THE END OF THE WORLD... AGAIN: APOCALYPTIC VISIONS ON THE LONDON STAGE

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RESUMO: Desde 2009, quando Roland Emmerich lançou seu filme *2012*, a mídia tem dedicada muita atenção à profecia Maia que supostamente prevê o final do mundo em dezembro de 2012. Uma vez que faz milênios que profetas de diversas religiões antecipam o apocalipse seria justificável dizer que *doomsayers* pertencem à segunda profissão mais velha. Nas décadas após a Segunda Guerra Mundial a Europa e a América do Norte pelo menos foram escurecidas pela sombra de um holocausto nuclear sempre iminente. Agora, com as preocupações dos climatólogos sendo levadas mais ao sério, a ansiedade sobre o fim da Natureza está tirando o sono de uma proporção cada vez maior dos 7 bilhões de habitantes do planeta. Após uma breve história do apocalipticismo como modo de pensar a presente comunicação examina os meios pelos quais os dramaturgos escrevendo para o palco londrino têm articulado pensamentos sobre Armageddon, incluindo Ewan MacColl, Samuel Beckett, Marghanita Laski, Edward Bond, Raymond Briggs, Philip Ridley e o ciclo de dez peças curtas dirigido por Nicolas Kent no *Tricycle Theatre* em 2012.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Apocalipse; holocausto nuclear; palco londrino

ABSTRACT: *Since 2009, when Roland Emmerich released his film* 2012*, much attention has been given in the media to the Maya prophecy that supposedly foretells the end of the world in December 2012. Given that prophets of various religions have been forecasting the apocalypse for millennia one would be justified in arguing that doomsayers belong to the second oldest profession. In the decades following the Second World War Europe and North America at least were darkened by the shadow of an ever-imminent nuclear holocaust. Now, with the concerns of climate scientists being taken more seriously, anxiety over the end of Nature is a significant worry for many of the world's 7 billion inhabitants. After a brief history of apocalypticism as a frame of mind this paper examines ways in which dramatists on the London stage have given shape to thoughts of Armageddon, including Ewan MacColl, Samuel Beckett, Marghanita Laski, Edward Bond, Raymond Briggs, Philip Ridley and the cycle of ten short plays directed by Nicolas Kent at the Tricycle Theatre in 2012.*
KEYWORDS: *Apocalypse*; *nuclear holocaust*; *London stage*.

We live in apocalyptic times. The greenhouse effect and global warming are already producing a perceptible impact on the climate in every region of the world. Violent storms, strong winds, floods, melting glaciers – the effect of human economic activity on the environment has never been so obvious. The population is increasing, natural and mineral resources are being exhausted, and species of flora and fauna are becoming extinct, blacked out one by one, like lights in a skyscraper at the end of the working day. In December 2009 scientists and heads of state from the whole world met in Copenhagen in a third attempt by the United Nations to reach an agreement capable of reverting the alarming trend, but, just as in the previous conferences, in Rio de Janeiro and Kyoto, the result was insignificant. In the month prior to the conference, the Hollywood film industry, always adept at transforming disaster into entertainment, released *2012*, based on an amalgam of Earth's Crust Displacement Theory with the purported Maya prophecy that the world would end on 21 December 2012. With just six weeks of box-office takings *2012*

was nonetheless the fifth-highest grossing film in 2009 and was undoubtedly responsible for the global dissemination of a sense of anxiety concerning an imminent doomsday.

Since the meaning of the term 'apocalyptic' and its root noun have been subject to a considerable degree of slippage it is important to establish what exactly is under discussion. From its origins in the Greek *apokaluptō*, meaning to 'uncover, reveal' the word Apocalypse (with capital initial) has been used as a synonym for the last book in the Bible, 'The Revelation of St. John the Divine', since the end of the 12th century. A couple of centuries later the word was being used by extension (with a lower-case initial) to refer to any revelation or disclosure. With time the word has been further secularised to refer to 'a revelation, esp. of the end of the world' (THOMPSON, 1995, p. 57) and, most recently, it has come to be used metonymically to refer to 'a grand or violent event resembling those described in the Apocalypse' (THOMPSON, 1995, p. 57). What has occurred over the centuries therefore is that those elements of 'Revelation' which predict the fall of empires and the destruction of the beast have been extrapolated to such an extent that the parts have come to represent the whole. To many modern users of the word, 'apocalypse' means simply the end of the world as such or a scenario of societal breakdown which is so drastic that it resembles the end of the world.

