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Justice, Fear and Public Safety (in the Age of Terror): Anthony Weigh's *2,000 Feet Away* (2007).

ABSTRACT

Australian-born, British-raised playwright Anthony Weigh set *2000 Feet Away* in the American midwest, which reflects the internationalism of modern culture. This is also apparent in the play's original international productions, including Belvoir Downstairs (2007), London's Bush Theatre (2008) and Chicago's Steep Theatre (2010). The play's title refers to legislation requiring registered sex offenders to maintain that minimum distance from child-frequented places and the play explores the conflict and controversy surrounding the subject through an offender and the residents of the quintessential rural community where he attempts to resettle: Eldon, Iowa, site of Grant Wood's iconic painting, *American Gothic* (1930). Weigh shrewdly uses this scenario to suggest other social and cultural conflicts, including those of sexual identity politics, immigration, crime and terrorism, issues which frequently elicit fear and intolerance in today's media-permeated culture.

KEYWORDS

Australian
theatre
2000 Feet Away
sensationalism in
mass media
sexuality
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INTRODUCTION

When Australian-born, British-educated dramatist Anthony Weigh set his debut play *2000 Feet Away* in the American midwest, he illustrated some of the global perspectives and contexts of contemporary culture. The play's international productions at Belvoir Downstairs (2007), London's Bush Theatre (2008) and subsequently in Chicago's Steep Theatre (2010) underlined that international context while also highlighting the play's cultural engagement with major social and political conflicts and controversies played out in the global mass media. The play's title refers to a 2005 law in Iowa—later introduced in several other US states—requiring registered child sex offenders to keep that distance from places where children gather (www.iowasexoffender.com). In practice, this piece of legislation intended to

keep children safe probably aggravated community fears while backfiring as a police measure since individuals evicted from their homes often became untraceable (Shuttleworth 2008). In exploring popular responses to child abuse and public demands for safety through the figure of a sex offender and the residents of the small town where he attempts to resettle—Eldon, Iowa, site of Grant Wood's iconic 1930 painting *American Gothic*—Weigh's play also resonates with other contemporary social and cultural conflicts marked by collective fear and intolerance in today's media-permeated culture.

Weigh's play attracted mixed reviews. Several found fault with its fragmentary, unfocused structure and sketchily-drawn characters (Dunne 2007), or its supposedly glib moral message (Wolf 2008). However, the play's episodic nature is clearly deliberate, with its eleven speaking roles and its emphasis on the spoken word, along with the nine unnumbered but *titled* scenes—which suggests a short-story collection or a loosely-drawn novel. The result, however, is a very vivid, distinctly polyphonic work, which shows the ways that contemporary societies—not only in the rural US—respond to perceived threats to their values and security. Arguably the play resonated and continues to resonate not only with media discussion of crime but also with the public discourse surrounding national security. Through a seemingly sketchy or superficial approach, Weigh exposed cultural fault lines, blind spots in dominant ideology and social-order discourse.

SEXUAL IDENTITY AND MARGINALIZATION

In the original, Belvoir Downstairs production, Weigh's 'Prologue' scene was itself preceded by the drawing of a boundary onstage—this in a small theatre which seated perhaps fifty people - as a chalk line was drawn to demarcate the play area. This symbolic boundary suggested the concept of *liminality*—from the Latin *limen* of Ancient Roman culture: the 'threshold' between the civilized Self from the barbarian Other. In 'Liminality and Communitas', Victor Turner famously defined the 'liminal *personae*' or 'entity' as 'neither here nor there' but 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (1991:95). Notably, the line was drawn by the young cast member who played the unnamed adolescent 'girl'—later shown as a former victim of sexual abuse who becomes involved in surveillance of local sex offenders while she disconcertingly flirts, Lolita-like, with the police deputy. The audience thus watched as a girl in short cut-off jeans bent over to draw that line. By these means the director Lee Lewis provided an implicit

cultural context, suggesting the ubiquitous heterosexist commercialization of girls and young women in the mass media.



Figure 1: *2000 Feet Away*, Bush Theatre, London 2008. Joseph Fiennes (Deputy), Charlotte Beaumont (Girl)

The play's 'Prologue' scene introduces an image which symbolically overshadows the play when a teacher and a young student look at Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*, a painting also personally significant to the teacher who hails from the painting's setting, the town of Eldon, Iowa—the play's primary setting. The unpleasant impression that the teacher, A.G., is grooming the boy is confirmed when he explains that the woman in the painting could be married to the much older man with the pitchfork. Trying to make it relevant to himself and the boy, A.G. adds, 'Sometimes younger people like spending time with older people' (Weigh 2008: 7). A reviewer of the 2010 Chicago production justly described this scene as 'creepy' (Sava 2010). In the original Belvoir production which placed the audience in a voyeuristic position with regard to a young girl only moments earlier, that *creepiness* was certainly emphasized—Lee's directorial choice serving to foreground Weigh's implicit message in the play, which challenges the still common homophobic stereotype that associates or even conflates paedophilia and homosexuality.

