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“Tangled passions”: realism and lyricism in the plays of Peter Gill

Abstract

This article argues that the work of Welsh theatre director and playwright Peter Gill occupies a unique place in post-1960s British playwriting. Using theatre critic Susannah Clapp’s phrase, it explores Gill’s plays as the “missing link” (Clapp 2002) between kitchen-sink realism and more self-consciously poetic forms of theatre text. Gill’s plays make an important contribution to the history of working-class representation in UK theatre for three main reasons: first, the centrality he gives to Wales, Welsh working-class characters, and the city of Cardiff; second, his emphasis on the experience of women, especially mothers; and third, his focus on young male characters expressing and exploring the complexities of same-sex desire. The plays make advances in terms of realist dialogue and structure while also experimenting with layout, repetition, fragmentation, poetic description, and monologue narration. Gill’s work realistically documents the impact of poverty, cramped housing conditions and social deprivation on his working-class characters as part of a political project to show the lives of Welsh working-class people on stage. While doing so, Gill innovates in his handling of time, perspective, viewpoint, and genre. His plays occupy a distinctive place in the history of British, working-class, gay theatre, helping us to rethink what each of these three key terms means.

Key word

Welsh, queer, working-class, realism, housing

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In 2002, the Observer newspaper’s theatre critic Susannah Clapp described Peter Gill as “a magical missing link in theatrical history” (Clapp 2002). She was referring to the way his work combines social engagement with formal innovation, bridging the traditions of kitchen-sink realism that emerged in the 1950s and the more experimental techniques associated with modernist and later postmodernist textuality. This article looks at the important contributions Gill’s plays make to the representation of working-class lives in the context of post-1960s British theatre, particularly in focusing on Welsh characters, women’s experiences, and the lives of young gay, bisexual or queer men - terms which are kept purposely fluid here since many of the characters do not explicitly self-identify using these words. It explores the subtleties of Gill’s naturalistic dialogue and argues that his use of experimental techniques more often associated with figures such as Beckett, Brecht, and Churchill is frequently prompted by the exploration of female subjectivity and same-sex male desire, as well as operating as a rejection of prevailing negative class connotations around realism as a genre. Central to Gill’s achievement, I suggest, is his ability to show how realist and non-realist techniques enrich one another, crucially documenting previously excluded working-class lives while also using formal innovations to promote a more poetic, plural mode of realist aesthetics.

Clapp calls Gill a “missing link” because he is relatively unknown outside British theatre circles, despite being the author of sixteen plays, former assistant director at the Royal Court theatre in London, founder and first artistic director of the Riverside Studios in London, associate director at the National Theatre, founder of the National Theatre Studio, and a translator and adaptor of Chekhov, Wedekind, and others. Born in Cardiff a few days
after the outbreak of World War II to a working-class family, Gill moved to London after he had finished school to work as a stage manager and actor. He went on to become a director and playwright and has spent most of his professional life in the capital. His first play, *The Sleepers Den*, was written in 1965, and the premiere of his play *As Good a Time As Any* in 2015 marked a writing career spanning half a century.

This article views Gill’s work as a continuation of the working-class renaissance in British theatre, literature and cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, led by figures like Shelagh Delaney, Alan Sillitoe, Arnold Wesker, Ken Loach, and Lindsay Anderson. It discusses Gill’s attention to the housing conditions of his working-class characters, especially the correlation between confined domestic spaces, the social proximity they produce, and a form of dialogue generated by intimacy and physical closeness – dialogue made up of unfinished thoughts, habitual phatic repetitions, deictic specificity, and other types of subtextual emotional exchange. Gill’s work powerfully communicates the pros and cons of living in such close proximity to family and neighbours, especially for female characters, but also employs textual and dramaturgical strategies that open external perspectives on the dialogue of enclosure and claustrophobia, reframing and repositioning his characters beyond the immediate consequences of poverty, violence, and mental illness. Gill’s plays, I argue, rework realism to create shifting rhythms as they transition between genres and styles, positioning the viewer variously inside and outside the realist frame, documenting the real while also subjecting it to a poetics of memory, elegy, and nostalgia.

