. They’re little dickless Paki boys training to be doctors or to run corner shops and smuggling explosives in rucksacks onto the top decks of buses. It’s not funny, Jade. I’m not joking. I fought a war for this lot. (188)

In the following scene, Danny tells the couple Justin and Helen what he thinks about the anti-war march by saying that he wanted to go there with his SA80 weapon and kill the protesters (see 200).

In *Pornography*, the theme of alienation is mainly visible in Scene Four, the monologue of the suicide bomber. Stephens explains the function of the theme in an interview with Innes:

I was haunted by what the bombers were going through on that final day. It struck me that at the heart of their action was an alienation from the people they were going to kill and from themselves. This seemed to be symptomatic of a consumerist culture, which objectifies everyone and everything. (qtd. in Innes 457)

The dehumanisation and objectification of people is also present in *Motortown*, as Danny remarks about his victim Jade that “[s]he was like a doll. She was a cute little black thing” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 205).

3.5.3 Ecology, environment and nature

“Another major theme is ecology and the environment, [...], and in the consistency of its expression represents a direct authorial message,” says Innes (462). Indeed, concerns about the environment as well as allusions to the wonder of the nature, the universe and the stars occur in many of Stephens’ plays.

While *Bluebird* and *Christmas* do not refer to this theme, Innes claims that “*Hérons* [...] has a strong environmental focus – the first statement of a theme that will surface frequently in Stephens’s work” (449). The protagonist of *Hérons*, Billy Lee Russell, is concerned about the environment around the canal in east London. He enjoys the quiet

spot of nature at the lock of the canal and goes fishing there. In contrast, Scott and his gang members Aaron and Darren inhabit an anti-nature position. Innes explains that “[t]he world of the gangs is one of debris and litter, fouling the nature that they despise, in an extended hate-sequence aimed at Billy” (449). In this sequence Darren and Aaron reveal their resentment towards the environment and call Billy a “Nature boy” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 204).

DARREN. Nature!

AARON. You’re thick!

DARREN. Nature is thick!

AARON. I rape it. I piss on it. And I laugh at it. (*Beat.*) Billy. (203)

In the last scene, after the violent climax of the play, Adele Kent asks Billy whether he killed Scott Cooper and what he is going to do if the police search for him. In the middle of the conversation Billy starts to philosophise about nature and the universe:

BILLY. I was thinking about Ross, Adele, and Bergsie. I think I know why they were so scared. I think that they realised what I realised when I saw Scott like that. The way that things are wonderful. The way that colours work. The sound of things and the way they smell, Adele. But they couldn’t handle it. So they got frightened. And I started to figure out how everything joins up, Adele.

ADELE. What?

BILLY. The blue sky. And the flowers in the towpath.

ADELE. What?

BILLY. Everything is just joined up...(228-229)

Rebellato remarks that *Hérons* and *Port* express “a childlike sense of wonder at the world” (“New Theatre Writing: Simon Stephens” 174). In fact, *Port* continues the theme of environment and nature which was introduced in *Hérons*. For instance, in Scene One of *Port* the protagonist Racheal Keats vividly recalls finding a dead sparrow once (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 241). And in Scene Three she explains to her friend Chris which parts of nature she prefers:

RACHEAL. Yer know what else I love?

CHRIS. What?

RACHEAL. All mountains.

CHRIS. Yer what?

RACHEAL. Our mum went on about them all the time and all. Yer should’ve seen ‘em this morning. Such a clear day. Yer could see ‘em all ready detailed. We should go. Shouldn’t we? Me and you. Tek Luce and Danny. (269)

Similar to *Hérons*, the nature lover Racheal has a counterpart who dislikes nature. For instance, in Scene Six, when Racheal stays in a hotel with her husband Kevin Brake the night before the millennium, Racheal admires the solitude of the countryside:

RACHEAL. It's a beautiful part of the world this.
He [Kevin] goes over to the window and stares out.
 I love it, all the hills. The smell of the air. You go for walks
 round here and you don't see anybody for miles. Only
 sheep. (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 303)

Her husband Kevin takes the contrary position:

KEVIN (*honestly, as though gently scared*) I hate the
 countryside. It's too quiet.
 RACHEAL. I like that.
 KEVIN (*the same*). At night-time. You open your window.
 You can't hear nothing. Scares the shit out of us.
 RACHEAL. You can hear foxes. Owls and that. (305)

Finally in the last scene of the play, it is not Racheal that expresses her awe of nature, but her younger brother Billy. In the middle of the conversation he suddenly breaks into a philosophical pondering about the world, the universe and the position of the humans in it:

BILLY. Do you know how old the world is?
 RACHEAL. No.
 BILLY. Five hundred million years old. They reckon.
 RACHEAL. How do you know that?
 BILLY. I read it. In nick. And scientists are starting to think
 that it might be even older.
 RACHEAL. Are they?
 BILLY. Do you know how long human beings have been around on it?
 RACHEAL. How long?
 BILLY. Fifty thousand years. It's fucking nothing. We don't
 matter a jot. Not one jot. (335)

The characters in *On the Shore* express similar concerns about their position in the universe. For instance, in Scene One of Part One Sarah Black spots the moon and her boyfriend Alex Holmes tells her that it is 238,000 miles away (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 5). Paul Danziger remarks that there are "[s]ix billion people in this world" and that "[o]ne don't mean so much. Out of six billion. When you think of it like that" (53). And Christopher Holmes says that he "read somewhere that the earth is going to be sucked into the sun in five thousand years time. That's not that long when you think about it, is it?" (36). At the end of the play Charlie Holmes expresses his longing to

leave the town and go to the countryside with Ellen, to the mountains or the forests or Nottingham, Ellen's hometown (see 123).

In *Motortown* Stephens states his concerns about ecology through the character Paul, who not only converts Danny's gun, but also shares his philosophical views on the current state of the nation. Paul's philosophical musings about the planet and the ecological fallout are perhaps the most critical manifestation of the theme in Stephens' work.

PAUL. This whole planet is in a terrible state, Danny, you know? The ecological fallout of the decisions that you have made [...] is catastrophic.
And it's the same for all of us. Times sixty million. Times six billion. And nobody says anything about it. There are too many people. There is not enough water. There is not enough oxygen. And nobody admits it. And so now we're gonna consume China. And then we're gonna consume India and then we're gonna consume Africa and we'll carry on consuming. We'll continue to eat it all up [...] until the only thing we've got left to fucking eat, Danny, [...] is each other. (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 174)

Similar to *Hérons*, *Port* and *On the Shore* the characters in *Wastwater* give short comments on their environment in the middle of conversations. When a plane, which according to the stage directions looks "*odd against the beauty of the garden*", passes Harry and Frieda overhead, Harry remarks that "[i]t's a completely clear sky now" (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 5). A little later in the conversation he notices that "[t]he moon's out" (6). Harry also demonstrates his concerns about the decay of nature, as he states that "[a] hundred years ago there were twenty million elm trees in England. Now it's in the hundreds" (12). In contrast, he does not care about the construction of a third runway at Heathrow Airport, which would destroy the whole town and the surrounding environment, where his foster mother Frieda is living (see 5). Similar to Billy Keats in *Port* Harry also shares his philosophical musings about the age of the world in an extended speech. Referring to his point of view that we are living in the middle of an ice age, Harry concludes:

HARRY. We've maybe a millennium or two of thawing left. Probably much less. The freezing can start very suddenly. We're living through an infinitesimal moment in the history of the planet. It will end. I rather like the pathos of that. (13)

In the other two scenes of *Wastwater* one can detect short remarks about nature and the environment as well. For instance, in Scene Two, when Lisa looks out of her hotel room window, she asks Mark in the middle of a conversation: “Have you ever seen a sky that colour before?” (39). In Scene Three Sian interrogates Jonathan, who recalls his experiences in nature. Like Scott’s gang in *Hérons* and Kevin Brake in *Port*, Sian has an oppositional opinion about that topic.

SIAN. All your memories are memories of nature, did you notice that?
 I think that’s true for a lot of people.
 We remember nature.
 I hate it. Nature. It scares the living Christ out of me. I hate the darkness. I hate the quiet. (59-60)

Part of the larger theme of ecology, environment and nature is the star motif. Daemmrich and Daemmrich explain that “[t]he primary function of the star motif [...] has been to indicate natural order, dependable regularity, and contiguity” and that “[t]he stars’ light has frequently signified enlightenment, hope, comfort, certainty, and heavenly guidance” (235).

It can be observed that Stephens’ plays frequently allude to the stars. For instance, towards the end of *On the Shore*, in Scene Nine of Part Four, Peter Holmes asks his wife Alice Holmes:

PETER. You know how many stars there are up there? In the Milky Way?
 ALICE. No.
 PETER. Two hundred billion. Sometimes. Night like this.
 (Stephens, *On the Shore* 132)

Likewise, in the first scene of *Wastwater* the stage directions reveal that Harry and Frieda “count the stars for a bit” (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 16). And it seems to be no coincidence that “Dalisay Bituin”, the name of the child that is sold to Jonathan in the third scene of the play, means “the pure stars” (63). Like *On the Shore* and *Wastwater*, *Pornography* contains references to the stars as well. In the first scene, Scene Seven, the unnamed character says: “I think in the shops everybody’s got the concert on. It’s that man I like. He’s singing the song about looking at the stars. Look at the stars. See how they shine for you” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 216). And in the following scene this reference to the stars is repeated by another unnamed character by saying “I go downstairs and my sister’s watching Coldplay. They’re singing that song about

looking at the stars” (226). Referring to the star motif in *Pornography*, Innes explains that

the stars are a symbol of hope, however ironic, as in the Coldplay ‘song [‘Yellow’] about looking at the stars [...] see how they shine for you’ from the first Live Earth [sic!] concert that immediately precedes the bombing in *Pornography*. Global warming and social breakdown are united, but this apocalypse is also linked with the stars: the wonder of the natural universe, which is beyond the destructive reach of mankind. (462)

3.5.4 Loneliness

In her short biography of Simon Stephens Blachnio says that in his plays the author explores “the unsurpassable loneliness of individuals” (par.1). Indeed, many of his plays deal with characters that are haunted by the “loneliness of existence” (Sierz, Introduction, *Methuen drama book* xvii), in particular in the anonymity of large cities such as London. Daemmrich and Daemmrich explain that “[l]oneliness is almost exclusively represented in binary opposition to sociability; that is, as the antithesis of active social intercourse” (167).

Stephens’ first play *Bluebird* seems to introduce this theme in his dramatic work. The protagonist Jimmy Macneill confesses to his ex-wife that he has been living alone in his cab for the past four and a half years.