In fact it was probably never the intention of John of Patmos, the author of the book that is now known simply as Apocalypse, to attempt to predict the likely date of the end of the world, although readers for almost two millennia have seen his cryptic and unsettling text as an elaborately encoded work of futurology. In the Glossary they provide to their Notes in the Oxford World's Classics edition of the Authorized King James Version of The Bible (1998), the editors, Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, define 'apocalypse' thus:

> **apocalypse** from the Greek word for 'unveiling'. A literary genre of revelatory disclosures, often about the immediate future, claiming to explain the present state of things in terms of bizarre and esoterical images (highly intertextual) mediated to the seer by an other-worldly being (adjective: apocalyptic) (*The Bible*, 1998, p. 442)

According to this definition, neither the end of the world nor some lesser catastrophe are necessary components of the apocalyptic genre. What has happened, especially over the past few decades, is that apocalypticism has assumed the guise of eschatology, the branch of theology which focuses specifically on 'the four last things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell' (SIMPSON + WEINER, 1989, Vol. V, p. 388); in popular usage at least, 'apocalyptic' has now become a synonym for 'eschatological'. However, as Carroll and Prickett's definition makes clear, the objective of apocalyptic writing is primarily 'to explain the present state of things', rather than to forecast future events. Indeed, theological commentators are careful to draw a distinction between apocalyptic and prophecy. The Bible contains two notable instances of the apocalyptic genre – 'The Book of Daniel', in the Old Testament, and, as mentioned above, the last book of the New Testament, 'The Revelation of St. John the Divine'. The Old Testament also contains various prophetical texts, notably the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as the Books of the minor prophets, such as Amos, Obadiah, Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi. Although the categories of prophecy and apocalyptic are not mutually exclusive they are distinguished by certain important differences, including the formal distinctions here outlined by the theologian H. H. Rowley:

> we must not ignore the curious difference in the form of prophecy in the prophets and in the apocalyptists. The prophets spoke from the standpoint of the present, while from the time of the issue of the Book of Daniel it became a characteristic of the apocalyptists that they threw themselves back into the past, under an assumed name, and put in the guise of prophecy things that were past in their own day as the prelude to their unfolding of the grand dénouement of history which they believed to be imminent. (ROWLEY, 1963, p. 39)

Revelation, or Apocalypse, is generally believed to have been written in the first century AD at a time when the Christians were being persecuted by the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 AD) or, for some scholars, Nero (54-68 AD); indeed, it is likely that the presence of the text's author on the Greek island of Patmos was due to the fact that he had been exiled there by the Romans, a punishment for his Christian faith. While referring to Christ's Crucifixion as 'a Lamb as it had been slain' (Rev. 5: 6) the writer also predicts the destruction of Babylon and the beast (both of which are understood to refer to Rome and its Emperor). Although Revelation characterises the overthrow and downfall of the Roman Empire in disturbingly grotesque imagery, the book also holds out the consolation that, after the catastrophe, a certain number of Christians will reign with Christ over the ensuing transformed world. At the same time, intertextual references to previous apocalyptic writings validate the future predictions – the image of the beast, for example, is drawn from the Book of Daniel. Thus, while Revelation is a prophecy of the imminent future – 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which shortly must come to pass;' (Rev. 1: 1) – , it is also authenticated by references to the recent past and offers a consolatory vision of the impermanence of the trials of the present.