**Cardiff transformed**

Gill’s work emerged in the context of post-war upheaval, when the capital city of Wales, Cardiff, was at a crossroads in terms of its identity, and plans for urban redevelopment threatened to sweep aside homes and communities. His early plays *The Sleepers Den* (1965)
and *Over Gardens Out* (1968) draw attention to the characters’ cramped housing conditions in post-war Cardiff and the forced proximity that shapes the criss-crossing relationships between women of different generations. That proximity also impacts on young male characters, blurring the boundary between friendship and sexual attraction. Gill’s play *Small Change* from 1976 will bring the lives and complex desires of mothers and sons together in an elegiac and structurally intricate memory play.

In the four decades before Gill’s birth in 1939, Cardiff as a city underwent major changes. Huw Thomas notes that by 1913, Cardiff’s coal exports peaked at 13.7 million tons “at which time it was the world’s largest coal-exporting port” (Thomas 1989, 92). However, the decade before Gill’s birth saw the collapse of the coal trade: “[t]he economic and demographic boom was over by the 1920s, and the docks’ long decline began” (Coop and Thomas 171). During the war, German bombardments damaged thousands of homes; the worst bombing raid took place in 1941, when 165 people were killed, over 400 injured, and more than 750 homes either totally destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. The city’s population had gone from about 2,000 in the early nineteenth century to about 128,000 in 1901, increasing to 230,000 in 1921 (its population growth would slow down in later decades, reaching only 290,000 by 1971) (Coop and Thomas 170-171).

One of the dominant issues in Cardiff’s post-war planning was the city’s acute housing shortage, a subject that shapes many aspects of Gill’s early plays. As Coop and Thomas report, when future Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan was campaigning for a parliamentary seat in the 1945 General Election, representing a working-class constituency in south Cardiff, the housing shortage was one of the issues voters asked him about most frequently (Coop and Thomas 173). With the inauguration of Cardiff as the capital in 1955, only half a century after it had been first granted city status, urban planning sought to remodel the city to reflect its new national role and to cope with post-war de-industrialisation.
As Martin Johnes notes: “in many ways Cardiff’s post-war development was fairly typical of medium-sized UK cities: the shift from a mixed industrial base to a service-driven economy [and] the regeneration of its built environment” (523).

Britain’s leading urban planner, Colin Buchanan, had been commissioned in the early 1960s to outline how Cardiff could be regenerated. Characters in Gill’s drama are often caught up in this post-war modernisation process; his plays chart the transition from the older, closely-knit tenement housing to the new social housing projects, whose inhabitants would become more anonymous, more numerous, and eventually, more international in origin. The Buchanan Reports from 1964 onwards and the main study of 1968 were controversial because they proposed large-scale urban redevelopment that “necessitated clearance of existing property” (Coop and Thomas 180). Buchanan’s plans for Cardiff involved creating “a compact city centre worthy of being the focus of a nation” but “many residents were less convinced because of the need for large-scale compulsory purchases of homes in order to expand the civic centre and build a major inner-city highway” (Johnes 515). Gill’s early work captures the positives and negatives of living in the pre-Buchanan back-to-back houses: the cramped, crowded rooms shared by several generations; the claustrophobia and sense of entrapment, especially for married women, but also the feeling of community derived from friendships between households and neighbours.

*The Sleepers Den*, published in 1965, is set among the closely-packed houses of 1960s Cardiff. Its central character, Mrs. Shannon, is an agoraphobic woman who lives with her sick, elderly mother Old Mrs Shannon, her brother Frankie, and her teenage daughter Maria, three generations of a family crammed into the one small house (back-to-backs were small terraced houses, surrounded on three sides, composed of three or four rooms on top of one another which often served as both living and sleeping space, usually without indoor toilets). The debt collector is a constant threat. The impact of the proposed sweeping changes
to the housing stock, and the opposing views about this, are evident in the following exchange between Frankie and a young woman, Mary, who has come to visit the ailing Old Mrs Shannon on behalf of the religious organisation The Legion of Mary:

[…]

Mary My mother was born over here.

Frankie Go on.

Mary Yes. North William Street.

Frankie Blimey. How old are you?

Mary Mind your own business.

Frankie This is all coming down, you know.

Mary Is it? When?

Frankie Well, we’ve had quittance. But they’ll never do it.

Mary Have you indeed? Just as well, really, don’t you think?

Frankie Indeed I don’t. This is where we lives. Let them pull their own places down.