CLARE. Does anybody else know that you do this?
 JIMMY. No.
 CLARE. Did you never think of telling anybody where you are?
 JIMMY. No.
 CLARE. Somebody might miss you, James.
 JIMMY. They wouldn’t.
 CLARE. They might.
 JIMMY. Did anybody phone for me? Try to get in touch with me? Write to me? Wonder where the fuck I was?
 CLARE. No.
 JIMMY. I told you. Nobody misses me, Clare. There’s nobody to miss me. (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 51)

Jimmy dehumanises and objectifies his passengers by calling them “fares” (11). He does not acknowledge the real people but only the money they pay for their rides. Similarly, at the end of the play it is revealed that Jimmy is dehumanised by his employer as well, emphasising once again Jimmy’s loneliness:

CLARE. Jimmy, what will I do if I decide I want to see you

again? How will I get in touch with you?
 JIMMY. Here. Take my card. This is the number of the
 company I work for. If you ever need a taxi ask for driver 42.
 CLARE. Can't I ask for you by name?
 JIMMY. I don't think they know my name. (72)

Similar situations of loneliness are also found in *Christmas*, *Port*, *Motortown* and *Wastwater*. *Christmas* is dominated by the loneliness of the four men in the pub. All of them suffered a loss – Michael Macgraw is separated from his wife and son, Billy Lee Russell learns about how his father died, and Giuseppe Rossi and Charlie Anderson both lost their wives. In *Port* Racheal and her brother Billy are left alone by their mother Christine Keats (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 256-257). In *Motortown* Danny dreams of having a family with Marley, who he dated in the sixth form but has not seen for years (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 174-175). However, as Innes remarks, “Danny’s desire for kids and a family car with tea in the morning [...] is literally a fantasy” (453). And in *Wastwater* the foster child Harry leaves his overprotective foster mother Frieda behind (see Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 19).

3.6 Sound and music

As far as the use of sound and music in Stephens’ plays is concerned, Innes states that “music has been central to his plays, as well as informing the titles of *Country Music* (Royal Court, 2004) and *Punk Rock*” (446). In fact, in almost every play the characters either listen to music or refer to it in their speeches. Music is one of the most important elements in Stephens’ dramatic aesthetic, as it often comments on the dramatic action, conveys the mood of the characters or emphasizes the atmosphere of the play.

Bluebird is a good example for the function of music in Stephens’ plays. After the introduction of the taxi driver Jimmy Macneill in the first scene the stage direction informs us about the use of sound and music in the play:

Urban jungle-jazz music plays loud. Mixed in with sounds of a taxi-firm radio. After a short while the music fades. It should return in between each scene to provide a rhythm to the night and the driving. (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 3)

There are several more references to music in the play. In the sixth scene Jimmy sings “the Leonard Bernstein tune” and tells his passenger Angela that his “favourite song is a song by Otis Redding called ‘My Girl’” (16). In scene sixteen Jimmy tells his ex-wife

Clare that he owns an “Otis Redding cassette” (50). And the stage direction at the end of the last scene, when Jimmy sits alone in his cab, reads: “*‘My Girl’ starts once more. [...] Montage of taxi radio instructions with the Otis Redding and the jungle music rises, then, with the headlights, fades*” (72). Of course, the song is closely related to Jimmy’s backstory: He has a guilty conscience because he overran his daughter girl with his car five years ago, when he was sacked and returned drunk from work.

Similar to *Bluebird*, the music in *Christmas* comments on the subject of the play. The stage direction at the beginning of Scene One says:

Very dim light on the interior of a pub. Loud music playing and the sound of a live band, a three-piece of drums, double bass and piano, leading a rousing, full-pub chorus of Frank Sinatra’s ‘That’s Life’. Sound of laughter, shouting, singing, sparring. Yet the pub is empty. The intended effect is ghostly. (Stephens, Plays: 1 77)

Apart from this song there are several more Sinatra songs in the play: “*‘Luck Be A Lady’*” (78), “*‘You Make Me Feel So Young’*” (90) and “*‘Drinking Again’*” (100). In Scene Four Charlie Anderson wants to “[d]rink some whiskey. Maybe listen to some of the early recordings of Frank Sinatra” (117). As it is generally known that Sinatra was not averse to boozing, the songs emphasise the melancholy of the characters in the pub and their habit of drinking heavily in order to forget their problems. Other references to music occur in Scene Three and Scene Four. As the play takes place a week before Christmas, Giuseppe Rossi sings “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas” (99). When former cellist Charlie Anderson is asked about the best piece of classical music for the cello that he has ever played, he answers: “The second movement of Beethoven’s cello sonata in D major” (114). Finally, at the end of the last scene the first Sinatra song is repeated, as the stage direction reveals: “*Lights dim and the version of ‘That’s Life’ that we heard at the beginning plays again. This time we hear the end of the song and the singer thank his audience and wish them goodnight*” (147). The positioning of the song at the end of the play might indicate that the bartender Michael Macgraw will carry on with his pub despite the financial troubles he faces.

In *Hérons* sound and music also play an influential role. The first scene is preceded by a long stage direction indicating the sound and music of the scene:

‘Can I Pass? – instrumental’ by the Rebel plays gently. After a while, and as though from some distance, we hear the sound of water. As the sound increases in volume it should become clear that it is the sound of water running through the gate of a lock. The volume of the sound increases with the volume of the

water, drowning the music, and growing in time to an almost deafening level.
(Stephens, *Plays: 1* 155)

The song is repeated as a musical leitmotif at crucial points in the narrative. The protagonist Billy Lee Russell hums the melody of the song before his first meeting with the bully Scott Cooper (see 158). Later it is played after the first climax of a scene, in which Billy is bullied by the gang and threatened by Scott (see 189), and after another violent climax of a scene, in which Scott forces a bottle up Billy's rectum (see 209). Towards the end of the play the stage direction indicates "*Perhaps music*" (221) before the climactic confrontation of the play between Billy and Scott's gang. In the final scene the stage direction says that "'*Can I Pass?*' by the Rebel plays to close" (232). Similar to *Christmas*, the song "opens and closes the play, [...] with lyrics that clearly relate to the situation of the adolescent protagonist, who has to navigate the world of urban gangs" (Innes 447-448).

In *Port* and *On the Shore* Stephens seems to change his approach as regards the use of sound and music. *Port* does not contain any references to a piece of music and *On the Shore* alludes to only one. When Charlie Holmes tells his grandson Alex Holmes how he met his to-be wife Ellen, while he was doing his National Service in Dresden, he cites the lyrics of a famous Elvis Presley song:

CHARLIE. 'Well since my baby left me
I found a new place to dwell,
It's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel.' (Stephens, *On the Shore* 122)

In contrast to the two Stockport plays, Stephens employs musical references more widely again in *Motortown*. In Scene Three the arms dealer Tom sells a gun to Danny and tells him about the hip hop artists "50 Cent", "Outcast", "Snoop Dog" [sic!], "Black Eyed Peas" and "Jay-Z, featuring Beyoncé" (Stephens, *Plays: 2* 163) he has on his iPod: "I've got 6,324 songs on mine. Mostly hip hop. I got some Rod Stewart, for me mum" (164). In Scene Six, after the kidnapping of Jade, Danny forces her to sing a song by "Britney Spears", namely "that one with the school uniform on, that one 'Baby One More Time'" (181). Danny applies a literal reading to the chorus of the song ('Hit me baby one more time') and nearly hits Jade. The choice of the song gives us an early hint about what is going to happen to Jade. In Scene Seven when Danny talks with Justin and Helen about the anti-war march up Hyde Park, he refers to "Damon Albarn", the singer of Blur and Gorillaz, as a "fucking pikey cunt" (200).

Pornography also contains references to popular music. In Scene Seven the unnamed character refers to the lyrics of Coldplay's song 'Yellow': "I think in the shops everybody's got the concert on. It's that man I like. He's singing the song about looking at the stars. Look at the stars. See how they shine for you" (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 216). In Scene Six the reference to this particular Coldplay song recurs (see 226), and Sierz adds that between the scenes of the play "coherence is achieved", among other things, "through [...] quotations from Coldplay's 'Yellow'" (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvii).

Like *Christmas* and *Pornography*, *Wastwater* also contains several references to popular and classical music. In Scene One the first stage direction of the play says that Harry "sings the opening of 'Habanera' from Bizet's *Carmen* to himself" (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 3). The aria provides a subtle connection to Scene Two, in which Lisa "sings the 'Habanera' from Bizet's *Carmen*" (27). Moore and Varchaver state that "[t]he most famous of all [habaneras] is the provocative aria *L'amour est un oiseau rebelle* [Love is a rebellious bird] that Georges Bizet transcribed from a work by Yradier and inserted in his opera *Carmen*" (222). In this aria the protagonist Carmen expresses her attitude of indifference towards admirers and lovers – a situation that resembles the action in the first two scenes of the play. In Scene One Harry decides to leave his overprotective foster mother Frieda despite her loving care (see Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 3-6). In Scene Two Lisa tells Mark that she craves for sadomasochistic sex with him and that she has never had sex with her husband Andrew (see 34-38). Furthermore, Scene Three also contains a reference to music: when Sian asks Jonathan about his favourite piece of music, he answers, "'Music for the End of Time' by Messiaen" (54). Other references to music in the play include the musician "Prince" (39) as well as the band "Arctic Monkeys" (52).

3.7 Intertextual references

Stephens' plays sometimes contain intertextual references to poems, novels or other pieces of literature. For instance, *Bluebird* contains intertextual references to a novel and to a poem. When Jimmy talks with Clare about his belongings in the car he mentions that he owns "a dog-eared edition of *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad that Alice bought me one year for my birthday" (Stephens, *Plays*: 1 50). The title of the book

alludes to the protagonist of the play, Jimmy Macneill. The fifth passenger in Jimmy's cab, a fifteen-year-old girl, recites the first lines of the poem *The Tower* by Irish poet William Butler Yeats (see 19).

Similar to *Bluebird*, Stephens' recent play *Wastwater* also contains a reference to a nineteenth century novel. At the end of Scene Two the police officer Lisa recites a famous quote by Pip from Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*:

MARK. I'm not crying. What gives you the idea that I'm crying? Why would I be crying?

LISA. 'Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth overlying our hard hearts.' (Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 41)

In Scene Three, when Jonathan asks Sian about the current whereabouts of the girl he is going to buy, she answers "Heathrow. Terminal 5" (51). This might be interpreted as a subtle intertextual reference by Stephens to one of his own plays, the monologue *T5*, which was published in combination with *Wastwater* (see *Wastwater and T5* 65) and was performed in Germany under the name of *Terminal 5* (see Appendix).

Apart from novels, there are also references to poetry in Stephens' plays. In *On the Shore* Susan Reynolds recites two lines of a sonnet by John Keats, while she talks to Peter Holmes, who is restoring her house (see Stephens, *On the Shore* 111-112). Parts of the first line Susan quotes refer to the title of the whole play.

Some of his plays also utilise other texts as their model. According to Innes *Motortown* drew upon a prominent source of inspiration for the creation of the protagonist as well as the composition of the action:

Although its epigraph is taken from Heiner Müller's *Mauser* (1975, a *Lehrstück* about revolutionary violence and terror during the civil-war period in Russia), this play was influenced by Georg Büchner's fragmented nineteenth-century classic [*Woyzeck*] about a cruel vicious military system, and its effect on a soldier who kills his women. And indeed it echoes the major elements in *Woyzeck*'s action. (Innes 452)

Other influences of *Motortown* include films such as "Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993)" (Innes 452) as well as "Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and any number of road movies" (Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation* 131). Apart from *Motortown*, the structure of *Pornography* was also substantially inspired by another text. The seven scenes of the play correspond to the seven ages of man, which are the subject of a famous speech by a character in William Shakespeare's pastoral comedy *As You Like It* (see Stephens, *Plays*: 2 xviii).

