Exploring the edges of theatre form and moral values through a practical approach to *Grand-Guignol*

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Fascinatingly nasty

At the end of one of Paris’ dingier narrow streets is a peculiarly small theatre. The alley looks for all the world like the set for a piece of expressionist cinema; one wouldn’t be surprised to have Peter Lorre sidling up to you here, or perhaps you might catch a fleeting glimpse of Nosferatu the Vampire scuttling off into the shadows. Alternatively, you could be the subject of a salacious invitation from one of the district’s whores or have your throat slit as a result of inadvertently looking at someone in the wrong way.

This is Pigalle, a neighbourhood of Montmartre, where images of writers, artists and musicians and their Bohemian life-style jostle for position in the popular conscience with the sleaze and decadence surrounding the prostitutes, pimps and assorted low life who inhabit the area. Here is a place where distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ have been blurred in art and life by their mutually parasitic relationship (‘symbiotic’ sounds far too clean and clinical for this context!) and where the extremes of human desires have been explored, expressed and satiated for the past one hundred and fifty years. For the first half of the last century this tiny theatre, with its 20 by 20 feet stage and 285 seats, was the laboratory in which the most grotesque excesses of human behaviour were laid open to public inspection, and the temple in which the darkest recesses of a human psyche which can conceive of such things was been revered. This is the building that was once known as the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol.

There’s an irony that befits the location of this theatre in that, before its founding in 1897 by Oscar Méténier, the building was a chapel. Deriving from the French equivalent of Punch and Judy, Grand-Guignol suggests mad-cap violence which is both grotesque and comic. However, whereas in a puppet show the characters are clearly immune to actual physical pain and mental anguish, the players of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol had a thousand tricks to convince the audience that what
they were seeing was real and far from comic. In its hey day the theatre was one of Paris' main tourist attractions. A doctor was always on hand to attend to those whose fascination exceeded their capacity to cope with what they witnessed: on average, two members of the audience fainted each night! Perhaps, as with contemporary white-knuckle rides, part of the attraction of the experience was the possibility of having some sort of gross physical reaction! To some extent what happened in this theatre may be considered as no more than a footnote to theatre history; an obscure, slightly obscene little experiment. But how many other theatres can boast that they not only gave their name to a specific genre but introduced a new phrase into the popular language? For Grand-Guignol has now entered the language:

as a general term for the display of grotesque violence within performance media.

(Hand, R & Wilson, M., 2002, p.ix)

This paper will argue that there is much to be learnt by considering how the responses of modern audiences to the plays of the Grand-Guignol are so different from the responses of those who originally flocked to this curious little theatre. I believe that practical work on the genre may help young drama students develop a greater understanding of the relationship between what it is technically possible and what it is morally acceptable to present as drama. Achieving such an understanding is contingent upon recognising how the theatre may seek to imitate or critically dissect horrific events, and how either project relates to the events in actually. The forces that inspired the inception of the Grand-Guignol and kept its doors open for so long are as potent and disquieting today as they ever were. However, the theatrical genre has ceased to reflect how the public cares to consider such forces. By exploring why this might be, students may learn something about the limits of form as well as questioning their own values regarding how theatre could, or should, be used.

A theatre of its time

As a former secretary to the police commissioner, Méténier had access to the most vivid details of the seediest criminal cases. As a writer of tabloid journals he had developed a fine understanding of what startled and titivated the public and had honed his skill in providing the required lurid details while collaborating with André Antoine gave him an appreciation of theatre craft and a conviction that theatre could be a force for reflecting on the state of humanity if changing it. His project at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol involved rejecting the simplistic moralising of the dominant theatre form of the period, melodrama, while taking its drive to perfecting the illusion of reality in a new direction. This would be achieved by drawing on the emerging theatrical force of naturalism whose characters were underpinned by the new science of psychology. As in melodrama, the innocent would be depicted as victims of the slings and arrows of the most outrageous fortune – in extremis! However, while oppression in melodrama is expressed in sometimes quaintly oblique
ways (for example, the villain stereotypically contrives to force the heroine to ‘marry’ him), and the villains invariably got their comeuppance, in the Grand-Guignol no such niceties and neat conclusions would exist. Rather, the extent of human desire would be shown explicitly through the most cruel, sexually deviant and repulsively violent acts it was possible to stage at the time without exploring reason or consequence. In melodrama most sensational scenes centred on those ‘moments when the set does its acrobatics’ (Shepherd, S & Womack, P., 1996, p.222): dams burst, trains crashed, river steamers exploded and ghosts disappeared through walls. In the Grand-Guignol it was the props, rather than the set, that upstaged the humans: a doctor cuts open the brain of his wife’s lover and is stabbed in the skull; a man’s face dissolves when his jilted lover throws acid into it; a one-eyed mad woman sears the face of a fellow inmate on a hot plate. Creating such detailed illusion just feet from the audience, the gratuitously shocking sensation became both horrific but entirely plausible. By ‘extrapolating, as it were, la bête humaine into le monster humaine’ (Hand, R & Wilson, M., 2002, p.x) the Grand-Guignol reminded its audience in graphic detail of the existence of deviants, murderers and lunatics in a recognisable society.