(2002, 44-45)

While the Buchanan Plan proposed mandatory housing clearance, the character of Frankie voices the objections of residents “politically neutralized by the coalition of interests at all levels of government” (Coop and Thomas 180). From Frankie’s perspective, it is a matter of class conflict, the implication being that working-class homes and communities are dispensable – his attitude to those in power summed up by the line: “[l]et them pull their own places down”. For Mary, visiting an area connected to her family past (her mother was born there), the imminent housing clearance is more welcome, her comment “Just as well, really, don’t you think?” implying that she believes the homes deserve to be demolished. Frankie’s
rejoinder, “this is where we lives”, the non-standard first-person plural locating him in class and geographical terms, conveys his sense of belonging to a distinctive local community, despite the poor-quality housing conditions.

In *The Sleepers Den*, the emphasis is often on how women are affected by these overcrowded houses, in which they are trapped and oppressed, but where they also find female friendship and support from neighbours. The play feels startlingly contemporary in terms of the observational directness it brings to the depiction of women’s lives, touching on questions of ageing, illness, and the challenges of being a working-class mother in 1960s Cardiff. Even in his first major play, Gill’s subsequent themes of family tension, suffocating intimacy, the spectre of poverty, and a society on the brink of transition—a community striving to articulate its sense of place and identity—are evident. The enforced social proximity of the characters is reflected in dialogue which often registers mood, unspoken affinities, or emotional cross-currents. It is compact and compressed. In *The Sleepers Den*, the intimacy of the three female generations who live together is conveyed by the way the characters echo one another, their phatic, elliptical, and repetitive dialogue shaped by long periods in a shared space. Maria and her mother Mrs Shannon are talking while Old Mrs Shannon is dozing:

**Maria** Come on, Nana, let me comb your hair?

**Mrs Shannon** Oh, don’t comb her hair this time of night.

**Maria** Come on, Nana. Where’s the comb? Where’s the comb, nana?

**Mrs Shannon** Look.

**Maria** Nana. Where’s the comb?

**Mrs Shannon** Look. Look. How should I know? You don’t want the comb.

**Maria** I do. (*She walks about, frustrated.*) Where’s Frankie’s comb, Mama?
Mrs Shannon Christ, there. There’s the comb.

Maria gets the comb.

Maria Haven’t we got a better one?


Gill here communicates the repeated ritual of haircombing between granddaughter and grandmother, an act of care and touch across generations, while at the same time registering the undercurrents of irritation this occasions, especially for Mrs Shannon. Gill focuses our attention on the minutiae of everyday life: the specific comb and its owner; the minor domestic frustrations of objects lost and found; the responsibility for knowing where things are displaced onto Mrs Shannon as the mother-figure, all imbued with the fatigued familiarity of the characters’ linguistic mirroring. The half-articulated assumptions, the frustrations, the sudden impatience, all bespeak repeated family routines and habits.

Gill’s focus on the dynamics of intimacy rather than the mechanics of plot becomes more obvious in comparison with the work of another British playwright dealing with working-class communities in the late 1960s, David Storey. Storey’s 1969 play In Celebration, written only four years after The Sleepers Den, features the return of three sons to their family home in Derby, a medium-sized city in the English East Midlands, to celebrate their parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary. The play touches on generational conflict and the relationship between class, identity and labour. In the opening scene, Shaw, a 64-year-old miner, is welcoming his youngest son, 33-year-old Steven, whom he has not seen for some time, back to the family home:

Shaw […] Make yourself at home…Mind where you put yourself. She’s puffed up every cushion, straightened every chair. It’s like being in the army… (He goes out to the kitchen. Off.) How long are you staying?
Steven I’ll have to get back tomorrow.

Shaw (off.) How’s your work going?

Steven All right.

Shaw (popping in the door.) I wish I got half of what you got, I can tell you: and for doing twice as much. I wouldn’t mind.

(1994, 95)

For Storey, each phrase contains a clear implication about the characters, allowing us to make explicit deductions about their relationship, attitudes, state of mind, and emerging source of class conflict. The dialogue is carefully managed so that each phrase has a determinate function; nothing is throwaway, superfluous, or circuitous. Gill’s writing, in contrast, using the example of the quotation above, evokes shifting moods and emotional undercurrents, a subtext of habit, proximity and almost telepathic intimacy. Whereas Storey’s writing operates through an accumulation of dramatically relevant information, Gill’s offers us the contracting and dilating rhythms of boredom, irritation and domestic frustration.