3.8 Autobiographical references

It can be observed that Stephens frequently uses details from his personal biography as well as elements from his lived experience in his plays. For instance, referring to his first plays in the collection *Plays: 1*, Stephens explains that

[i]n writing them [he] tried to make sense of what it is to be raised in Stockport and to live in London. Or to be the son of an alcoholic who died before he was sixty. Or the father of two sons. Or to be a schoolteacher or a barman, a DJ in the suburbs of Edinburgh, or a husband. (Introduction, *Plays: 1* xii)

London night-life seems to exert a particular influence on his writing, as the first two plays *Bluebird* and *Christmas* are based on his working experience in a bar and his leisure time in a pub. As regards *Bluebird* Stephens remarks that “[t]he characters that populate the play are nearly all based on people I’ve served drinks to at one time or another”, and he adds that the second play *Christmas* emerged “out of drinking and playing pool in the pub next door to our house” (Introduction, *Plays: 1* ix).

While he was writing *Christmas* Stephens worked as a schoolteacher in the Eastbrook School in Dagenham (see “Simon Stephens, Esq”; Introduction, *Plays: 1* ix-x). This working experience not only immediately inspired the writing of the 2001 play *Hérons* (see Stephens, Introduction, *Plays: 1* x), but is also represented in the 2005 play *Motortown*. In the seventh scene the protagonist Danny informs the couple Justin and Helen that he is “from Dagenham” (Stephens, *Plays: 2* 191). And in the fourth scene he talks to Jade about her school education and tells her that he “used to go Eastbrook. In Dagenham” (173).

The second scene of *Port* and the fourth scene of Part Three in *On the Shore* are both set in Stepping Hill Hospital in Stockport (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 251; Stephens, *On the Shore* 91). In the introduction to *Plays: 3* Stephens explains that “Stepping Hill Hospital” is “the hospital in Stockport where my dad died” (xvi). Stephens comments on the fact that this setting is not only used in the two plays described above, but also in two other plays:

If it is true, as I think it is, that writers write out of some kind of attempt to heal irreparable wounds, perhaps I should be less surprised by the spectre of that hospital and the spectre of my dad’s presence in these plays [*On the Shore*, *Harper Regan*, *Punk Rock*] than I was re-reading them this morning. (Introduction, *Plays: 3* xvi)

While in *Port* Racheal's grandfather Gordon Keats dies in the hospital, in *On the Shore* Alex and Christopher's grandfather Charlie Holmes leaves it after a few tests and returns home (see Stephens, *Plays: I* 260; Stephens, *On the Shore* 119).

3.9 Titles

Stephens often uses catchy titles for his plays, which sometimes carry a metaphorical meaning as regards the subject or the characters of the play. Stephens named his first play *Bluebird* after a car model. The character Clare, Jimmy's ex-wife, mentions once in the play that the protagonist is "[l]iving in a Nissan bloody Bluebird for God's sake" (Stephens, *Plays: I* 53). However, the title also refers to the field of ornithology. A bluebird is a migratory bird, which might stand as a metaphor for the fact that Jimmy is homeless and roams the city in his taxicab. Moreover, the colour 'blue' not only appears in the title *Bluebird*, but also dominates the overall colour scheme, as expressed by several references to this colour: the address "Bluebird Towers" (14 & 54), a tattoo consisting of "five blue dots" (38), the "very blue" (18) eyes of the passenger Angela, the "sick cold blue" (25) skin of a dead person, the "still blue" (35) of a boy's eyes, the "blueness" (43) of smoke as well as the stage directions "[l]ights fall, save for a wash of deep blue" (47) and "[l]ights fall, then rise again to the light blue, quiet wash" (67). Besides, Huber, Rubik and Novak point to the "metaphorical status of colour in his plays" (12). Hence, the colour 'blue' might also allude to Jimmy's emotional condition, as he 'feels blue' due to the death of his daughter Alice.

The titles of *Christmas*, *Port* and *Motortown* refer to the temporal and local setting of the plays. *Christmas* takes place a week before Christmas. Besides, the father of the character Billy Lee Russell died on Christmas Eve (see Stephens, *Plays: I* 85). The title *Port* is an abbreviation of 'Stockport' and refers to the location of the play. Beyond that, it might also carry a metaphorical meaning in relation to Racheal's intention to leave the town: a port is a place where ships arrive and leave. *Motortown* alludes to the setting in east London as well as to war, one of the main themes of the play. As Innes puts it, "Motortown is of course Dagenham, the centre of the British autoindustry, which ties in with the war-for-oil aspect in Iraq" (452).

The title *On the Shore* refers to the beginning of a line in a poem by John Keats. In Scene Three of Part Four the character Susan Reynolds quotes two lines of the sonnet in a conversation with Peter Holmes:

SUSAN. That's rather extraordinary to me.

Pause.

'On the shore of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.'

PETER. What's that?

SUSAN. Sorry, it's just a. It's a poem. A sonnet. By John Keats. (*Beat. He looks at her.*) It's one of my favourites. Here. Let me. Is a cheque all right? (Stephens, *On the Shore* 111-112)

The second line in the quotation of the sonnet alludes to the transience of love, one of the main themes of the play.

Similar to *Bluebird*, Stephens takes the title for *Hérons* from the field of ornithology. When Charlie Russell meets his son Billy Lee at the canal, he tells him that "[o]ne time. I come down here. There was a heron. Perched. Just resting. You know up by Goresbrook House?" (Stephens, *Plays: I* 164). And he admits that "[i]t was one of the most breathtaking sights that I ever saw" (165). However, the heron not only stands for natural beauty, but also for danger. Innes notes that "the pastime of fourteen-year-old Billy and his father, Charlie, is fishing in the canal, and the herons are predatory competitors" (448). Therefore Charlie bought a gun in order to "shoot the herons that were eating my fish and also for protection from robbers" (Stephens, *Plays: I* 165). On a metaphorical level the heron alludes to Billy and Charlie's situation, as the violent bully Scott and his gang members disturb the secluded spot of nature around the canal and endanger their lives. Sierz states that "the vision of a heron is a potent symbol of the desire to fly from a place which radiates danger" (*Rewriting the nation* 232). The open ending of *Hérons* suggests that this desire might not be fulfilled, although Billy makes his intentions to leave clear. Innes confirms that "[f]or Stephens the title is not a reference to Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* or Chekhov's *The Seagull* but 'a metaphor for an impossible escape, but there's a kind of latent savagery to it as well'" (448).

The title *Pornography* refers to the objectification and dehumanisation of people. Sierz states that "the central transgression in the play is a suicide bombing. Stephens suggests that this kind of action is only possible if the terrorist is able to objectify, to dehumanise, his victims" and adds that "Stephens equates this psychological manoeuvre

with the objectification of women by pornographers” (Introduction, *The Methuen drama book* xvi). In Stephens’ own words:

I was haunted by what the bombers were going through on that final day. It struck me that at the heart of their action was an alienation from the people they were going to kill and from themselves. This seemed to be symptomatic of a consumerist culture, which objectifies everyone and everything. And objectification also sits under the production and consumption of pornography. I think we’re living in pornographic times. (qtd. in Innes 457)

Stephens’ recent play *Wastwater* refers to a lake in the Lake District in northwestern Britain. In Scene Two Lisa mentions it in a conversation with Mark during their meeting in a hotel:

LISA. Where does her mother live?

MARK. Outside Lancaster.

LISA. Near the Lake District.

MARK. That’s right.

LISA. We used to go camping on Wastwater, when I was a little girl. It’s the deepest lake in the country. It’s surrounded by scree and mountains which mean it’s never completely out of the shadow. It’s terribly still. My dad told me that the stillness was a bit of a lie. ‘It looks still, Lisa, but you should see how many bodies are hidden under there.’

(Stephens, *Wastwater and T5* 33)

The title is not only a reference to a specific location, but also seems to allude to the psychological condition of the characters and the spiritual and moral abyss they reveal over the course of the play. It might also stand as a symbol for the proverb ‘still waters run deep’, as expressed by Lisa’s father’s words above. There is stillness on the surface of the lake, but danger lurks beneath.

4. Stephens' position in contemporary British drama

Defining and categorising Simon Stephens' dramatic work and style of writing is a difficult task. His work shows influences of naturalism, social realism and in-*yer-face* theatre, which dominated British writing for the theatre when he started his professional career in the late 1990s. Furthermore, Simon Stephens is usually characterised as being part of the 'new writing' scene, a vague term that carries many different meanings. As Sierz puts it in 2007: "While in the mid-1990s an 'in-*yer-face* sensibility' dominated cutting-edge new writing for the theatre, today the scene is much more diverse, diffuse and disorienting" ("British New Writing Today" 5). In the following sections I will specify the different features of Stephens' style of writing and attempt to indicate his position in relation to the influences mentioned above.

4.1 In-*yer-face* theatre

"Born in 1971, Simon Stephens is a contemporary of the 1990s 'in-*yer-face* theatre' playwrights," says Innes (445). The English entry on Simon Stephens in the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* states that "[h]is writing is characterised as part of the in-*yer-face* theatre generation" ("Simon Stephens" par.1). Aleks Sierz defines in-*yer-face* theatre as follows:

In-*yer-face* theatre shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images; unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms. It not only sums up the *zeitgeist*, but criticises it as well. Most in-*yer-face* plays are [...] experiential – they want audiences to feel the extreme emotions that are being shown on stage. In-*yer-face* theatre is experiential theatre. ("What is in-*yer-face* theatre?" par.2)

However, I disagree with this categorisation of Stephens' work as being in-*yer-face* theatre for several reasons. Firstly, when Stephens entered the theatrical scene in 1998 with *Bluebird*, in-*yer-face* theatre was already in decline. It dominated the decade of the 1990s and, according to Sierz, ended with the suicide of Sarah Kane in 1999 (see "'To recommend a cure'" 45). Innes states that Stephens is "highly conscious of beginning his writing career later than this group" (445). Secondly, Stephens is neither listed in Sierz' study *In-*yer-face* theatre: British drama today*, nor is he described as being part of this dominant style of writing of the 1990s on Sierz' *In-*yer-face* theatre* website:

The big three of in-er-face theatre are Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson. Other hot shots include Simon Block, Jez Butterworth, David Eldridge, Nick Grosso, Tracy Letts, Martin McDonagh, Patrick Marber, Phyllis Nagy, Joe Penhall, Rebecca Prichard, Philip Ridley, Judy Upton, Naomi Wallace and Richard Zajdlic. Of course, some writers wrote one or two in-er-face plays and then moved on. (“What is in-er-face theatre?” par.5)

Thirdly, when Stephens started his professional theatrical career some of the most important in-er-face theatre playwrights were completely unknown to him. Innes remarks that, when Simon Stephens “in 2000 was appointed Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court”, he “had never read or seen any plays by either Edward Bond or Sarah Kane: two of the iconic Royal Court playwrights” (446). Fourthly, it is true that Stephens grew up in the in-er-face theatre culture and that his style of writing shares some aspects with in-er-face theatre: his language and images used in his plays can be extreme; he often depicts human emotions frankly and questions moral norms openly; and he can be extremely critical of the current state of the nation. However, it can be argued that his style of writing can rather be characterised as post-in-er-face theatre. As Innes puts it:

Today he tends to gloss over his first two plays, staged in Edinburgh during the Fringe Festival, and to mark the beginning of his career with *Bluebird*, because this allows him to categorise himself as part of the post-millennial and post-in-er-face generation of playwrights, whose main output was staged after 2000. (445)

In comparison to Kane’s *Blasted* or Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking*, two of the most notorious in-er-face theatre plays, Stephens’ dramatic style is less blunt and aggressive and more lyrical and poetic. While Sierz notes that Stephens “writes precisely and lyrically about hope, honesty and humour, as well as brutality and despair” (“New Writing A-Z: Stephens, Simon”), Lane adds that “[h]e poeticises an otherwise naturalistic use of language, allowing his characters to speak with passion and verve” (33).