Although the Roman Empire has long since declined and fallen, the symbolic nature of the imagery of Revelation has enabled innumerable other interpretations to be made of the text. Sects, most notably the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, have been founded on particular understandings of the book, confident that the text assures the survival of their select group after God has eliminated the faithless. As a result, the past two thousand years have witnessed never-ending attempts to calculate a specific date for the great cataclysm from the supposed clues hidden within the cryptic language of the Apocalypse. The text offers plenty of numerical data for such attempts, most notably the number identifying the beast: 'Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number *is* Six hundred threescore *and* six' (Rev. 13: 18) – 666, possibly the best-known number in Western literature. Much attention has also been lavished on John of Patmos's division of the various stages of his prophecy into blocks of one thousand years, for example, 'And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years' (Rev. 20: 2), and 'they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years' (Rev. 20: 6). Millenarians, who favour a literal interpretation of these predictions, have therefore forecast the end of the world for the year 1000 and 2000. (In addition, they have utilised other numerological evidence to set Doomsday in 968, 1033, 1260, 1420, 1533, 1588, 1666, and 1843, to list but a few of the failed guesses in the last two millennia.[1])

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[1] A list of 242 dates for the end of the world, together with a summary of the argument underlying each calculation, can be found at <http://www.bible.ca/pre-date-setters.htm>.

However it would be a mistake to think that all millenarians are either cranks or fanatics. Perhaps the most distinguished of them all was Isaac Newton (1642-1727), the founder of modern Physics, over half of whose publications were devoted to biblical prophecy. In his study of literary eschatology, *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode explains the particular fascination of millennial dates as follows:

> The blending together of millennium and apocalypse is primarily attributable to the Bible, where apocalyptic prophecy is often associated, however obscurely, with certain dates or spans of time. Psalm 90: 4 ('A thousand ages in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past') and 2 Peter 3: 8 ('one day is with the Lord a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day') authorized the assumption that since God created the world in six days the history of his creation would run to 6000 years, and be followed by a millennial sabbath analogous to the seventh day on which God rested. This was an idea that conferred a special dignity on millennial dates. A span of a thousand years was a sixth of all the time there ever was or ever would be, and of course the sixth span had to be the last. The moment of moving out of one span of time, into another, especially as there might not be another to move into, remained crucially interesting. (KERMODE, 2000, p. 187)

It can therefore be seen that those who forecast the end of the world for 2012, whether basing their calculations on the Julian, the Gregorian or the Mayan calendar, are following a tradition dating back at least to the Book of Daniel. Latterday apocalyptists may not anticipate that the event will be a revelation of God's will, but their secular belief is no less fervent than that of Judaic Christian millenarians.

It is a fairly safe bet that the world will not end on 21 December 2012 or on any other date in the foreseeable future. On 20 May 2011 the British chain of betting shops Ladbrokes offered odds mischievously fixed at 666,666/1 against the world ending the following day, as forecast by evangelical preacher Harold Camping.[2] Spokesman for the company Alex Donohue acknowledged that they would have had difficulty paying out in the event of any winning bet being placed since the company had 'yet to open shops in heaven or hell' (PREECE, 2011). Even Roland Emmerich, the director of *2012*, was certain enough of the fictionality of his film to attempt to interest backers in a follow-up TV series, which was to have been entitled *2013*. Nonetheless, despite the fact that we have been living with recurrent apocalyptic perspectives for at least two and a half millennia, with each failed prophecy being quickly substituted by a new one, the fascination of apocalypse never palls. The reason for this may perhaps be attributed to our consciousness of our own mortality – the only certainty that any of us have is that our life will end in death. As a result, the disconfirmation of an imminent predicted apocalypse does not invalidate our immanent underlying sense that our world must end, which shapes and informs our individual lives, our artistic production and our very civilisation.

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[2] Harold Camping (1921-), president of the California-based Family Radio Christian radio station from 1958 until 2011, has so far predicted Judgement Day four times – on 21 May 1988, 6 September 1994, 21 May 2011 and 21 October 2011. Given his poor success rate it is not surprising that he finally decided to retire, at the age of 90, in October 2011.