What this theatre didn’t appear to do was present any kind of moral comment on the situations it exploited in the name of drama. In this sense, the Grand-Guignol could be considered to be popular theatre in the worst possible taste:

Grand-Guignol, like sensationalism, like scenic ‘effects’, shows a stage misusing or betraying its own art, moved always to overstep each new limit or stopping point in order to excite the greatest number of people.

(Shepherd, S & Womack, P., op.cit.)

However, while its mission to present ‘a slice of death’, and its obsession with representing rape, torture, murder, mutilation, infection and madness, might now be abhorrent to some, the fact that it was so popular may tell us a lot about the context in which it became so. Furthermore, it may cause contemporary students to examine how social and psychological dynamics change over time, how the way such dynamics are treated dramatically changes, and how they, as a modern audience, respond to such treatments. A consideration, for example, of some of the theatre’s great admirers might cause indignation and consternation in equal measure in that all hues of the political spectrum were represented in the visitors’ book of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. European royalty were frequent guests. Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh was a regular attendee as was Hermann Goering (presumably notwithstanding the Nazis’ official policies regarding what they saw as decadent and immoral). One might ask why such people bothered going to watch such debauchery and violence being represented through the illusion of theatre when they could, and did, cause so much of it to happen for real.

A paradox lies at the heart of the Grand-Guignol in that while it originally sought to explore what it considered to be the universal fear of man’s darker side overthrowing moral order, its representation of this dark side excited as much as it
disgusted. Perhaps like the Absurdist dramatists who followed half a century later, its founder, Oscar Méténier, wanted to demonstrate that believing in progress and reason is impossibly idealistic when set against the cancerous realities of human decrepitude. This might explain why, after just four seasons, Méténier concluded that the Grand-Guignol had made its point. Having lost its novelty, it lost its impact. Méténier sold the enterprise to Max Maurey in 1898. Maurey’s interest was purely financial. For him, horror was a commodity and he set about capitalising on the audience’s thirst for it. Writing about Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Marguerite Alexander noted that ‘cumulative acts of horror bring diminishing returns’ (1979 p.185). In part this may be because the apparent insatiability of an audience’s blood-lust requires ever more startling things to be presented. As it turned out, Maurey and his successors appear to have been adept at meeting such a challenge. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Grand-Guignol was yet to have its heyday.

Echoes of the past

In the programme notes for her production of Titus Andronicus, director Lucy Bailey writes that this early outing by Shakespeare into revenge tragedy is:

relevant to so many things going on in the world today, where terrifying and incomprehensible violence is happening...the savagery of the play is not so removed from our own culture.

(Bailey, 2006, p.14)

In terms of the sheer quantity and nature of violent acts, it is easy to make links between Titus Andronicus, which was first presented around 1594, and the plays presented at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol over 300 year later. Rape, torture, adultery and, most famously, cannibalism, all feature in this play which has been criticised by some for attempting to give such violence a resonance that the play cannot in fact carry. Alexander (1979, p.184), for example, holds the view that ‘suggestions of depth are no more than gloss.’ Some critics have been more forgiving and see the play as an almost juvenile piece of self-indulgence on the part of the novice writer (it is generally considered to be one of Shakespeare’s earliest). In contrast, director of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, Dominic Dromgoole, commends ‘the macabre humour and Grand Guignol’ of the play (Dromgoole, 2006, p ii) while Lucy Bailey identifies an underlying seriousness to its examination of how quickly powerful and ordered cultures can descend into hellish chaos:

(in Elizabethan England) most men would have carried a sword, an instrument of death, and mutilations, hangings, beheadings and burnings were things that common people would have witnessed every day. Our world is reverting to the currency of violence that Shakespeare depicts...Shakespeare does not promote revenge as a way of forwarding a culture, he depicts the end of a civilisation.