Acts of random violence are comparatively rare in Stephens’ plays. *Bluebird*, Stephens’ first professional play, seems to be reminiscent of in-er-face theatre. It features dubious characters such as drunkards, prostitutes, nymphomaniacs or fascists and uses vulgar language and many swear words, but violence and brutality are not shown explicitly on stage but rather evoked in the speeches of the characters. For instance, the second passenger Robert Greenwood tells the story of his daughter, who was stabbed to death

by a burglar in her flat eight years ago (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 6-8). The fourth passenger Angela Davies admits that she was raped and beaten up by her uncle in Dorset (see 14). And the eighth passenger Andy Green, a bouncer, shares the story of how his colleague killed an aggressive customer (see 34-35). The most violent incidents explicitly depicted on stage probably occur in *Hérons* and in *Motortown*. In *Hérons* Scott Cooper headbutts Billy Lee Russell and forces a bottle up the protagonist's rectum (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 209); in *Motortown* the protagonist Danny brutally tortures and shoots the black teenager Jade (see Stephens, *Plays: 2* 184-188). In Stephens' work, *Motortown* with its vulgar and filthy language and its depiction of violence, murder and insanity may be the closest of all his plays to in-er-face theatre.

4.2 Naturalism and social realism

In the introduction to *Plays: 1* Stephens notes that his plays "could be loosely described as naturalistic" (xii). Theatre critic and playwright Rebellato remarks that "*Hérons* (2001), *Port* (2002), *One Minute* (2003), *Country Music* (2004), and *Harper Regan* (2008) are domestic, somewhat naturalistic dramas depicting the effect on ordinary people of violence, scandal, and loss" ("Stephens, Simon"). Moore and Varchaver define "naturalism" as follows:

A style of theater that attempts to reproduce life wholly integrated with its environment, without mystical or symbolic significance, expressing this not only in the dialogue spoken by the actors and their way of speaking it, but also in the sets, costumes and manner of putting the play on stage. (313)

Indeed, it can be observed that Stephens' plays show the typical markers of naturalism. Apart from *Motortown* and *Wastwater*, which only use the first names of the characters, and *Pornography*, which does not use specified characters at all, Stephens' plays usually feature characters with full names and speech prefixes. His stage directions frequently contain authorial characterisations of the dramatis personae. For instance, the initial stage directions of *Hérons* are almost one and a half pages long and describe the characters in detail (see Stephens, *Plays: 1* 153-154). Stephens' plays usually take place in recognisable, contemporary and urban settings and refer to specific places and buildings in the cities or to the geography surrounding the location. For instance, *Bluebird* employs a "televisual naturalism in its minicab setting" (Lane 33). The plays

are normally divided into scenes, in which the action unfolds in dialogues or conversations comprising more speakers. The language of the *dramatis personae* is characterised by an up-to-date style, which often uses everyday speech, colloquial expressions or local accents in order to convey social affiliation and authenticity.

However, according to Innes, Stephens does not always follow the naturalistic tradition closely, but also utilises “techniques to break the naturalistic illusion” such as

keeping all the actors on stage throughout the performance; characters observing the scenes of others, in both *One Minute* and particularly *On the Shore of the Wide World*. The other major element that modifies the naturalistic surface of Stephens’s plays is his use of music, which serves him as reference and structuring principle; (461)

Besides, in *Port* several characters are played by the same actor, indicating the “fundamental shared resonances in their relationships with Racheal Keats” (Stephens, *Plays: 1* 236). Other non-naturalistic techniques include the use of bare stages and spare sets as well as the renunciation of a detailed decor in *Port*, *Motortown* and *Pornography* (see Stephens, *Plays:1* 236; Stephens, *Plays: 2* 142 & 214). The last-mentioned play also represents a modification of the naturalistic tradition due to its experimental approach to dramatic structure and the openness of the play text. Referring to *Pornography*, Sierz explains that

[o]ne of the play’s implicit arguments is that the defining thing about the 7/7 bombers was that they were so English. In this way, the form and content of Stephens’s play not only rewrite contemporary history but also recast our naturalistic tradition. (*Rewriting the nation* 62)

Furthermore, in the opinion of Sierz, Stephens has developed his own approach to the naturalistic tradition, as “[h]is writing blends the great British tradition of naturalism with a much more poetic style” (Introduction, *Methuen drama book* xv). Hence, Sierz calls his style “poetic realism” (“New Writing A-Z: Stephens, Simon”).

Innes states that Simon Stephens “sees himself as part of a generation defined by Thatcher’s reign as prime minister, believing in the value of the individual rather than the collective identity and communal action” and “as continuing the tradition of intense individualism celebrated in the plays of John Osborne” (446). In fact, most of Stephens’ plays selected for this thesis have a linear plot starring a central protagonist, who links the scenes, locations and themes of the play. Exceptions to the rule are *On the Shore*, which follows six family members in a complex dramatic structure, *Pornography*,

which “can be performed by any number of actors” (Stephens, *Plays*: 2 214), and *Wastwater*, which introduces new characters in each of the three scenes.

Sierz explains that the tradition of individualism in writing also relates to the tradition of social realism, which has influenced British theatre since the 1950s:

British theatre experienced the first of its post-war new waves when John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court [in 1956]. Not only did the Royal Court project of developing new writers challenge the accepted codes of existing theatre [...] but it also established its own codes. From the working-class settings to the austere designs, British theatre became a home for social realist drama. The standard code [...] is still based on these conventions of social realism. (“To recommend a cure” 46)

It can be claimed that Stephens’ plays embrace aspects of the social-realist tradition in British theatre as well, as they frequently employ working-class settings and feature working class or underclass characters. In particular *Hérons* and *Motortown*, which are both set in run-down areas of east London, depict the British poor and their struggles to survive in a hostile environment. Moore and Varchaver argue that “social realism” is a “heavily propagandistic style of theater of the 1920s and 1930s, intended to expose the misery of the lower classes” (441). Sierz is especially critical of the naturalistic and social realist tradition in British theatre and laments that “there’s little sense of exploration, or experiment, or excitement. Boundaries remain unbreached; fantasy is grounded by the twin ballast of naturalism and social realism” (“British New Writing Today” 8).

4.3 New writing

Simon Stephens is listed among the most important exponents of the so called ‘new writing’ scene on Sierz’ *In-yer-face theatre* website (“New Writing A-Z: Stephens, Simon”). Sierz explains the importance and influence of new writing, which considerably improved the position of the playwright in British theatre:

The story of British new drama over the past ten years is the story of the revival of new writing. In Britain, the new European drama took the form of an explosion of new plays in which the writer – rather than director, dramaturge or designer – is the centre of the theatrical experience. Basically, the term ‘new writing’ emphasises the British tradition of making the word more important than the gesture. (“To recommend a cure” 47)

The term ‘new writing’ is rather vague, as it carries different meanings. Sierz suggests that ‘new writing’ embraces at least four different notions. Firstly, Sierz states that “‘new writing implies the first plays written by people who are usually in their twenties. But age is much less important than the fact that they are making their debut” (“‘To recommend a cure’” 47). For instance, Simon Stephens was twenty-seven years old, when his professional debut *Bluebird* was produced by the Royal Court in 1998, and he wrote his breakthrough play *Motortown* (2005) at the age of thirty-four. Secondly, new writing means “[p]lays about contemporary issues” (Sierz, “‘To recommend a cure’” 47). Stephens’ plays not only tackle current problems and controversial issues, but also respond immediately to significant events such as the London bombings in 2005, which inspired the composition of *Motortown* and *Pornography*. Thirdly, new writing refers to “[p]lays written in an up-to-date style”, which are “much more direct, funky and to the point than those of previous decades, which in comparison look verbose, windy and long-winded” (Sierz, “‘To recommend a cure’” 47). Stephens fulfills this criterion as well, as most of his plays are written in present-day speech, which often includes colloquial and slang expressions and local accents as well. Fourthly, new writing signifies

[p]lays produced by subsidised new writing theatres. For example, theatres such as the Royal Court, the National Studio, the Traverse, the Bush, the Hampstead or the Soho Theatre produce new work without having to depend on commercial success. (Sierz, “‘To recommend a cure’” 48)

Stephens was part of a state-subsidised theatre, the Royal Court Theatre in London, between 2000 and 2006. Little and McLaughlin state that “[p]laywright Simon Stephens, a former member of the Young Writers’ Programme and Writer in Residence and Young Writers’ tutor, contributed over several years to the work with young playwrights” (380). Therefore, Stephens also exercised a considerable influence on a new generation of emerging writers in Britain. As Stephens puts it:

I wanted to support a whole generation of playwrights. I wanted the Royal Court to be something that could have the energy of good comprehensive school education, where it is as accessible as it could possibly be, where as many different people are introduced to the possibility of writing plays as you could possibly reach, people who’ve never been to the theatre like I’d never been to the theatre. People who’d never read plays. (qtd. in Little and McLaughlin 380)

While Simon Stephens can be categorised by the label ‘new writing’, many other playwrights are subsumed under this heading, although they do not fulfill all the criteria

of a 'new writing' playwright. The question remains "whether the label, and thus the idea of new writing, should be restricted to playwrights at the very start of their careers" (Sierz, *Rewriting the nation* 47). Besides, the label often serves the purpose of marketing new plays, as "[t]he new sells the product as good, modern and up-to-date" (Sierz, *Rewriting the nation* 47).

According to Sierz, new writing especially flourished after 1997 under the New Labour government led by prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, who granted considerably higher subsidies to the theatres than the government before (see *Rewriting the nation* 1-2). As a consequence, Britain currently experiences a new writing boom:

It's relatively easy to make a list of more than 150 new British playwrights who have made their debuts in the past ten years. It has also been calculated that between 500 and 700 writers of stage plays, radio plays, and television drama make their living from writing in Britain. These are really remarkable figures, and unique in Europe. (Sierz, "Beyond timidity?" 56)

Sierz estimates that "[a]t a very rough count, there were some 3,000 new plays produced during the 2000s, more than double the amount of the previous decade" (*Rewriting the nation* 1).

5. Critical reception on British stages

From rave reviews to scathing critiques – Simon Stephens’ plays have caused controversies over the last fifteen years. *Motortown*, for example, has been called “powerful and disturbing” (Taylor, Rev. of *Motortown* 489), whereas *Christmas* is just “a boring way to spend the evening” (Sierz, Rev. of *Christmas* 33). This chapter takes a closer look at the critical reception on British stages, focusing on the premieres.