Apocalyptic and eschatological references in English Literature are as old as the canon itself. In *Beowulf*, which J. R. R. Tolkien and other scholars date back to the 8th century AD, although the text is not explicit in its reference to the end of the world, the narrative may be summarised as the apocalypse averted. Christopher Booker (2004) classifies *Beowulf* as being the prototype of the 'Overcoming the Monster' narrative, one of the seven archetypal plots which, he argues, underpin the whole of Western literature. In his Jungian analysis Booker suggests that the fundamental impulse that lies behind each of these seven plots is the pattern of light overcoming darkness, a process that is very clearly at the heart of Revelation. In the case of *Beowulf*, the 'world' whose end is being threatened is Heorot, the mead hall of Hrothgar, King of the Danes, which is suffering nightly depredations by the monster Grendel. Beowulf, a hero from the neighbouring kingdom of the Geats, comes to the aid of the Danes and, by superhuman effort, rids Hrothgar of both Grendel and his furious mother. It is generally believed that the story of *Beowulf* must have existed in the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition long before it was set down in manuscript form by an anonymous Christian monk, who Christianised the pagan source material. Like the Lamb in Revelation, Beowulf must also sacrifice his own life in the defence of his people when, having reigned as King of the Geats for fifty years after ridding the Danish world of Grendel, he dies in the course of the fight against the dragon that is threatening his land – the equivalent of the 'great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads' (Rev. 12: 3).

Throughout the course of English Literature there have been periods of crisis when it seemed that the world's end was imminent. But this sense was never so palpable as in the decades following the explosion of the atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, which marked a turning point not only in the history of the twentieth century but also in the development of humanity. Although the six years of the Second World War had unleashed unprecedented destruction on a global scale, with the industrialised evil of the Nazi concentration camps so appalling that it was almost impossible to assimilate, nobody was prepared for the instant annihilation of two cities. The first atomic bomb had been tested secretly at Alamogordo in the desert of New Mexico just three weeks previously. The language of one of the eye-witnesses, who had observed the explosion from a distance of more than five miles, was Apocalyptic in its imagery:

> The whole country was lighted by a searing light with an intensity many times that of the midday sun… Thirty seconds after the explosion came, first, the air blast pressing against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized. (In COX, 1977, p. 14)

When the scientists who had unleashed this force in their laboratory at Los Alamos became aware of the enormity of what they had done they signed a petition to the American government arguing that Japan should be allowed to surrender before a bomb was used against it. However, since America wished to pre-empt the promised declaration of war on Japan by the USSR on 8 August, the decision was taken to drop the bomb on an unprepared Hiroshima. As neither news of the test explosion nor of the petition were made public only

a tiny group of individuals had any prior notion of the catastrophic event unleashed by the 'Enola Gay' Superfortress bomber on 6 August.

Precise casualty figures as a result of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are impossible to obtain. According to John Cox:

> At least 75,000 people lost their lives at Hiroshima in the first hours after the bomb was dropped. Most were disintegrated immediately by the fireball; the others died shortly afterwards from burns, blast and shock. The eventual death toll was probably 200,000. … The exact number killed at Nagasaki, like Hiroshima, will never be known, but there were certainly more than 40,000 deaths in the first few seconds. For three fifths of a mile nearly all unprotected living organisms – birds, insects, horses, cats, chickens – perished instantly. Flowers, trees and plants all shrivelled and died. Wood burst into flames. Metal beams and galvanized iron roofs began to bubble, and the soft gooey masses twisted into grotesque shapes. (COX, 1977, p. 20 + 22)

This was destruction on a truly Biblical scale. However, little by little, details began to emerge of the fate, probably even worse than death, suffered by the survivors. New words and concepts crept insidiously into the English language – fallout, radiation sickness, genetic mutation. For the writers of science fiction the post-apocalyptic imagery of reality outstripped anything that had previously been imagined.

In the English theatre the first direct response to the dropping of the atomic bomb was *Uranium 235* (1948). The play was written by Ewan MacColl and performed by Theatre Workshop, the influential theatre collective which itself came into being in August 1945.[3] It remained in the group's repertory for five years, touring around the UK from 1946 to 1952. The show was an exercise in didactic pacifism, couched in an episodic structure described here by MacColl himself:

> You needed to explain the whole history of Atomic Energy. So I did this; in many scenes, in a whole series of styles. Energy as a gang boss in a Hollywood gangster movie, Max Planck and Niels Bohr explaining the quantum theory as a couple of knockabout comics with phoney German accents. Einstein as a comic figure. (MacCOLL in GOORNEY, 1981, p. 50)

It would be a mistake to believe that the song-and-dance routines trivialised the serious issues involved. In March 1963 Theatre Workshop would stage *Oh, What a Lovely War*, which used the songs of the First World War, staged in the format of a pierrot revue, to criticise the enormous waste of life resulting from the incompetence of commanders on both sides of the conflict. Staged just five months after the Cuban Missile Crisis the play was a timely reminder of the horrors of war.