Alongside Gill’s ear for the subtleties of familial communication, he also presents us with characters on the edge, collapsing under the pressure of conflict, poverty, or caring responsibilities. In Act 3 of The Sleepers Den, Mrs Shannon sounds almost like a Beckett character - Mouth in Not I comes to mind - as her dialogue fragments and repeats itself: “[…] Stop laughing. They’re laughing at you. Don’t belittle yourself. Don’t join in with them. It started over nothing. Don’t laugh. Come on. Come to me. Come on, lovey, to me. It’s alright. Stop it. Stop it. Let them just think on. You silly fool. You silly” (56-7). Gill highlights the inordinate pressure on working-class women required to hold households together in the face of poverty and economic hardship. By disrupting the nuanced realism of his naturalistic dialogue with a fragmentary interior monologue, he gives Mrs Shannon a special form of
textual attention here, charging her vulnerability with poetic intensity. In breaking the realist frame, Gill highlights the playwright’s management of language, creating a kind of double perspective whereby the character is no longer speaking or thinking solely within the limits of psychological realism, but instead also acts as a vehicle for poetic language and its efforts to verbalise the character’s unspoken emotional pain. The writer’s own act of poetic creation becomes visible in speeches like this; the textual experiment does not undermine the play’s more general realism but instead complements it.

**Working-class lives**

Writing in 2008, Gill describes what Britain was like in the early 1960s at the start of his career:

> There was an unreconstructed Tory party in government and a Clause 4 Labour party in opposition. The trades union movement was flourishing, the hereditary principle was safe in the House of Lords, convicted murderers were hanged, homosexuals lived outside the law, divorce was obtained principally by the well-heeled, racial equality was a leftist dream, the theatre was censored, contraception was primitive, and everything was on the cusp. (2008, 11)

As Gill says, this was a Britain in which Labour, the party in opposition, was still committed, through Clause 4 of its constitution, to socialism in the form of common ownership of the means of production, i.e., nationalisation (a new Clause 4 no longer advocating nationalisation would later be controversially adopted under Tony Blair’s leadership in 1995). It was before a whole series of progressive reforms: the abolition of capital punishment in Great Britain in 1965, hence the reference to convicted murderers being
hanged; the legalisation of homosexual acts in England between men over 21 in private in 1967; the 1965 Race Relations Act, banning racial discrimination in public, and before the end of state censorship of theatre via the Lord Chamberlain’s office with The Theatres Act (1968).

In terms of British literature, cinema and theatre, the “kitchen sink” movement of writers such as John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, Shelagh Delaney and Stan Barstow often centred on socially alienated young men, as in Sillitoe’s short story “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner” (1959), adapted for film in 1962, whose titular hero became synonymous with social isolation. Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* from 1958, made into a film in 1960, took readers and cinemagoers into industrial communities like working-class Nottingham. Arnold Wesker’s *The Kitchen* (1957), based on his experiences as a kitchen porter at the Bell Hotel in Norwich, explored the experiences of waitresses, chefs and porters in the basement kitchen of a busy restaurant. Later in the 1960s, Edward Bond’s *Saved* (1965) would stage the urban violence, ennui, and sexual frankness that marked the lives of young working-class Londoners with a new directness.

For Gill, the emphasis on working-class lives was long overdue: “[i]n the British theatre it seemed as if, between 1918 and 1945, nothing but the fears and miseries of the middle class had been dramatized, as if nothing of significance had happened to anyone who wasn’t well-heeled” (2008, 16). Not long after he wrote his first play, Gill saw Pinter’s *The Homecoming*, which premiered in London in June 1965, and observed that “[…] the first act seem[ed] to me as powerful an image of an aspect of working-class family as I had ever seen” (2008, 22). Yet while *The Homecoming* was dominated by male characters engaged in the brutal treatment of a female outsider, Gill’s work concentrated on putting female characters at its centre, exploring women’s relationships, friendship, marriage, and physical and mental health, with husbands and older men often notably absent.
In the midst of this new literary and cinematic emphasis on working-class lives, Gill took inspiration from D.H. Lawrence, whose plays, largely neglected until the 1960s, represented working-class characters in their own right, making them the subject of his work rather than supporting cast for important upper or middle-class characters. Gill directed Lawrence’s play *A Collier’s Friday Night* at the Royal Court, London, in 1965, the same year *The Sleepers Den* premiered, and then included it as part of a trilogy of Lawrence’s plays (the other two were *The Daughter-in-Law* and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*) which he directed at the Royal Court in London in 1968 to great acclaim. These productions were credited with reviving interest in Lawrence’s plays, which had first been written between 1909-1913.