5.1 Bluebird

Simon Stephens’ first play *Bluebird* premiered on 1 December 1998 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London, directed by Gordon Anderson (see Appendix). It was one of four new plays at the Young Writers Festival, and, out of the four, received the best reviews. For Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* this play “is the most accomplished” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1608). She praises the “bruising fluency of the writing” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1608). Aleks Sierz is of the same opinion; for him, *Bluebird* is the “best of the lot” (Sierz, Rev. of *Bluebird* 1610). Christopher James of *The Times* calls the play “a rough gem” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1609), and for Carole Woodis it is “[v]ery, very fine” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1611).

Especially the first half of *Bluebird* receives praise, it is “as accomplished, comic and revealing about the people who litter London’s street as anything I’ve ever seen on stage or screen” (James, Rev. of *Bluebird* 1609). For Dominic Cavendish

Simon Stephens gets a great deal of mileage, comic and otherwise, from the inert scenario of a sad cabbie [...] lending an ear to his ‘fares’, while psyching himself up for a meeting with his estranged wife to reveal the truth about the death of their daughter. (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1611)

Aleks Sierz also wrote very positively about the play:

With its hip music and bright city lights, *Bluebird* starts as a raw, imaginative take on metropolitan life, then morphs into a heartbreaking and angry play about a couple’s love, hatred and inability to forgive. At first you feel dazzled in the headlights of Stephens’ wit, then you’re hit by an emotional punch that would floor a bouncer. (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1610)

The music, an important part of Simon Stephens’ plays, was especially noted by the reviewers. Whereas for Christopher James “the tempo [is sustained] with pulsing

nightclub music” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1609), Aleks Sierz simply calls the music “hip” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1610).

The play has also been compared to the American hit *Hellcab*:

It’s the sheer naked pain of living alone in the city that makes you flinch. All the way home I was haunted by the image of a small girl called Alice playing happily outside her home and the terrible regret of never having had the chance to say sorry or goodbye. (Gardner, Rev. of *Bluebird* 1609)

Although the play received good reviews all over, some critical points about the play were raised. The “play lacks in plausibility” for Lyn Gardner (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1608), since the character Jimmy spends a lot of time talking and listening and it is not clear how he can ever make money. Dominic Cavendish also comments on the fact that the passengers spend an “implausible amount of time – and presumably money – pouring their London-wearied hearts out” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1611).

For Christopher James the “drama stumbles, even as the darker motives of Jimmy’s philanthropy are movingly revealed” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1609). He is especially critical regarding the end of the play: “But the momentum comes to a crunching halt as surely as if Stephens had slammed on the breaks” (1609). Dominic Cavendish also addresses the end: “If the melodramatic baggage of the final spouse showdown could be jettisoned, ‘Bluebird’ may yet take spectacular wing” (Rev. of *Bluebird* 1611).

5.2 Christmas

Christmas, written in 1999, premiered in 2003 at the Pavilion Theatre in Brighton (see Appendix). It was directed by Joanne McInnes, who received praise for her work, as she “directs fluidly” (Shuttleworth, Rev. of *Christmas* 30). The “beautifully crafted play, set in an East End boozer a week before Christmas, uses chance encounters and casual camaraderie to stir the deep well of human experience, touching on past troubles, present laughter and future uncertainties” (Thaxter, Rev. of *Christmas* 31).

Christmas received mixed reviews. On the one hand, Ian Shuttleworth notes that “Stephens has a keen ear for demotic yet finely turned phrasing” (Rev. of *Christmas* 30). Aleks Sierz describes the play as being realistic and emotional:

Stephens writes this slice of life in a realistically textured and emotionally sympathetic way – the bleak jokes and telling comments capture perfectly the characters of all four men. It is well-observed, serious in its intentions and

quietly naturalistic – you can almost smell the alcohol on the breath of these men when they talk. (Rev. of *Christmas* 30)

Most reviewers praise the actors, especially Paul Ritter as the character Charlie. “The evening belongs [...] to Paul Ritter,” states Dominic Cavendish (Rev. of *Christmas* 32). Susannah Clapp thinks that “Paul Ritter provides a performance it’s worth crossing London to see” (Rev. of *Christmas* 33), and for Ian Shuttleworth “he responds to Charlie’s moods and nuances with one of the performances of his career so far” (Rev. of *Christmas* 30). Charlie’s character is played “with an unnerving mix of calmness and aggression” (Taylor, Rev. of *Christmas* 30). “The catalyst for danger is Paul Ritter’s brilliant performance as a disaffected postman” (Thaxter, Rev. of *Christmas* 31). Michael Billington comments on his “cawing, nasal voice that mixes Manchester with the Mile End Road” (Rev. of *Christmas* 30). Dominic Maxwell also stresses that Paul Ritter is essential to the play:

Paul Ritter gives Mancunian interloper Charlie an unforced intensity that raises everyone’s game. His relish of the role turns Stephens’ dialogue from skilful to searing, and the response he gets from the others gives this drinking session an intoxicating sense of physical anxiety. Elsewhere Stephens’ states his themes clearly and turns a nice phrase. But what he wants to say about male escape-hatches – drink, jokes, violence, nostalgia – only really matters when his best character is on stage. (Rev. of *Christmas* 31)

Apart from Paul Ritter, other actors also received praise. Billington mentions Fred Ridgeway as the pained publican, Bernard Gallagher as the bereaved barber and Lee Ross as the Oedipal tosser and calls their performances good (see Rev. of *Christmas* 30). For Kate Bassett “Fred Ridgeway is superb as the affable but touchy barman and Lee Ross’s Billy is a beautiful observed portrait of gabby lad who knows he’s going nowhere” (Rev. of *Christmas* 32).

For most reviewers, though, “something is missing” (Billington, Rev. of *Christmas* 30). “Like Christmas itself, it is agreeable but less special than you might expect” (Shuttleworth, Rev. of *Christmas* 30). For Taylor the “piece has a number of quiet strengths, such as humane observation and stoical humour, but it does not prompt you to raise a glass to its formal daring or originality” (Rev. of *Christmas* 30). Coveney explains: “We get a lot of information, but not much drama. But the play’s a big nothing, and even less when robbed its faint seasonal application” (Rev. of *Christmas* 31). For Aleks Sierz the play

exemplifies what is wrong with much new writing at the moment. Its dirty social realism is an accurate reflection of the real lives. Of the people it portrays but it also means that watching the play is a depression, low-octane experience. [...]. But this means that this night in the pub remains just that – a boring way to spend the evening. (Rev. of *Christmas* 33)

Two reviews deal with the fact that *Christmas* is set in a pub. Firstly, Michael Billington of *The Guardian* argues that the “pub play is rapidly becoming a fixed genre”, referring to plays set in public bars as a “source of melancholic confession” (Rev. of *Christmas* 30). In comparison to other plays of the same genre “Stephens springs the odd surprise”, but Billington wishes “dramatists would find more original settings in which to delineate male misery” (30). According to Billington

Stephens gives us eccentric personal detail in place of any great revelations about life beyond the bar. The result leaves me with the urge to shout out, in the case of this particular overworked genre, ‘Time, gentlemen please.’ (30)

Secondly, Ian Shuttleworth sums *Christmas* up as a “‘handful of folk chatting in a pub’ play”. For him, “it’s the ordinary aspects that make the production a success or a failure” (Rev. of *Christmas* 30) – in this case a modest success.

5.3 Herons

Herons was first seen at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in London in 2001 (see Appendix). According to Innes the “critical reception of the play was positive” (44). Michael Billington even calls it “[a]n extraordinary evening which suggests that in east London good and evil exist in symbiotic closeness” (Rev. of *Herons* 665).

The director of the play was Simon Usher, who was applauded by the critics. Charles Spencer of *The Daily Telegraph* says that Simon Usher “directs a tense, gripping production of a play that comes over like both an inner city *Lord of the Flies* and *Dirty Harry* with a conscience” (Rev. of *Herons* 664). Alastair Macaulay even goes as far as stating that the play could not have worked without this director, as he

has handled his five teenage and two adult actors superbly. In other hands the play could have become either too coarse or too feel-good. Here, you hang on every moment, never know where the play will take you next, are drawn deep into an experience where style and content enrich each other. (Rev. of *Herons* 663)

However, one reviewer, Patrick Marmion is of a different opinion. For him, “Simon Usher's direction could do more to clarify some of Stephens's ideas and themes by paying closer attention to the rhythms of the language and hitting the sudden violent climaxes harder” (Rev. of *Hérons* 663).

What all reviews share is appraisal for the young actors. For Michael Billington, Simon Usher “gets from Billy Seymour as the hero the best performance [he has] seen from a boy actor since Ken Loach's *Kes*: Seymour's steady, unwavering gaze as he hears his parents coarsely trashed by bully boys is astonishing to behold” (Rev. of *Hérons* 665). In addition, he also compliments Nicolas Tennant as his dad, Lia Saville as his quizzical female friend and Robert Boulter as his teenage tormentor (see 665). Charles Spencer calls the performance of Billy Seymour “phenomenal”, whose “mixture of intelligence and vulnerability is painful to behold and in the plays brilliantly tense climax you don't know whether to cheer or weep as Billy finally gains the upper hand” (Rev. of *Hérons* 664). He also speaks highly of Nicolas Tennant as he “memorably combines foul-mouthed fecklessness with remnants of decency as Billy's dad” and calls Stuart Morris and Ryan Winsley “unforgettably horrible as Scott's inane sidekicks” (664). Even Patrick Marmion, otherwise critical towards the play, is impressed by the actors:

The most impressive feature of Usher's production is the acting of his young cast. Billy Seymour as the brooding hero gives a proud, finely tuned performance pitched between childhood and maturity. Robert Boulter sometimes lacks the savage unpredictability of a notorious bully, but Stuart Morris and Ryan Winsley as his two lackeys, are hilariously deluded deadbeats. Nicolas Tennant as Billy's staggering Dad is a pitiful wash-out and Jane Hazlegrove as Billy's Mum is disconcertingly doting. Finally, Lia Saville's Adele cuts a fascinatingly inquisitive and precocious soulmate to Billy, rounding off a cast displaying the sort of savvy the play celebrates and laments in equal measure. (Rev. of *Hérons* 663)

Apart from the actors' talent, the reviews also applaud Stephens' writing. “The play is constructed with skill, yielding its dark secrets slowly, and the terrifying violence is set against moments of beautiful tenderness,” says Charles Spencer (Rev. of *Hérons* 664); he especially notes that the scenes between Billy and his dad as well as between Billy and Adele are both extraordinarily touching (see 664). Macaulay loves “the wit of its phrasing, the irony of its rhythm. And the compassion with which its characters even, eventually, the bullies are viewed” (Rev. of *Hérons* 663). And Billington thinks it is remarkable that “while graphically acknowledging the nihilistic cruelty of east end

school kids, it is also filled with a sense of life's miraculous potential. It deals with damaged characters yet is imbued with a poetic lyricism" (Rev. of *Hérons* 664).

Patrick Marmion is the only reviewer who also addresses negative aspects. For him, "the play lacks a strong through-line and slithers along like the murky inner city canal of its setting. As a result, the fascination of Stephens's strongly atmospheric writing remains entwined in the surprising poetry of his naive yet hard-bitten dialogue" (Rev. of *Hérons* 663).