However, despite the arms race which resulted from the Cold War rivalry between the USSR and the USA, the English theatre was generally slow to address the growing

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[3] In fact Theatre Workshop evolved out of Ewan McColl and Joan Littlewood's pre-war participation in the Workers' Theatre Movement (1926-35), firstly with their Manchester-based 'Theatre of Action' (1932-4) and subsequently with 'Theatre Union', which espoused the Agitprop theatre born in Russia in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.

threat of a nuclear holocaust. The 1950s saw the publication of a number of novels which depicted the post-apocalyptic consequences of a nuclear war. In England the most successful SF writer in the post-war years was John Wyndham (1903-1969), whose novel, *The Chrysalids* (1955), set in Labrador in the distant future, thousands of years after a nuclear holocaust, became a classic of the genre, but was only adapted for the stage in 1999 by the Scottish dramatist, David Harrower (1966-) in a National Theatre production. Prior to that, in 1951, Wyndham's novel *The Day of the Triffids*, which focussed on other hypothetical consequences of the Cold War, recognised that:

> From 6 August 1945, the margin of survival has narrowed appallingly. (…) [In] the years succeeding 1945 (…) the path of safety started to shrink to a tight-rope along which we had to walk with our eyes deliberately closed to the depths beneath us. (WYNDHAM, 2000, p. 96)

Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) painted a bleakly pessimistic picture of a post-nuclear-war scenario, with the majority of the population of Australia taking the government-sponsored option of suicide. The novel was filmed in 1959, with Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner, and again in 2000, but has yet to be staged in a British theatre.[4] On the other hand, *The Offshore Island* (1961), a play written for BBC television in 1954 by Marghanita Laski (1915-1988), centred around a family that has survived a nuclear war, was transmitted on television on 14 April 1959, and staged for the first time in the tiny Unity Theatre in London in 1960.

On 3 April 1957, almost exactly two years before the television transmission of Marghanita Laski's play, the Royal Court Theatre had staged *Fim de partie*, the one-act play by the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), written in French, which also deals with a group of survivors of a catastrophe who are confined to a refuge in a bleak world from which civilisation has been obliterated. Soon after the première, George Devine, director of the English Stage Company, asked Beckett to translate the play into English. After a long battle with the Lord Chamberlain (the government official responsible at that time for censoring plays in the British theatre) which resulted in twenty-one lines being cut from the play, including the sceptical comment about God, 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!' (BECKETT, 1990, p. 119) the English version of the play had its first performance on 28 October 1958. The play is an unremittingly bleak portrait of the lives of Hamm, blind and confined to an armchair on castors, his lame servant Clov, and his parents, Nagg and Nell, living out their days in dustbins, having lost their legs in a bicycle accident. The physical privations of the characters are echoed in the post-apocalyptic barrenness of the world outside their shelter or refuge. In this world we are told there are no more bicycle-wheels, pap, nature, Turkish Delight and pain-killer; there are no waves on the tideless sea nor gulls in the sky, seeds fail to germinate and the whole universe stinks of corpses for there are no more coffins in which to bury the dead. Although Beckett criticism tends to shy away from literal interpretations of his metaphysical metaphors Hugh Kenner was courageous enough to admit the plausibility of reading *Endgame* as a post-nuclear-holocaust scenario:

> And where is this place? It is here, that is all we can say, here before us, on stage. The set does not *represent*, the set is itself. It has high windows, through which we cannot see, and when Clov mounts his ladder and

[4] An adaptation by Dale Gutzman was staged by the Off the Wall company in Milwaukee in September 2011.