Elizabethan revenge tragedy had its roots in the Senecan tradition and was popularised by utilising what modern audiences would now recognise as melodramatic devices. A standard ingredient of such plays involved inflicting pain and suffering in the most ingenious ways imaginable and presenting villains, such as Aaron, delighting in villainy for its own sake:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ have done a thousand dreadful things} \\
\text{As willingly as one would kill a fly;} \\
\text{And nothing grieves me heartily indeed,} \\
\text{But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (Act V, Sc 1)}
\end{align*}
\]

However, mirroring the stance taken by Alexander, theatre critic John Peter of The Sunday Times has asked ‘how much horror can you show, before an audience is overdosed?’ (Saunders, p.23)

**Decline and fall**

As the Elizabethan age evolved into the Jacobean, revenge tragedy became almost sublime in its representation of the employment of imagination and creativity to insidious ends. Is it that an audience becomes overdosed with horror though, or is it that once the novelty of the medium begins to pall, audiences move in other directions in search of satisfaction? ‘It has been suggested,’ says Ronald Harwood (1984, p.150):

\[
\text{that these playwrights (i.e. the Jacobean) were piling on the agony in order to satisfy the jaded palates of their audiences, but this begs the question of why taste should have changed in that direction.}
\]

One possibility is that the theatre of the early 17th century simply began to reflect the growing social and political tensions that ultimately found expression in a bloody civil war. Harwood goes on to suggest that:

\[
\text{There is a parallel in the twentieth century for similar subconscious prophecies. The psychologist Carl Jung noted that many of his patients’ dreams in the 1920s and 1930s were full of horror which he diagnosed as anticipation of the terrible future of Hitler’s Germany.}
\]

At the start of the twentieth century, the Grand-Guignol began to feed on new technologies to create ever more spectacular effects and a developing understanding of psychosis and mental illness to provide new scenarios. Camille Choisy who took over the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in 1915 drew inspiration from both the science and the butchery of WW1 but Paula Maxa, the greatest of all the Grand-Guignol actresses, speculated that the reason for Maurey’s departure was a fear that:
after the real-life horrors of the war, his audience would have no further appetite for the horrors of the stage.

(Hand R & Wilson M, 2002, p.16)

In direct contradiction to this though and as if in support Jung’s observations, the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol reached its peak of popularity during the inter-war years, its final demise coming after the Second World War.

It has been suggested that, once faced with the truth of the Nazi genocide, there could be no place for stylised theatrical horror. In an interview with Time magazine in 1962, the last director of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, Charles Nonon, claimed:

we could not compete with Buchenwald. Before the war everyone believed that what happened on the stage was purely imaginary, whereas now we know that it – and much more – is possible.

(Hand, R & Wilson, M., 2002, p.24)

Such an argument does not seem wholly plausible to me however. A generation of Europeans had experienced, many first hand, unprecedented slaughter in WW1. Many others had doubtless witnessed an array of cruelties dispensed with in the name of colonialism, and public execution by guillotine was not abandoned in France until 1939. What seems more likely than the audience being so shocked and repulsed by reality to the point where it rejected its representation on stage, is that people had come to see that, for the graphic illusion of horrific actions and events, cinema (and eventually television) was more gratifyingly effective. The final decline of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol coincides precisely with both the ascendency of the Hammer horror film and public airings of increasingly shocking newsreels from Vietnam.

Asking how much horror can be shown before an audience is overdosed may be a misguided question. The limits of what might have been seen on stage in Shakespeare’s England or on the stage of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol were not, I suggest, regulated by either the limits of human imagination or any biological pre-conditioning, but by what is perceived as either acceptable or somehow useful in the social context.