5.4 Port

Port premiered on 12 November 2002 at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, under the direction of Marianne Elliott (see Appendix). Alfred Hickling called the play "tender" and "turbulent" (Rev. of *Port* par.4). Kaiser says it is "a beautifully executed piece of theatre that moves you and impresses" (Rev. of *Port* par.3) and that "it is really quite inspiring and life changing" (par.8). For Spencer "the insecurities of childhood, tense family relationships, and the embarrassment, wonder and disappointment of young love are all caught with rare precision" ("Glimmers of hope in the gloom" par.7). *Port* is based on Simon Stephens' own biography, which can go wrong, but not in this case, as Susannah Tresilian explains:

It ought to be admitted that a play based largely on a playwright's own experience usually sends a shiver of dread down my spine: more eulogy to the past, more sentimentalisation of 'issues', more dismay. However, despite writing that he wants to 'do justice to the people' that he spoke with whilst researching the play, Stephens manages to sidestep – just – the dormant hazards that await new playwrights. (Rev. of *Port* par.3)

Referring to the composition of the narrative, Tresilian notices that

[t]he plot itself is standard but [...] he breathed a different life into the world, and imbued it with sincerity, heartbreak, and charisma. He demonstrates life as it is lived surrounded by people with little vocabulary with which to express themselves ('It was just... so... like... alright. Do you know what I mean?'), but more passion than they know what to do with ('It's like, why should I be doin' this stuff when I could be makin' panels?'), and sets it alight before our eyes. (Rev. of *Port* par.4)

The actors received a lot of praise. Hickling even calls them "phenomenal" (Rev. of *Port* par.5). For him, "Emma Lowndes's Rachel is outstanding as her age increases and her expectations diminish" (par.5). Lynne Walker is of the same opinion, as she calls

her “stunning” (Rev. of *Port* 1549). Susannah Tresilian agrees, although, for her, Emma Lowndes is more convincing as the play progresses:

It is no mean feat, as an actress in her mid-twenties, to portray a girl from her eleventh year to her twenty-fourth – and she doesn’t fully succeed in the first few scenes – but Emma Lowndes has created such a captivating and resonating character that as she transforms – literally – from scene to scene, you are increasingly willing to believe in her. And by the time the play finishes you really do feel you know her, you have travelled with her, and you care for her too. (Rev. of *Port* par.6)

Music, an important part of Simon Stephens’ plays, again features prominently in *Port*, and is acknowledged by the critics, for example by Spencer: “Marianne Elliott directs a marvellously acted and atmospheric production, punctuated by a backing track of great Manchester pop music by acts ranging from Joy Division to Oasis” (“Glimmers of hope in the gloom” par.7). Walker explains that “Ian Dickinson’s choice of rave music by Manchester bands from 1988 to 2002 spans the years we live through with Rachel on Rae Smith’s cleverly versatile set” (Rev. of *Port* 1549).

The language used in this play was also noted by the reviewers. Hewison remarks that “the poverty is underlined by the brutal limitations of the foul, banal, violent language that everyone uses” (Rev. of *Port* 1549), and Kingston writes in *The Times* that the “Stockport born author has a shrewd ear for kidspeak” (Rev. of *Port* 1549). The language seems to be attractive to a younger audience, as Walker asserts that the play

scored a big hit with the teenagers sitting behind me. It was a genuine example of spontaneous appreciation as they giggled, gasped, groaned and identified with the events on stage. As a lesson in how to engage young people’s attention, *Port* is a model of its kind. (Rev. of *Port* 1549)

5.5 On the Shore of the Wide World

The play *On the Shore of the Wide World* premiered on 13 April 2005 at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester (see Appendix). It was “delicately directed by Sarah Frankcom” (Sierz, *Rewriting the nation* 168). Billington comments that “Sarah Frankcom’s production captures Stephens’ vein of anguished lyricism” (Rev. of *On the Shore* par.6). For Natalie Anglesey “the direction and casting are simply superb” (Rev. of *On the Shore* par.2).

The set designed by Liz Ascroft featured a large map of an industrial town spread out on the stage floor. Which town exactly was represented is a question the critics cannot

agree on. Meads believes it to be a map of Manchester (see Rev. of *On the Shore* par.6), whereas Fisher is not sure which town is represented but assumes it to be Stockport (see Rev. of *On the Shore* par.11). The audience is seated around this aerial view in close proximity to the actors. A “beautiful astral hemisphere hangs over them, suggesting a wide perspective of this microcosmic representation of life on earth” (Fisher, Rev. of *On the Shore* par.11).

Other critics however see the staging and set in an entirely different fashion. De Jongh sees the audience misled and calls it unfairly useless, “since the audience cannot be aware that Stephens gives a precise location for each scene” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 723). Evans goes even further in his verdict and sees the staging hindering the development of the play. He is especially unsatisfied with the audience’s seating arrangement:

Staging a show in the round effectively means making the audience part of the scenery. You can’t concentrate on actors pretending to be real people when you can see, just behind their heads, real people pretending to be interested. It’s too distracting. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 725)

However, nearly all the critics commented on the strong performance of the cast. Billington saw shining performances on the night (see Rev. of *On the Shore* par.6), and Clapp calls the acting “exemplary, both intense and easy” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724). Sawyer gives praise to all cast members:

The acting is uniformly excellent, though special mention must go to Nicholas Gleaves, as Peter Holmes, the play’s reluctant heart, as well as to Siobhan Finneran, as Alice, his wife, and David Hargreaves, as Peter’s father Charlie. All put in performances that move you to tears; complicated, modern, nondescript people living complicated, modern, nondescript lives. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 723)

Other critics also mention individual strong acting performances. It is Meads who provides a good overview of the level of acting skills on display:

Nicholas Gleaves’ Peter is childlike and scared of making the same mistakes as his father Charlie, played by the equally good David Hargreaves. Thomas Morrison and Steven Webb play the next generation with real spirit and a sense of urgency. Morrison holds his own when given very demanding scenes where he has to stand up to his granddad. Carla Henry brings humour and heartache to the role of Sarah, Alex’s girlfriend whose arrival signals a big change for the family.

Lastly, both Eileen O’Brien and Siobhan Finneran provide feisty turns as women who have to contend with their husband’s closed emotions and at the same time remain loyal Gran and mum, respectively. (Rev. of *On the Shore* pars.4-5)

When it comes to discussing the actual writing of Simon Stephens the critics are split down the middle. Shenton, for example, believes it to be “a lovely play, lovingly performed and beautifully directed, aching with feeling, hurt and insight into the damage that people inflict on each other in the name of love” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724). His colleague Meads found the scenes changing far too fast, preventing the audience from developing “any sense of involvement” (Rev. of *On the Shore* par.7). Shenton admits that the style of the play is somewhat controversial but recognises that this style of writing might have its rightful place in today’s world:

It’s true that the style is sometimes televisual in the fractured nature of the narrative’s telling and the fact that the action is telescoped into cross-cutting scenes from the lives of three generations of a Stockport family. But audiences – and writers like Stephens – have been trained by television to absorb information in a different way now, and are far quicker at picking up on the trail of reverberating emotions that this family subject each other to.

Here, instead of allowing the choices to be dictated to us by a camera lens, the story benefits from the close-up intensity of a theatrical stage where we piece it together ourselves. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724)

Peter finds Stephens to have a “wonderful ear for the language of people who know each other too well” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724), and according to Sawyer the “not-quite-real dialogue is revealing” and “rhythmic” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724). Edwardes thinks Stephens’ writing is capable of making an audience cry (see Rev. of *On the Shore* 723), and Morley believes the author to be

an observer of the human condition who deals in sentiment and subtlety but never forgets the emotional violence that can harm even the most loving relationships. He writes neither comedy nor tragedy but an observation of what it is like to feel for other people. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 723)

Some critics, on the other hand, point out that there seems to be fairly little happening in a play of nearly three hours length. “This play has some excellent parts that are funny or thought-provoking or both. However it does not seem to have the ‘legs’ to carry it through its three-hour running time” (Chadderton, Rev. of *On the Shore* par.5). Marmion mentions that for him the play “needs to embrace some bigger, tougher theme, whether it is spiritual or political” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724) to justify its hefty performance length.

All in all Sawyer calls *On the Shore* an “excellent piece of theatre, clearly staged, wonderfully written” and goes on to see it as a proof “that ordinary lives give writers something to say” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724). Shuttleworth agrees that “ordinary

stories are drama enough for most of us in our own lives, after all”, but calls *On the Shore* “ultimately less satisfying than those plays of last year” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 724).

De Jongh experienced the play as a “refuse-load of elderly clichés about the communication failures and sexual repressions, the guilts and wistful longings of English family life” and criticises the “fragmentary, quasi-televisual scenes” comparing them to a “very dry run for the first episodes of a lower-middle-class Channel 4 family soap opera set in Stockport” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 723). “That the National and Royal Exchange theatre should jointly commission and produce a play of such resounding banality” strikes De Jongh “as an alarming waste of money and opportunity” (Rev. of *On the Shore* 723).

Finally, while discussing the play *On the Shore* Evans fells his general verdict on the playwright Simon Stephens. He starts positively by saying that

Lancashire-born Simon Stephens has plenty of the skills a dramatist needs but they are not very evenly distributed. He’s a brilliant conjurer of that highly artificial type of dialogue which TV has schooled us to accept as real. He is also terrific at creating characters who instantly ensnare your sympathy. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 725)

However, he continues that

he has no originality and not nearly enough psychological insight. His tremendous knack for character and dialogue causes him to neglect the art of storytelling. When he deploys a big plot-device Stephens hasn’t the talent, or the sense, to keep it concealed. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 725)

And about the play itself Evans does not find much good to say either:

A sort of sameyness [sic!] creeps into everything. The characters evolve along predictable line, the enchantment of the dialogue fades, and the quick-fire scenes display the same underlying shapes and rhythms. A show that starts of a trifle boring ends up a boring trifle. (Rev. of *On the Shore* 725)

5.6 Motortown

Motortown premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs in London in 2006 and was directed by Ramin Gray (see Appendix). It was “a storming success” (Sierz, “New Writing A-Z: Stephens, Simon”). Many reviewers commented on the fact that the play was staged in the Royal Court Theatre. Paul Taylor writes in *The Independent* that this play is “[w]ithout doubt, the most provocative and gripping piece

produced so far in the Royal Court's 50th anniversary year" (Rev. of *Motortown* 489). Benedict Nightingale critically remarks that "[f]or that incongruously named theatre, the Royal Court, it's a periodic duty to stage a play that sickens us with its violence" (Rev. of *Motortown* 489). And Nicholas De Jongh is surprised to "find a Royal Court playwright sympathetically engaging with the experiences of the British military in Iraq" (Rev. of *Motortown* 489). Simon Stephens himself explains:

I was not an unapologetic advocate of the war in any way and was sensitive to many arguments made against it. But it struck me as simplistic and somehow childlike not to see the war as symptomatic rather than causal. It wasn't that the war was a monstrosity born out of a salvageable world. The world felt malign to me. The war seemed symptomatic of that. And it gave me no end of pleasure that the play was at various times, by various critics, received as being a criticism of the war and a criticism of the anti-war campaign. (Introduction, *Plays*: 2 xvii)

Motortown left many reviewers emotional. For Charles Spencer it is "a deeply unsettling piece" and a play that "gets under your skin" (Rev. of *Motortown* 488). Lyn Gardner sums it by saying, "*Motortown* is like being run over by a 10-tonne truck that doesn't bother to stop to check that you are still breathing. It is in no way a pleasant experience, but is, I think, an essential one" (Rev. of *Motortown* 488).