> informs us that there is nothing to be seen, he tells the simple truth, for what can be seen through stage windows?
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> But surely (says the reader again) we are to imagine that it is some other place, surrounded by an outdoors, and that when Clov gazes through the windows and sees nothing he is reporting that the outside has been consumed by some unimaginable catastrophe? Moreover the text alludes to the room before us as 'the shelter', outside of which is death. Are we not to imagine a fallout shelter, perhaps, and the last hours of the last morsels of human life, after perhaps an H-Bomb explosion? The Bomb was much on the mind of Europe in 1957 when this play was published. (KENNER, 1973, p. 121)

Although, as Hugh Kenner says, the Bomb was a source of great concern in the late 1950s, only a handful of other British dramatists addressed Bomb-related issues at that time, including David Campton (*Then…*, 1957), Doris Lessing (*Each His Own Wilderness*, 1958), Robert Bolt (*The Tiger and the Horse*, 1960), Bernard Kops (*The Dream of Peter Mann*, 1960), and David Mercer (*A Climate of Fear*, 1962). Probably the most important work to address the issue in the 1960s was Peter Watkins' documentary-style TV drama *The War Game* (1967), which was scheduled to be broadcast on the twentieth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, on 6 August 1965, but was withheld by the BBC as being too horrifying for public viewing. Nonetheless the film won the Oscar for best documentary the following year, which guaranteed private showings at sufficient cinemas for the film's graphic images and statistics to be disseminated amongst the British population. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Peter Watkins' drama was the portrait of the breakdown of society in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. This in its turn inspired a number of works of post-apocalyptic fiction, notably Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969). The profound pessimism of the period may be gauged from the following extract from an interview Doris Lessing gave in October 1969:

> "I keep on writing," she said. "I consider that professionalism. But I don't see the use of it sometimes. I really do believe there's no use. Sometime in the next few years it's all going to end. It will be the bomb, or bacterial warfare, or we'll simply foul our environment beyond help. We're too stupid to make the decisions we have to make, and so we'll commit suicide. Sometimes I think man is programmed to destroy himself. So writing novels is a useless occupation. I wonder if small groups of us—of mankind, that is—will survive here and there and be able to carry on. I wonder what the conditions of survival would be. You see, these are absolutely the most important questions but nobody cares about them." (EBERT, 1969)

Five years later Doris Lessing did indeed publish her reflections on post-apocalyptic survival, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), which describes the privations and tribulations of life after society has collapsed following an unspecified catastrophe.

In 1971 Edward Bond's short Agit-Prop play, *Passion*, was staged as part of the Festival of Life organised by the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) at Alexandra Park Racecourse on Easter Sunday, directed by Bill Bryden, with a cast of notable actors including Penelope Wilton, Nigel Hawthorne and Bob Hoskins. The Queen and the Prime Minister were presented as satirically drawn archetypes, pressing the button to launch the bomb as though it were a ship setting off on its maiden voyage – "It now gives me great pleasure to press this button and may God bless all who sail in her." (BOND, 1974, p. 61)

In a parody of the Apocalyptic Second Coming, Christ arrives, accompanied by Buddha, only to find that a pig has already been crucified on his cross:

> I am too late. I can't be crucified for men because they've already crucified themselves, wasted their lives in misery, destroyed their homes and run like madmen over the fields stamping on animals and plants and everything that lived. (…) How can one innocent die for the guilty when so many innocents are corrupted and killed? This is a hell worse than anything my father imagined. (BOND, 1974, p. 66)

The best efforts of the CND notwithstanding the nuclear arms race continued unabated through the 1970s and into the 1980s, reaching a pinnacle with the British government's decision in 1981 to allow the US to base cruise missiles at RAF Greenham Common. As from September that year a protest by various women's groups who established a permanent camp outside the base ensured that the subject of nuclear proliferation would remain newsworthy until the last missiles finally left the base in 1991 under the terms of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.[5]

During the early 1980s one of the most eloquent forms of protest against nuclear weapons came in the unexpected form of a cartoon book published in 1982 by the artist Raymond Briggs (b. 1934). Briggs was already well known for his previous comic books, *Father Christmas* (1973), *Fungus the Bogeyman* (1977) and *The Snowman* (1978). The film version of *The Snowman*, first shown on television on Christmas Day in 1982, has become as integral a part of the British Christmas as Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. However, unlike his previous work, *When the Wind Blows* (BRIGGS, 1982) was aimed unequivocally at an adult audience. Although the title is a line from the lullaby 'Rock-a-bye Baby' this is no nursery tale. The narrative portrays a simple working-class retired couple, Jim and Hilda Bloggs, who slavishly follow official government advice on preparing for a nuclear attack. Not surprisingly, such strategies as building a lean-to shelter out of doors unscrewed from their hinges, whitewashing the windows and climbing into paper potato sacks are insufficient to prevent the couple from being fatally contaminated by radiation.