In Gill’s words, Lawrence “projected the figures, particularly the young working-class women he portrayed, as unequivocally themselves, as much the centres of their drama as Hamlet is of his” (2008, 41; my italics). The trilogy explores issues such as living conditions, labour, patriarchal masculinity and female oppression, domestic violence, and the importance of touch. As Gill said of Lawrence’s first play, *A Collier’s Friday Night* (c.1909): “[It was] unperformable in the theatre of its time. It’s a revolutionary play, although people haven’t understood why. There was nothing Ibsenite about it, no European intellectualised context, no Shavian project” (quoted in Costa 2008). For Maddy Costa, “Lawrence simply depicted working-class people and their tangled passions with a lyricism and richness of emotion they hadn’t previously been afforded. And that, in itself, was an act of striking political and artistic radicalism” (Costa 2008). As well as drawing inspiration from Lawrence’s reproduction of working-class idioms and speech patterns, Gill saw in these spoken rhythms a lyricism he would take in more overtly poetic directions, the “tangled passions” of Lawrence’s mining communities evolving in Gill’s texts to explore the dynamics of female friendship and same-sex male desire.
From early in his playwriting career, then, Gill’s writing sought to do two things simultaneously. The first was to rethink realistic dialogue, inspired by Lawrence and Pinter, but also borrowing techniques from Chekhov such as digressive observation, interwoven conversational fragments, and the use of recurring poetic motifs. From Lawrence, he took the use of idiomatic spoken language, and from Pinter, the linguistic tics of repetition, redundancy and circularity. His writing sought to capture the speech patterns of particular working-class Welsh communities, specifically from inner-city Cardiff, rejecting conventional conflict-driven, turn-taking dialogue. At the same time, he employed more overtly stylised techniques inspired by writers like Brecht and Beckett, interrupting his subtle dialogic realism with experimental monologues, poetic motifs, or sections of prose narration. The interaction of realistic dialogue with more avant-garde poetic writing techniques was part of his political agenda, enacted both at the level of visibility and representation, and at the level of textual aesthetics and poetics. He would show us working-class Welsh characters and voices previously excluded from the major British theatre stages while also re-working realism to incorporate the poetic and the elegiac, the social and material pressures of the present, interwoven with the multiple temporalities of subjectivity, consciousness and memory.

Class and realism

Gill’s relationship to realism and its aesthetics is complex. Writing in 2008, he is concerned to dismantle the class snobbery around realism that categorises it as a merely sociological genre, associated with lower-class (in the pejorative sense) lives and social problems like “sanitary conditions” (p. 45). It is the same attitude that views realism as “a lazy, dull approximation of the surface of things, an unexplored, undigested compromise that is concerned with the eccentricities of the individual” (2008, p. 45). Instead, Gill’s work both
incorporates and reworks realism as part of a political critique of such classist assumptions. It is an extraordinary balancing act.

Behind this strategy is his attack on the elitist idea “that sensibility cannot co-exist with poverty” (2008, 47). These plays show us working-class Cardiff communities in action, offering a materialist account of the way poverty and substandard housing conditions impact on people’s identities and futures. Yet, in the process, his writing challenges realist conventions around dialogue, linear time, and the relationship between spoken words and inner thoughts. As we see in Small Change (1976), interwoven temporalities and shifting stylistic forms create a poetic memory-text in which the realist details of the past become elegiac and narrative techniques like prose-poem monologues offer an external, nostalgic tonality to the evocation of the post-industrial landscape and its detritus.

Small Change brings together Gill’s themes of female friendship, male sexuality, and working-class community. The play has four main characters, Mrs Driscoll and Mrs Harte, and their two sons, respectively, Vincent and Gerard. The line between friendship and love is blurred for the two young male characters as we trace their changing emotional lives. This relationship is conducted in counterpoint to the exploration of their mothers’ friendship throughout the play.