The scene which was apparently most memorable for the reviewers is the one after Jade's murder, when the blood is cleaned up. Lyn Gardner was impressed by "the astonishing moments when blood is mopped from the stage in a ritual that feels both like absolution and a terrible punishment" (Rev. of *Motortown* 488). Sierz reports vividly that "the show report for 25 April 2006 says, 'There was too much blood tonight so we had trouble cleaning the blood'" (*Rewriting the nation* 131).

There is one element of Ramin Gray's production which was not to the reviewers' liking. As Sierz explains, the production "had pounding dance music during the scene changes, with the cast crossing the stage and making choreographed moves with tables and chairs" (*Rewriting the nation* 131). Lyn Gardner "could have done without the dancing furniture" (Rev. of *Motortown* 488) and Charles Spencer "could have happily dispensed with [...] the silly choreographed routines with chairs between scenes, which tiresomely remind us that we are watching actors and weaken the charged atmosphere" (Rev. of *Motortown* 488).

Daniel Mays in the role of Danny received good critiques. Lyn Gardner says that it is "a searingly honest play written and played particularly by Daniel Mays as Danny, with a

deadly coiled energy” (Rev. of *Motortown* 448). Charles Spencer simply says that “[t]he acting itself is superb” (Rev. of *Motortown* 488).

Although the character Danny is played very well, Sierz explains that many reviewers commented on the fact that “Stephens, by revealing that Danny was psychotic at school, weakens the central argument that war has brutalised Danny” (*Rewriting the nation* 131). For Lyn Gardner “in suggesting that Danny was a psychopath long before he went to Iraq, or perhaps even joined the army, Stephens undercuts the connection between personal violence and violence perpetrated in the name of the state” (Rev. of *Motortown* 448). Charles Spencer is of the same opinion: “Unfortunately, it doesn’t turn out to be quite as brave and interesting as that, for the chap defending the war in Iraq and pouring scorn on the anti-war marchers turns out to be a psychopathic squaddie from Dagenham” (Rev. of *Motortown* 488).

5.7 Pornography

Pornography celebrated its English premiere on 28 July 2008 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, directed by Sean Holmes (see Appendix). Michael Billington describes the play as a “remarkable kaleidoscopic portrait of a London that moved in a few days from the euphoria of Live 8 and the Olympics announcement to the devastation of the July 7 bombings” (Rev. of *Pornography* 877).

Lyn Gardner thinks that, after the controversial *Motortown*, this new play made the British theatres nervous:

I suspect it was not just *Pornography*’s form (its freeform dialogue can be played in any order the director wishes), but its content that made British theatres nervous. *Motortown* created a furore for the way it inculcated audiences for Britain’s part in the war in Iraq. This goes further still, suggesting that the London bombings, and those who planted the bombs, were created and nourished by the prevailing culture. (“The finger-pointer” par.4)

The issue of the London bombings seems to be a sensitive one in the public eye, but for Dominic Cavendish of *The Telegraph* “there’s no ducking the challenge of facing up to the problems on our doorsteps” (“Pornography: The most shocking play of the Edinburgh Festival?” par.12). Alan Chadwick thinks that the new play is not just about the bombings: “To call Simon Stephens’ *Pornography* a play specifically about the July 7 terrorist bombings in London would be to do it a disservice. It looks with soulful

mourning at what it means to be British today and the culture of displacement that we live in” (“Pornography brings violence and terrorism to onstage urban life” par.1).

Spencer, on the other hand, believes that the issue has not been dealt with properly; he felt Simon Stephens “was playing games with a subject that needed a far more engaged response” (Rev. of *Pornography* 877). And he adds:

[O]ne leaves this artful play feeling that Stephens has ducked the central issue – that there are disaffected British Muslims among us who want to destroy our way of life and cause whatever carnage they can. No amount of fine writing can disguise the fact that this is a craven cop-out. (Rev. of *Pornography* 877)

What is most striking about the play is that there is no specific structure, as many reviewers commented. The directors are instructed by Simon Stephens to arrange the scenes and monologues as they like. In the case of Sean Holmes, “the result is a haunting group portrait of exclusion, frustration, loneliness and how that feeds into the culture of modern Britain” (Chadwick, “Pornography brings violence and terrorism to onstage urban life” par.2).

The staging was particularly praised by the reviewers. O’Donovan describes the stage as such:

TV screens are littered around the stage; thick red wires like veins pumping blood wrap themselves across the bare black floor; dark wires are strung from the stage into the rafters of the auditorium with thin fluorescent lights dangling precariously. As soon as they flicker for a moment, Paul Wills’ design immediately transports us to the London underground. (Rev. of *Pornography* par.1)

For Spencer the stage “suggests both the humming energy, and the disconcerting alienation, of city life” (Rev. of *Pornography* 877), whereas for Billington the simple staging “allows the words and the stories to do their work” (Rev. of *Pornography* 877).

The actors received good critiques as well. Spencer praises Sheila Reid as the widow and Billy Seymour as the schoolboy (see Rev. of *Pornography* 877). For Billington

there is fine work from Kirsty Bushell and Sam Spruell as the self-absorbed siblings, Billy Seymour as the rancorous schoolboy and Anthony Welsh as the bomber who briefly allows his mask of composure to slip as he entertains dreams of destruction. (Rev. of *Pornography* 877)

O’Donovan thinks that Billy Seymour is “compelling”, as “violence is never far from his squeaky voice and he regularly erupts in a stream of obscenities, at one point explicitly detailing how he would knife his teacher to pieces” (Rev. of *Pornography* par.5).

The final scene seems to be the most memorable one. It consists of a list of fifty-two short biographies representing the real victims of 7/7. For Sierz “number 43, which is blank, and thus denotes an unidentified victim, is arguably the saddest” (*Rewriting the nation* 62). In this first British production “this list was projected onto the back wall of the stage after the curtain call” (Sierz, *Rewriting the nation* 62).

5.8 Wastwater

Wastwater, one of Simon Stephens’ most recent plays, premiered on 31 March 2011 at the Royal Court Theatre, London; Katie Mitchell was the director (see Appendix). “The combination of bracingly skilful playwright Simon Stephens and iconoclastic director Katie Mitchell seems, in prospect, an explosive one,” says Hitchings in the *London Evening Standard* (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358).

The play is named after the deepest lake in England, “which because of the surrounding Lakeland fells is never entirely out of shadow” (Spencer, Rev. of *Wastwater* 359). Hitchings thinks that it is “a place of darkness that has long haunted Stephens’s imagination. The mood is sinister and secretive” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). Billington stresses, though, that the play is actually set on the fringes of Heathrow “and part of its point is that the airport environs, like the lake, are full of sinister shadows. But, for all the momentary power of an evening that takes the form of a compressed triptych, I was left simply with a feeling of impotent disquiet” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). *Wastwater* sparked many controversies, to say the least. Hitchings, for instance, calls it “an exasperating experience” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). The play left many reviewers puzzled. Bassett explains:

The dialogue tilts between delightful, gently satirical humour and threatening edginess. Stephens’s narrative, meanwhile, keeps you guessing about what exactly his characters are up to and how they are, in fact, connected. It must be said, if you want his plot lines to knit together and everything to make sense in the end, you’re going to be disappointed. *Wastwater* remains elliptical, perhaps unsatisfyingly so. (Rev. of *Wastwater* 360)

Letts even calls the play a waste of time:

A few youngsters in last night’s audience tittered. The rest, certainly the older ones, watched in silence, maybe thinking: ‘What a waste-water of an evening. [...] Cryptic and creepy, *Wastwater* is ‘outstanding’ only as in ‘outstandingly unpleasant’. (Rev. of *Wastwater* 360)

Many critics wonder about the message Simon Stephens wants to transmit in *Wastwater*. For instance, Spencer thinks that “Stephens clearly wants us to consider the darker depths of the human heart. In this he certainly succeeds. But the writing is so elliptical, the characters’ motives and feelings so obscure, that one never becomes fully involved” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 359). Hitchings cannot “grasp its true purposes” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). And Billington cannot see

what Stephens is telling us beyond the fact we inhabit a heartless, dehumanised world where sex is commodified and children are subject to various forms of abuse. He offers us snapshots of individual cruelties that, for all the suggestion of larger forces at work, don’t add up to a social critique. We may be disturbed; but what are we meant to do about it? (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358)

One aspect of the play that received positive reviews was the work of the crew and cast. Billington thinks that Katie Mitchell “directs with her meticulous precision”, and he also likes Lizzie Clachan’s design, which “ingeniously embraces three radically different settings” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). Spencer agrees:

Katie Mitchell directs a slick, rigorously controlled production, with virtuosic designs by Lizzie Clachan that change the scene in an instant from derelict greenhouse to luxury hotel and finally the bleak airport warehouse where the hellish transaction of a child is taking place. (Rev. of *Wastwater* 359)

For Billington “the acting is extremely good” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). Hitchings is full of praise for Tom Sturridge as he “is exquisitely awkward as Harry”, Linda Bassett who “makes a touching Frieda” and Jo McInnes who “bristles with troubled sexual energy as Lisa” (Rev. of *Wastwater* 358). For Spencer

there are particularly strong performances from Jo McInnes as the policewoman with a troubled past who longs to be hurt, Amanda Hale as the psychopathic trafficker in smuggled children and Angus Wright as the terrified man who has got himself involved in an evil deal he cannot escape. (Rev. of *Wastwater* 359)

Bassett agrees:

Bassett and Sturridge are affectionate and funny, as well as disturbing. Ready’s and McInnes’s sexually eager, panting advances and nervous retreats are intense and droll, too. And Amanda Hale – matter-of-fact but insanely weird – grills Wright with a hint of the purgatorial fiend. (Rev. of *Wastwater* 360)

“But for all the skill of both writing and performances, it is a relief to escape this manipulative, cruel and cold-hearted play,” says Charles Spencer (Rev. of *Wastwater* 359).

6. Conclusion

This thesis is based on the underlying hypothesis that Stephens' dramatic aesthetic has evolved since his first professionally produced play *Bluebird* in 1998. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to delineate the development of Stephens' dramatic aesthetic over the past fifteen years by analysing eight selected plays by the author.

The investigation of the genesis of Stephens' plays shows that he draws upon many different sources for inspiration. As Stephens explains in his introductions to the three collections of his plays, his style of writing has been significantly influenced by British TV dramas, American films, pieces of music and other literary works.

The development of Stephens' dramatic aesthetic is marked by two significant shifts. For *Hérons* (2001) and *Port* (2002), written during or after Stephens' two residencies at the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, Stephens starts to plan the composition of the dramatic structure and the development of the action in his plays more thoroughly. For instance, *Port* covers a longer period of time than the plays before, focuses on a female protagonist and employs a non-naturalistic set. The second shift results from a collaboration with German theatre practitioners for *Pornography* (2008), who inspire Stephens to introduce open structures and formal experiments to his dramatic aesthetic.