Echoes of the future

Where Grand-Guignol as a genre may be seen as fatally flawed was in its inability to offer the audience any new insights into the nature of le monster humaine. Its fascination with psychology was akin to the 18th century pastime of spending Sunday afternoons gawping at the antics of the lunatics in Bedlam, or gaping at public executions in order simply to witness a human in his or her final throes. It offered neither analysis of mental illness or violence per se nor a critique of the public's
responses to it. The Grand-Guignol wasn’t so interested in the motives and morals and the mental and emotional consequences of cruelty, as it was in violent actions and their physical consequences. In this it is distinctly different from the great revenge tragedies that preceded it, and the more contemporary explorations of the extremes of human behaviour. As the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol closed its doors for the last time in the early 1960s, new voices began to emerge on the English side of the Channel. These dramatists, who included Howard Barker, Edward Bond, Peter Barnes and Howard Brenton have been given the epithet of ‘the new Jacobins’ (the collective noun for such a group presumably being ‘an alliteration’!) Their work shared an overt sense of theatricality and a number of themes:

most notably the depiction of violence and a fascination with the grotesque – which were frequently laced with mordant black humour.

(Saunders, 2002, p.19)

In fact, this wave of playwrights achieved some notoriety for showing things on stage which were more explicit than anything that had been seen since the excesses of popular entertainment in the decaying Roman empire: one thinks, for example, of the stoning of the baby in Bond’s Saved and the homosexual rape in Brenton’s The Romans in Britain. However, rather than aiming to titivate or repulse just because social latitude suggested that they could, these writers were attempting to offer audiences new insights by using the medium to make its members reflect rather than simply indulge or react:

To make an audience face its own ideological beliefs, the dramatic form must challenge, not confirm or confuse, the relationship between reason and imagination.

(Katafiasz, 2005, p.26)

The indignation and outrage expressed by some in response to the brutality depicted in such work may be seen as directly proportional to the imperative to explore the existence of such brutality. The typical narrative of the revenge tragedy shows that revenge only leads to more suffering. Titus Andronicus is a fine example of just such a critical commentary. Lucy Bailey’s view that:

The culture of revenge is...one that can only lead to brutalisation.

(Bailey, 2006)

is currently supported by the periodic release of carefully staged videos from Abu Musab Al-Zargawi’s Tawhid group on the one hand, and pictures smuggled out of Abu Ghraib on the other. In her exploration of acts of terrorism, such as the videoed beheading of Ken Bigley, as a form of social interventionist theatre, Jenny Hughes (2005) writes:
Perhaps...in the attempt to understand I am humanising an act that we feel should remain in a frame of the senseless and barbaric. However, I would argue that if I choose to ignore an imperative to understand this act – if I refuse to push the limits of my capacity to make sense – I accept a framing that has been imposed upon me – and that misrepresents this act as senseless violence and those who committed it as uncivilised and barbaric.

The tenet of Hughes’ argument as an academic reserving the right to find a frame through which to enhance her understanding of events, seems to me to mirror that of Sarah Kane, another playwright whose work was attacked vehemently for its depiction of vile acts:

*If you are saying you can’t represent something, you are saying you can’t talk about it, you are denying its existence, and that’s an extraordinarily ignorant thing to do.*

(Saunders, 2002, p.24)

Kane’s Blasted contains graphic scenes of rape, eye gouging and cannibalism while in Cleansed the audience witnesses a ritual mutilation involving a character having his tongue cut out and his hands amputated (a direct replication of what happens to Lavinia in Titus Andronicus). But while these actions seem to come straight from the Grand-Guignol recipe book, the inclusion of scenes of masturbation, fellatio, frottage, micturation and defecation (all those ‘old familiar faeces’ as Michael Billington put it (Saunders, 2002, p.9) confirm that Kane wanted to position her audience in an entirely different places to the writers of that genre.

Evidently, it seems that mankind is never overdosed with horror yet, paradoxically, western societies may be outraged by the way the horrors are dramatised. Certainly, there appear to be no limits to the capacity of individuals and whole governments for imagining ways of inflicting pain and terror. A validation for the study of the way such actions have been dramatised from Seneca, through Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedy and Grand-Guignol, to the more contemporary work of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenshill, is that such a study provides a way of identifying and assessing values towards what horrors exist in actuality, and what constitutes socially acceptable and morally useful dramatisation. Conversely, faced with the apparent moral vacuum of the plays written for the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, students are obliged to position themselves in relation to material which may seem repulsively gratuitous yet laughably trite when set against other experiences of violence, both real and dramatised, available to the modern audience.