Small Change captures Cardiff in a period of transition by juxtaposing the experiences of pre-war and post-war generations. The action shifts across different time periods, from when Vincent and Gerard are schoolboys, through their adolescence, early twenties, and even later in their lives after their mothers have died. The play choreographs time so that voices from different decades intersect and overlap in a fluid, melancholic text permeated by grief and loss as words and images form motifs.

The play opens with a series of extended character monologues, telling us from the beginning that it will depart from standard forms of realism. As it progresses, Gill’s characters
simultaneously live out and comment on their lives, ruminating on how changing social structures make it difficult for them to find a clear role within the family. Male characters are often perceived as solid and intransigent—“Heavy, big, dark thing that he is,” Mrs Harte remarks of Mrs Driscoll’s husband (150)—while female characters suffer a loss of identity to the point of invisibility, as Mrs Driscoll says, “I feel as if I’m not here. I feel as if I don’t exist at all. How can I exist?” (148). The women’s husbands, as often in Gill’s work, are oppressive but absent, while women face the physical and mental pressure of keeping families together in the face of poverty.

Gill repeats phrases and images, from Mrs Harte’s refrain, “The war finished me off. It started everything, and it ended everything” (114), to the recurring reference to a dead boy lost at sea, first mentioned in Mrs Harte’s opening monologue ‘Oh, he was a lovely boy, Jimmy Harrington. Oh, he really was. He was lost at sea’ (114) and then when Mrs Harte recollects him for the final time at the end of the play. Capturing the ebbing and flowing temporality of the text, a further, linked motif is the danger of going swimming when the tide is out, a source of maternal anxiety and male bonding. Indeed, the text as a whole is modelled on currents and flowing impressions, weaving together the mundane and the traumatic. Grief pervades the play as vestiges of an individual life and the aftermath of urban deindustrialisation mirror one another. Vincent notes after his mother’s death “She left cupboards and cupboards of clothes…,” and Gerard responds about his own mother, “She left jewellery mostly. Rubbish really, but very pretty” (165).

A few scenes later, in an extended prose monologue, Gerard observes the post-industrial landscape from a train window, a perspective physically and formally separated from the main action and locations of the play’s events. Gerald’s poetic I/eye becomes almost depersonalised, allowing the voice to adopt an external, authorial objectivity, gradually noting and thematising the colour red, giving poetic order and rhythm to a landscape that...
otherwise disappears in literal and metaphorical senses as the train journeys through it:
“[t]hen the red starts. Dark, dark red […] Llanwern turning red with dust. Miles of blue laminated boxes under red dust. The green between the two towns has hedges, they’re red. Red pullovers on lovers with a dog, one red arm around another red shoulder” (172). The poetic memory text, a kind of reverie, is interrupted by a line of dialogue from Vincent, “What, you home then for a couple of days like, I suppose?” (172), exemplifying the play’s polyvocal quality, its shifting linguistic registers, as here, when dialogue suddenly relocates us to a present that is also past, creating a dualistic sense of temporality.

As Susannah Clapp has written about Small Change, “[h]ere’s a play that proves that realism need have nothing to do with putting lots of plumbing onstage and which moves convincingly from the dreariest of practical details to a lush lyricism” (Clapp 2002). For Gill, the “tangled passions” of his working-class characters need to incorporate fluidity and elegy, nostalgia and a poetics of memory, to include both the realistic reproduction of working-class lives and locations, and the poetic evocation of them retrospectively, reframing and repositioning them. In doing so, Gill both preserves the important, to use his term, “sociological” function of realism, to document, validate and disseminate the real, while short-circuiting the class-based critique of the genre by inflecting it with a poetic, elegiac “sensibility”, again, Gill’s term, without allowing one mode to dominate or invalidate the other.

“Tangled passions”: dramaturgies of queer (in)visibility
From the start of his playwriting career, the “tangled passions” of Cardiff’s working class communities crucially included for Gill issues of male sexuality and the expression of same-sex desire. One of his most distinctive achievements as a playwright is portraying gay male sex and sexual attraction as an integral part of the communities he writes about, socially
hidden but theatrically visible, a source of potential guilt and social shame, but also of erotic pleasure and frank and sensuous expression. Gill’s experiments with form integrate queer otherness into ostensibly heteronormative communities, stylistically making visible what is hidden and excluded in realistic terms. His representation of same-sex male desire becomes more explicit in the plays of the 1970s and 1980s (*Small Change*; *Mean Tears* (1987)), culminating in overtly gay-themed works in the 1990s and onwards in which gay male characters dominate the action (*Certain Young Men* (1999); *The York Realist* (2001)).