Raymond Briggs went on to adapt the book for the stage (BRIGGS, 1983) and it opened at Bristol's Little Theatre in February 1983, transferring to the Whitehall Theatre in London's West End on 21 April. The theatre critic for the *New Statesman*, Benedict Nightingale, described the play as 'Armageddon seen through the eyes of Mr. Pooter', invoking the lower-middle-class narrator of George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892). He set out the merits of the dramatisation thus:

> What gives the evening its poignancy is the sight of two people doggedly understating the hyperbolic, underrating the obscene, treating the unnatural as natural and the profoundly abnormal as normal. And what gives it greater force than the original cartoon is that those people arc indeed people: visibly three-dimensional, flesh and blood. When Jim and Hilda stare in silent disbelief at the desolate world outside, or share a last cough-sweet, or find that their hair is falling out, or mumble a half-remembered prayer, we feel that, however exaggerated they may be in some respects, they have emotions we can all recognise and identify

[5] The camp itself remained at the base until the year 2000 in protest against the UK's Trident missile programme.

> with. Briggs's play could, I suppose, be accused of being predictable, even monotonous at times; but it adds up to a pretty devastating comment on our collective inability to face what it implicitly insists we must face if we're to have any serious chance of survival. (NIGHTINGALE, 1983, p. 296)

Raymond Briggs subsequently dramatised *When the Wind Blows* for BBC Radio 4, and in 1986 it was released as a cartoon film, voiced by Sir John Mills and Dame Peggy Ashcroft. The success of Briggs's biting satire in four different media is a testament not only to the power of the original cartoon but also to the high level of anxiety about the issues involved.

It was to be hoped that the break-up of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, which effectively brought the Cold War to a close, would have brought an end to concerns about an imminent nuclear apocalypse. However the paranoia of almost forty-five years was not so easily dispelled. In 1991, Philip Ridley's play *The Pitchfork Disney*, later credited as being the prototype of the 'ín-yer-face' movement, demonstrated that the terror of a possible nuclear holocaust continued to be an ever-present nightmare. The play's central characters, the 28-year-old twin brother and sister Presley and Haley, are chocoholic agoraphobics who terrify themselves with drug-fuelled fantasies of a post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland lying in wait for them just beyond the taped-up front door of their inner-city refuge. A desperately bleak play this is *Endgame* Redux.

Ten years later any hopes that what Aleks Sierz describes as 'the nasty nineties' (SIERZ, 2001, p. 30) would be succeeded by the bright dawn of a new millennium were dashed on 11 September 2001. Introducing his survey of British theatre in the first decade of the twenty-first century Aleks Sierz parodied Ian Dury's 'reasons to be cheerful' arguing that:

> The world of the 2000s was a world of fear. Everywhere, there were reasons to be fearful: millennium bug, Frankenstein foods, Ebola virus, genocidal war, bird flu and global warming. (…) The idea of extreme risk grew into a new bogeyman, stalking through our lives and casting horrific shadows across our imaginations. Fear was the whip that compels conformity. Everywhere this was reflected in paranoid, apocalyptic culture: *Spooks, Survivors, State of Play*. (SIERZ, 2011, p. 71)

Although global warming and the end of Nature as presaged by Beckett in *Endgame* half a century ago are undoubtedly the most ubiquitous fears of today, the shadow of nuclear annihilation has now been hanging over us for sixty-seven years. By coincidence the outgoing artistic director of London's Tricycle Theatre, Nicolas Kent, was born in 1945. His swan-song at the theatre recognised this grim synchronicity in *The Bomb: A Partial History*. This was a cycle of ten short plays commissioned from nine playwrights and staged in two programmes on subsequent nights: 'First Blast: Proliferation (1940-1992)' and 'Second Blast: Present Dangers (1992-2012)'. The cycle opened on 20 February this year and ran for five weeks, closing, ironically enough, on April Fool's Day. As Iran, under its stridently fundamentalist government, edges ever closer to the capacity for manufacturing its own nuclear weapons, Nicolas Kent reminds us that this is no time for complacency: the nuclear apocalypse continues to be just over the horizon.

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