Lesley McGill, an English drama teacher who works on Grand-Guignol with her 14 – 15 year old students, observes that:

*even though the events, actions and content of the Grand-Guignol are quite horrific, the students find these funny and fun respectively. Funny because of the attitudes and expressions the characters have.*
Although these are supposed to be ‘real’, the students argue they can’t be. They do have fun though going through the process of trying to make the situations and characters look and sound real. The work does encourage an adult approach to the underlying issues and the discussion work which has evolved from this has been very interesting.

These students clearly perceive the relationship between the production and reception of Grand-Guignol theatre very differently from actors and audiences in Paris over half a century ago. Many young teenagers are fascinated with both fictionalised and real horror and violence; older drama students are captivated by Sarah Kane. My conviction is that by considering how such works fit into a historical, social and aesthetic continuum, they will be better able to critically assess find their own position in relation to such material rather than accepting it because ‘it’s cool’, or allowing it to be imposed upon them as a framework through which to view humanity.

Practical explorations

What follows is a description of a workshop presented as a part of a drama workshop at a drama conference in the UK in 2006. This practical workshop was offered as a part of the research into ‘the theatre of horror’ outlined above in terms of exploring the extent to which delving into the world of the Grand-Guignol could provide participants a lens through which to review their conscious or subliminal values towards theatrical representations of violence. The workshop also sought to examine the degree to which a practical exploration of the Grand-Guignol could prove a useful vehicle for developing students’ skills in making and performing drama:

1. In the first instance, the participants were told a story with a grisly twist to it and were then invited to discuss how the workshop leader had made use of voice, eye contact, pauses etc. to generate an engaging dramatic atmosphere. Working in small groups, the participants shared stories of their own making deliberate use of the techniques modelled by the workshop leader. A more general discussion regarding ‘horror’ as a genre was facilitated by browsing over a number of photographs showing scenes from Grand-Guignol productions. A further storytelling exercise encouraged pairs of participants to explore their own capacity to generate explicitly horrible images through words and actions.

This first sequence of activities was designed to introduce the group to the content of the workshop, provide some contextual details of the genre and invite the participants to begin an exploration of their own capacity to imagine dark events and images. The activities also focused explicitly on the employment of specific performance skills to create mood and tension.
2. In small groups, participants reviewed a number of synopses of Grand-Guignol plays. For example:

At Salpêtrière, a medical school within a lunatic asylum, doctors perform experiments to cure insanity. While the chief doctor, Prof. Marbois, conducts his lecture, an intern, Nicolo, executes his instructions. A first patient is cut open. A second with a bandaged head and paralysed arm, Claire, is wheeled in. She maintains that her arm injury was the result of an experiment at Salpetriere. Marbois assures her that she is suffering from an hallucination. Nicolo is ordered to hypnotise her. Under hypnosis, Claire remembers that it was Nicolo who shocked her with electrical currents and destroyed her nerves. Grabbing a bottle of acid, she hurls it into Nicolo’s face, causing him to fall to the floor in excruciating pain. Claire is dragged off by the orderlies while Marbois launches into a lecture on the antidotes to acid burns.

Using specific aural and physical techniques such as mirroring, chorus and cannon, the groups worked towards a dramatic realisation of their chosen scenario.

The guiding device for this exercise was the ‘line story’ (Kempe, A. & Ashwell, M., 2000, p.182). This technique provides a clear structure for narrative theatre and provides an opportunity to explore the dramatic effect of telling stories in the past, present or future tense, or as a first, second or third person narrative. Teaching young people about these linguistic devices in this kind of context helps them to understand not only what they are but how effective they can be when structuring a dramatic presentation (see also Kempe, A. & Holroyd, J., 2004, pp.62–63)

3. The next part of the workshop introduced a pre-text as a framing device for the extended work to come. The participants were asked to imagine that they were all actors in Paris in 1920. They had been drawn to the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol to attend an audition to join the company. Working on their own they answered a number of questions in order to develop the beginnings of a dramatic character. For example:

What have been their most recent personal experiences of horror?
What do they dream of?
What are they frightened of?
Where have they come from?
What / when was their last job?
How much do they know about this kind of theatre?
Do they have any kind of attitude towards it? If so, what is it?
Where do they hope to go in their lives professionally?
Personally?
From the answers to these questions, each character constructs a speech, constructed and delivered as an internal monologue. Participants move directly from this sequence of monologues into a spontaneously improvised scene in which the 'actors' meet each other for the first time on the stage of Théâtre du Grand-Guignol.