It was only as recently as 1959 that Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* became “the first modern British play to depict a working-class homosexual” (de Jongh 1991). Gill would take up this legacy in subsequent decades. *Over Gardens Out* from 1968 combines the representation of adolescent sexuality and social alienation, tracing the attraction between young male characters Dennis and Jeffry. The play contains Gill’s signature shift into more experimental writing in Scene Eight, which is composed of three and then two parallel dialogues reproduced side by side on the page (2002, 93-5). In the scene, Jeffry is feeding a baby while Dennis utters dialogue fragments that capture his dissociated thought process. On the page, the line breaks look and sound like a poem:

**Dennis** […]

Sick. This is the worst.

There was nothing.

It was only over.

This isn’t nothing. You have stopped. That. In it.

On the ground. Your chest is burnt out. [...] (95)
In their elliptical form, sequences like this resemble the disjointed experimental language found in much later Caryl Churchill plays like *Heart’s Desire* (1997) rather than conforming to models of “kitchen-sink” realist dialogue.

In *Small Change* and to greater effect in his 1997 play *Cardiff East*, Gill’s choice to keep all the actors onstage during the performance creates a complex stage community even when the real community being depicted is divisive or exclusionary. The stage directions at the start of *Small Change* note that “None of the characters leaves the stage” (2002, 111), which immediately encourages the audience to find correspondences between the two generations, mothers and sons. The device operates as a visible, embodied counter-narrative to the social alienation, sexuality-shaming, and gender stigmatisation of the society being depicted. It communicates to spectators the idea that this community survives not merely *despite* but *because of* its conflicts and contradictions, conveying to us the playwright’s own perspective, which integrates same-sex male desire into communities that render it taboo or shameful. The device allows him to chart the real as well as staging alternative perspectives on it from within the present moment of the action and from the future position of the playwright looking back at a repressive past. Indeed, it could be said to stage a hypothetical, utopian future for his queer characters.

*Cardiff East* contains many of the themes familiar from Gill’s earlier work. First performed at the Cottesloe auditorium of the National Theatre, London, in 1997, it is undoubtedly Gill’s most ambitious play to date, with a cast of 17 characters, and has been influential on later work such as Owen McCafferty’s *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2001), set in Northern Ireland and which Gill himself directed at the National in 2003. *Cardiff East* distributes dialogue between duos and larger groups of characters to give a symphonic quality to the lives of his working-class Cardiff community. Gill’s characters come together and
disperse while the dialogue moves from laconic exchanges to expositional monologues that create distance from the prevailing realism, taking the characters outside their own lives like external storytellers. In doing this, Gill gives them a critical distance from their own immediate living conditions and experiences, establishing a utopian position which places them simultaneously inside and beyond the poverty and social deprivation being represented. The play deals with housing problems, alcoholism, mother-son relationships, female friendship, hidden gay male sexuality, abortion, and religion. It also highlights questions of Welsh identity and urban and social change more explicitly than in Gill’s earlier plays. Characters ask what it means to be Welsh (Gill 2008: 92) and the overlapping languages of Cardiff’s different ethnic groups (95-6) (including Portuguese, Greek, Somali, Welsh, Italian, Irish and Spanish) build a picture of the cultural diversity that marks the city in the 1990s. Gill’s characters refer to the social tensions related to increased numbers of immigrants and their perceived preferential treatment by the local council, counteracting any romanticised view one might have of working-class communities undergoing a period of social transition. As one of the female characters, Dolly, says: “Them Somalis have got the only four-bedroom house around here” (96).