As far as dramatic structure is concerned, Stephens uses rather conventional structures at the beginning of his career in *Bluebird*, *Christmas*, *Hérons* and *Port*, and gradually develops more complex and experimental structures. For instance, *On the Shore* is divided into four parts containing 42 scenes altogether. While the seven scenes of *Pornography* allude to the seven ages of man in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and are numbered in descending order like a countdown, *Wastwater* employs a triptych structure. In contrast, *Motortown*, one of his most critically acclaimed plays, uses a rather simple structure of eight successive scenes, which are linked by the central protagonist Danny.

The settings of Stephens' plays demonstrate a remarkable unity. Stephens prefers recognisable, urban settings in either the Greater London or the Greater Manchester area. Most of his plays take place in and around London, but they usually contain references to Manchester or Stephens' hometown Stockport as well. As regards the setting of time, the selected plays show a development from the short period of a single

night in *Bluebird* and *Christmas* to longer periods of time in the two Stockport plays *Port* and *On the Shore*, with extended ellipses in between the scenes, to more experimental approaches to time in *Pornography* and *Wastwater*, whose scenes can be performed in any order. *Motortown* represents an exception in this development. Similar to the first two plays, it covers a single day in the protagonist's life. The historical background of Stephens' plays is usually a contemporary one. While his early plays treat smaller, often domestic problems, the more recent plays display Stephens' sense of burning issues such as the Iraq war or the 2005 London bombings, which inspired the composition of *Motortown* and *Pornography*.

Similar to the unity of the settings, the *dramatis personae* in Stephens' plays demonstrate unity by sharing the same class background and social affiliation. In the introduction to *Plays: 3* Stephens remarks that "[s]ometimes these characters feel as if they populate the same universe" (xix). This universe is usually confined to working class or underclass characters. Exceptions include the (lower) middle class family in *On the Shore* and the middle class or upper class couple Justin and Helen in *Motortown*. The analysis of the figure conception reveals that the plays are dominated by alcoholics, failed or absent fathers and mothers as well as dead children. *Hérons*, *Port* and *On the Shore* depict teenagers and their relationship to the older generation of parents and grandparents.

As regards the themes and motifs of Stephens' plays, it can be observed that he tends to return repeatedly to the same themes established in the early plays. While the theme of loneliness is already present in his first play *Bluebird*, his third play *Hérons* introduces the crucial themes of the dysfunctional family as well as the theme of ecology, environment and nature to his dramatic aesthetic. Since the beginning of his career Stephens' plays frequently deal with the theme of alienation as well.

Other crucial aspects of Stephens' dramatic aesthetic comprise the use of music, autobiographical references and intertextual references. Music represents an essential element of the plays, as it not only highlights beginnings and endings, scene transitions, or climaxes of the action, but also characterises the *dramatis personae* or comments on the action and themes of the play. The autobiographical references are strongly related to the alcoholism and subsequent death of Stephens' father from cancer. Intertextual references to poems and novels are used in *Bluebird*, *On the Shore* and *Wastwater* as subtle comments on the action, themes or title of the plays.

As regards Stephens' position in contemporary British theatre, he can be generally described as a 'new writing' playwright. According to leading scholars and critics Stephens follows the strong traditions of naturalism and social realism, which have dominated British theatre since the advent of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court in 1956. However, Stephens modifies these traditions by introducing non-naturalistic elements to his plays such as bare stages, actors observing scenes of other actors, music or experimental structures. Besides, his style of writing can be characterised as post-in-yer-face theatre, as he breaks with the dominant style of the 1990s by writing more lyrically and poetically about controversial subjects.

In the final chapter an attempt to summarise the critical reception of Stephens' plays and Stephens as a playwright is made. Generally speaking, the plays received favourable reviews, but the ambiguity of Stephens' writing can be seen in the reviews of the contemporary theatre critics as well. Almost all of the plays also received mixed or even negative reviews.

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8. Appendix: List of English and German premieres

The following list of premieres is a compilation of information found in the following sources:

- Stephens, *Plays: 1, Plays: 2 and Plays: 3*
- “Simon Stephens.” *Doollee: The Playwright's Database*
- “Simon Stephens, Esq.” *Debrett's People of Today*
- “Simon Stephens.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*
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- ”The Directors: Max Key.” *Young Vic Theatre*

The year in brackets after the title of the play indicates the time of writing.

* indicates that the play has not been published yet.

Play (English title)	English premiere	Theatre	Director	Play (German title)	German premiere	Theatre	Director
Sleep of the Just*	1994	New Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh					
Bring Me Sunshine (1994)*	1997	Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh					
Bluebird (1997)	01 December 1998	Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London	Gordon Anderson				
Christmas (1999)	06 December 2003	Pavilion Theatre, Brighton	Joanne McInnes	Christmas	24 November 2007	Staatstheater Mainz	Matthias Fontheim
Herons (2000)	18 May 2001	Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, London	Simon Usher	Reiher	28 March 2003	Staatstheater Stuttgart	Sebastian Nübling

Play (English title)	English premiere	Theatre	Director	Play (German title)	German premiere	Theatre	Director
Port (2001/2)	12 November 2002	Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester	Marianne Elliott	Port	17 January 2004	Theater Graz	Matthias Fontheim
One Minute	06 June 2003	Crucible Theatre, Sheffield	Gordon Anderson	One Minute	05 November 2004	Staatstheater Stuttgart	Beat Fäh
Country Music	24 June 2004	Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, London	Gordon Anderson	Country Music	14 January 2005	Schauspiel Essen / Theater Graz	Matthias Fontheim
On the Shore of the Wide World (2004)	13 April 2005	Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester	Sarah Frankcom	Am Strand der weiten Welt	9 March 2006	Schauspielhaus Zürich	Karin Beier
Motor- town (2005)	21 April 2006	Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, London	Ramin Gray	Motor- town	23 November 2006	Schauspielhaus Zürich	Samir
Harper Regan	23 April 2008	National Theatre, London	Marianne Elliott	Harper Regan	22 August 2008	Salzburger Festspiele / Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg	Ramin Gray
Porno- graphy (2005)	28 July 2008	Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh	Sean Holmes	Porno- graphie	15 June 2007	Schauspiel Hannover, Hanover / Festival Theaterformen / Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg	Sebastian Nübling

Play (English title)	English premiere	Theatre	Director	Play (German title)	German premiere	Theatre	Director
Sea Wall	06 October 2008	Bush Theatre, London	George Perrin	Steilwand	10 January 2010	Schauspiel Frankfurt, Frankfurt a. M.	Lily Sykes
Canopy of Stars (part of the <i>The Great Game: Afghanis- tan</i> series)	24 May 2009	Tricycle Theatre, London	Nicolas Kent, Indhu Rubasingham				
Lullaby Burn*	June 2009	Lyric Hammersmith, London	Max Key				
Heaven*	11 August 2009	Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh	?				
Punk Rock	03 September 2009	Lyric Hammersmith, London	Sarah Frankcom		March 2010	Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg	Daniel Wahl
Supernova *	2009	Latitude Festival, Suffolk	?				
A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky	07 May 2010	Lyric Hammersmith, London	Sean Holmes				

Play (English title)	English premiere	Theatre	Director	Play (German title)	German premiere	Theatre	Director
Marine Parade	18 May 2010	Old Market, Brighton International Festival	Joanne McInnes	Marine Parade	02 July 2010	Staatstheater Mainz	Matthias Fontheim
T5	18 August 2010	Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh Fringe Festival	Dominic Hill	Terminal 5	16 February 2011	Schauspiel Frankfurt, Frankfurt a. M.	Lily Sykes
The Trial of Ubu	24 January 2012	Hampstead Theatre	Katie Mitchell	Ubu	16 April 2010	Schauspielhaus Essen / Toneelgroep Amsterdam	Sebastian Nübling
Wastwater (2010)	31 March 2011	Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, London	Katie Mitchell	Wastwater	14 May 2011	Wiener Festwochen, Vienna	Katie Mitchell
I Am The Wind	04 May 2011	Young Vic Theatre, London	Patrice Chéreau				
Three Kingdoms	03 May 2012	Lyric Hammersmith, London	Sebastian Nübling	Three Kingdoms	17 September 2011 15 October 2011	Theatre NO99, Tallinn Munich Kammerspiele, Munich	Sebastian Nübling Sebastian Nübling
A Doll's House	29 June 2012	Young Vic Theatre, London	Carrie Cracknell				

Play (English title)	English premiere	Theatre	Director	Play (German title)	German premiere	Theatre	Director
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night- Time	02 August 2012	National Theatre, London	Marianne Elliott				
Morning	01 August 2012	Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh	Sean Holmes				
London (Sea Wall & T5)	03 October 2012	Salisbury Playhouse, Salisbury	George Perrin				
Utopia*	31 May 2012	Live Theatre, Newcastle Upon Tyne	Steve Marmion, Max Roberts				

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10. Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit untersucht die Entwicklung der Dramenästhetik des zeitgenössischen englischen Dramatikers Simon Stephens anhand von acht ausgewählten Theaterstücken des Autors: *Bluebird*, *Christmas*, *Hérons*, *Port*, *On the Shore of the Wide World*, *Motortown*, *Pornography* und *Wastwater*. Das erste Kapitel zeichnet Stephens' Weg von seinen ersten Versuchen, Dramen zu schreiben, bis zu den Anfängen seiner professionellen Theaterkarriere nach. Des Weiteren bietet es einen Überblick über seine Werke und die zahlreichen Einflüsse auf seine Theaterarbeit. Im folgenden Kapitel werden die wichtigsten Aspekte seiner Dramenästhetik, wie etwa die Struktur und der Aufbau der Stücke, das Setting (Zeit, Ort und historischer Hintergrund), die Figurenkonzeption, die Motive, der Einsatz von Musik und Geräuschen, die Bezüge auf andere literarische Texte und Stephens' Biographie sowie die Betitelung der Stücke, analysiert. Das vorletzte Kapitel versucht, den Einfluss verschiedener theatraler Traditionen auf Simon Stephens' Werk aufzuzeigen und den Autor im zeitgenössischen britischen Theater einzuordnen. Das letzte Kapitel fasst die kritische Rezeption der englischen Premieren der acht analysierten Stücke zusammen.

11. Curriculum Vitae

MAG. ALEXANDER TSCHIDA

EDUCATION

1993 – 2001	BG/BRG/BORG Eisenstadt Kurzwiese
2003 – 2012	University of Vienna – Theatre, film & media studies
2003 – 2013	University of Vienna – English and American Studies
2003 – 2006	University of Vienna – Spanish
2007 – 2008	University of Manchester – English and American Studies / Erasmus exchange semester
2008 – 2009	Werkstätte Kunstberufe (VHS / University of Vienna) – Practical job qualification „Werkstätte Fernsehdokumentation“ focusing on TV journalism, production and direction

WORK EXPERIENCE

01/2004 – 09/2007	UPC Austria – Shop Naschmarkt, Vienna
06/2006 – 12/2011	e-LISA academy, Vienna
11/2008 – 06/2011	Theater Akzent, Vienna
07/2010 – 12/2011	Freelance journalist and production assistant – mainly for the short film magazine „Kurzschluss“ (Arte)
01/2012 – 01/2013	Foggensteiner Public Relations GmbH, Vienna

PLACEMENTS

07/2009 – 10/2009	Regard Film GmbH, Hamburg – Erasmus placement
05/2010 – 09/2010	Österreichischer Bühnenverlag Kaiser & Co. GmbH, Vienna
10/2010	Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), Vienna