The intention here was to lead the participants into a dramatic narrative which would follow a structure derived from Gustav Freytag’s pyramid:

- **Exposition:** the characters are introduced and the scene is set;
- **Inciting action:** a situation is created which brings characters into potential conflict;
- **Rising action:** circumstances enhance the tension between the characters;
- **Catastrophe:** the tension climaxes in some drastic action;
- **Dénouement.**

In terms of teaching or developing drama skills, the structure here would allow the teacher to guide students in ways of developing a character through creating a backstory, structuring and delivering monologues and sustaining character in an improvisation.

4. By way of inciting action, a sequence of improvised scenes were created in which pairs of characters criticised and insulted other characters, unaware that their conversation was being overheard. This led to rising action: the company of actors attempt to rehearse a scene from a Grand-Guignol play (extracts from genuine plays such as The Bloody Trunk, The Crime in the Madhouse and The Eyes of the Ghost were used). The rehearsal is underpinned by the actors' lack of trust in and liking for each other.

These two sections of the workshop allowed for a discussion on the nature and application of dramatic irony while discovering some of the very considerable challenges involved in rehearsing and presenting a Grand-Guignol script.

5. The suggested catastrophe for each of the groups came directly from an Elizabethan revenge drama, namely Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy of 1589. At the end of this play one of the characters, Hieronimo, has prepared an entertainment in which he and other key characters are assigned parts. In the course of the play he stabs Lorenzo, Bellimperia and Balthazar. The dénouement involves him explaining his reasons before biting off his own tongue, stabbing the Duke of Castile and finally himself. (Cyril Tourner’s The Revenger’s Tragedy of 1607 similarly uses a play within a play as a means of mass assassination). In practice this involved the groups of participants devising a way of blending their
piece of Grand-Guignol script with a plot of their own devising in which something very horrible happened to at least one of the characters ‘for real’ during a performance of the play.

This was a complex and challenging exercise! The difficult lies not so much in the concept of the structure (i.e. a play about something happening ‘for real’ during the course of a performance of a play), but in finding a way of manipulating performance to show the difference between what is ‘real’ and what is fictional when both are, in fact, fictional! The very same dramatic conundrum is explored, albeit it in a very different tone, in Tom Stoppard’s The Real Inspector Hound.

Reflections and conclusions

Reviewing how the holocaust has been represented in art and literature, Trevor Pateman speculates that:

The greatest dangers are probably those of eliciting a voyeuristic pleasure (as when young boys avidly read accounts of torture) and of alternating bewilderment and complacency when pupils are faced with representations on a scale we often call unimaginable.

(Pateman, 1991, p.68)

At the end of the workshop discussion with the participants reflected some of the paradoxes inherent in working with material that challenges both personal, moral and political values as well as practical ability. The general feeling was that the workshop had been fun: there was a pleasure in creating and performing horror and watching how others had tackled the same task. There was an agreement that the material demanded self-appraisal of one’s position towards content and form and the purpose and function of theatre as entertainment and elucidation. And there was an appreciation that reviewing this aspect of theatre history raised questions about the connections between reality and the representation of reality. However, the workshop left the participants undecided as to whether incorporating a study of such material in schools would be desirable or useful. Similar debates doubtless abound regarding the viability of and justification for studying some of the work of Edward Bond or Sarah Kane with students who we can not simply assume have the emotional maturity or political circumspection to find a personal position in relation to it.

Having the opportunity to work practically with a group on the material has led me to the conclusion that there would be a value in exploring Grand-Guignol with students providing that the teacher who does so is clear about their purpose and comfortable in doing so. Indeed, I am grateful to Lesley McGill of Lychett Minster School who has shared with me her ideas for a scheme of work for Year 10 students based on the workshop at the drama conference. The way I see it is that the material is like an étude in that rather than standing as a great composition in its own right, it
tests technical virtuosity by identifying both the limitations of the genre and the players’ ability to give it life. In this way as much is learned through failure to make the thing work as through the successful transition from page to stage. Furthermore, the moral imperatives and parameters involved in dealing with this mixture of form and content are highlighted and so placed in a position whereby they may be critically reviewed.
References