Gill incorporates same-sex male desire into the play through the relationship between two young men, Neil and Tommy, who have sex with each other despite having girlfriends. In the fictional world of working-class Cardiff, these characters are enmeshed in complex communities and are highly visible, yet the expression of their sexuality remains out of sight – furtive or erotic, loving or urgent – except, of course, to the spectators or readers of Gill’s play. Neil and Tommy’s sexual attraction and intimacy are fundamental to their masculinity, friendship, and life in the community. Gill uses parallel and overlapping dialogue to generate this structural inclusion in spite of the social exclusion of their sexual practices. The scenes in which Neil and Tommy flirt or negotiate sex occur alongside those featuring heterosexually
intimate couples and duos of characters who are present on the stage throughout. For example, the alternating duologues between Neil and Tommy and those between mother and grown-up son, Stella and Darkie, halfway through Scene One (2008, 19), mirror one another to form a kind of composite dialogue of all four voices: the lives of young gay/bisexual/queer men intersect with others’ lives in a community of voices where different sexual identities co-exist but family dynamics seem to resemble one another. By keeping all the characters onstage throughout the play in Small Change and Cardiff East, Gill crafts a powerful metaphor for a simultaneous presence and absence, a theatrical visibility that offsets a lived invisibility and secrecy. The playwright creates onstage the community of plural desires which in actuality exists but cannot be acknowledged in public. In a sense, the theatrical recreation of that world in which his characters’ stories and experiences are woven together and co-present to one another is an act of reparation, a desired resolution to homophobic oppression and sexual self-denial. It is both realistic and utopian, finding space to depict exclusionary homophobia and to metatheatrically model its dissolution.

Conclusion: realism, class and sensibility

This essay has explored the idea of Gill as a “missing link” between working-class realism and textual experimentalism in post-1960s British theatre, demonstrating Gill’s political commitment to making working-class lives visible on mainstream stages while also innovating textually and dramatically. Crucially, he enlists formal innovation as part of an aesthetically-enacted critique of the way realism has been negatively castigated as a sociologically well-intentioned but artistically limited dramatic exercise in visibility politics. As Gill says, ‘[t]here is a class element in the continued attack on realism in the theatre’ (2008, 46), his own work self-consciously demonstrating the inaccuracy of the conflation of realism, poverty and the absence of artistic sensibility. As well as making an important
contribution to the history of working-class British theatre because of its focus on Welsh lives, and adding to this with its complex portraits of working-class women, his writing portrays same-sex male desire in relation to latent homophobia and social exclusion in a way that is often intensely erotic, turning sex that should ostensibly be a source of shame into a source of remarkably guilt-free pleasure and passion.

As in the work of leading British playwright Caryl Churchill’s, formal innovation in Gill’s playwriting is central to his political objective to represent working-class lives from new angles and to dislodge dramatic conventions that might make his plays predictable or reductive. Gill’s dramas constantly surprise us with moments of linguistic playfulness and poetic lyricism without undermining his project to document his characters lives. On the contrary, poetic sequences that foreground linguistic play lead us back to the nuances of Gill’s own sophisticated realist dialogue, attuned to the way language operates through gaps, pauses, suggestions and intimations, the subtextual choreography of intimacy rather than the overt expression of impulses, thoughts and emotions.

Gill’s work in plays like The Sleepers Den, Small Change and Cardiff East is able to revalidate realist aesthetics by showing their interplay with more overtly stylised techniques, converting the interplay between realism and formal innovation into a meta-textual mechanism for focusing attention onto hidden psychological suffering (linked to mental health, anxiety, social alienation) or excluded sex acts and sexualities. Such non-realist devices often create external perspectives on the realism at the heart of his plays, opening them up to elegy, nostalgia, the poetics of memory and the interplay of different temporalities. They indicate the creative, compositional presence of the writer, searching for new forms of language or structure, registering his perspective from the future on the past lives he is representing, staging a dramatic present that is layered with melancholic figurations of its loss and the utopian presentiment of its future translation into theatre. His
work preserves the aesthetics of realism, the quest to document the real authentically and objectively, but is interwoven with an experimental poetics which stops us (or the characters dramatized) being frozen in the historical and geographical specificity of the documentary real and instead opens the events in the plays up to reminiscence, nostalgia, displacement and reconstruction.

Word count: 6423 (excluding ‘works cited’)

NOTES

1 For further biographical information, see Norris 11-15.
2 Ciaran Jones, “German bombs lit up Cardiff ‘like daylight”, South Wales Echo, 10 January 2011, p. 17.
3 His professional involvement with Chekhov’s work ranges from directing the plays, for example, The Cherry Orchard in 1978 and Uncle Vanya in 1995, to producing his own version of The Cherry Orchard which he directed in 1995, and a new translation of The Seagull which he directed in 2000.

WORKS CITED
Jones, Ciaran, “German bombs lit up Cardiff ‘like daylight’”. South Wales Echo. 10 January 2011, p. 17.