Without condoning or excusing adult-child sexual relationships, the play's opening dialogue points to a wider, more socially acceptable *and* lawful context of homosexuality *per se*. This is specifically relevant to the LGBTQ community's struggle for acceptance—even for self-acceptance—in the face of the intolerance of heteronormative culture. As the reviewer for *The Guardian* noted, 'Anthony Weigh's first play puts the subject of child abuse in a cultural context, and, in so doing, poses ... searching questions' (Billington 2008). In this regard, when A.G. speaks of his lonely childhood—of his experience of growing up '[n]ot having friends' (Weigh 2008: 9)—he is trying to ingratiate himself with Boy; yet, there is no reason to disbelieve his account of a miserable childhood and youth with the implicit context of his sexual identity, aggravated by a stifling small-town environment. What immediately follows reinforces that context of the individual struggle and conflict of *coming out*. A.G.'s attempt at seduction initially seems to backfire, as the boy retorts, 'I got friends! [...] I got plenty!' (Weigh 2008: 9). In fact, evidently aware of A.G.'s motives and of A.G.'s insight into his emerging sexuality, the boy protests that he is 'not gay' (Weigh 2008: 11). But his anger *is* immediately exposed as a product of personal conflict involving his sexuality, a conflict manifested through denial and violent fantasies involving neighbouring boys in which he says he would '[g]o to their bedrooms maybe. Watch them sleep maybe. Stick a brick through their skulls. Get into bed with them. Maybe' (Weigh 2008: 12).

This scene illustrates the views of Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, in *Heterosexism: an ethical challenge* that 'heterosexism may preserve patterns of emotional isolation and suicidal desperation among adolescents who discover they are gay. It may inhibit the expression of same sex, especially male-to-male, affection. It may even reinforce certain forms of sexual violence and promiscuity' (Jung and Smith 1993: 44). Much as rural Iowa where A.G. resurfaces comes to define the play's portrayal of communal fear and intolerance, Weigh implies that internalized feelings of shame experienced by young homosexuals in heterosexist culture are not a phenomenon merely of small town life, but can even affect someone like Boy in urban Chicago.

In avoiding the temptation to simply caricature and condemn the sex offender, Anthony Weigh approaches a difficult subject boldly. Less sincere seems his obfuscation of the nature or extent of A.G.'s transgression when the character re-emerges, *symbolically* banished to the parental home in Eldon, Iowa from which he will soon be *literally* evicted in turn due to the introduction of the law to ban registered sex offenders from residing within

2,000 feet of child-frequented places. A.G.'s parents discuss harassment, and refer to threats of vigilante violence against those in their son's situation (Weigh 2008: 15-17). This threat is realized in the play's climactic act of deadly arson, which A.G. narrowly escapes, at an isolated budget motel where outcasts like him reside. Amid a pervasive atmosphere of fear and vindictiveness A.G.'s actual offense is left vague as shown when his mother expresses disbelief: 'What's he done that he can't live alongside an old school?' (Weigh 2008: 25)

HETEROSEXISM, CULTURAL UNIFORMITY AND FEAR OF THE OTHER

The play's main character however is not A.G. but the police deputy, who provides a link between different characters. Navigating the conflict and sincerely attempting to uphold the law, the deputy describes himself as a reluctant 'messenger' when he explains the situation to A.G.'s parents and yet he must control his own revulsion toward A.G. and others reportedly far worse (Weigh 2008: 23-25). The role of Deputy, played admirably by Colin Moody in the Belvoir Downstairs production and subsequently played by Joseph Fiennes at London's Bush Theatre, is also interesting for the irony and subtle humour that surround him. This somewhat



Figure 2: The police deputy and A.G.'s parents—the latter dressed for the town's annual *American Gothic* Lookalike Competition. *2000 Feet Away*, Chicago's Steep Theatre 2010.

bashful small-town bachelor is a magnet for persistent—unsolicited and mostly unwelcome—inquiries into his romantic life, compliments and sexual propositions, providing a modern update on the well-known ironic observation about 'a truth universally acknowledged' in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Ironically abuzz with sexual tension, the townspeople implicitly illustrate the normative nature of monocultural life, which demands conformity to prevailing social norms and where those who deviate from these norms elicit various

degrees of discomfort or curiosity. Deputy's romantically unattached status is one example and fear and hatred toward the paedophiles is another. A.G.'s mother Nan asks Deputy who he is taking to the local festival and assures him that

‘[p]lenty of girls would jump [at the chance to go with you]’ (Weigh 2008: 20). A sense of her vicarious pleasure and even of her own desire is emphasized when she insists, ‘I’d jump [at the chance to go with you] if I were thirty years younger’ (Weigh 2008: 20).

Similarly, when a married woman with children visits Deputy, alarmed that a known offender lives nearby, she ironically still manages some chit-chat about the ‘pretty young things’ the Deputy could meet ‘at the church’ (Weigh 2008: 34). Like Nan earlier, she reveals her own desires when she adds, ‘Big thing like you’ (Weigh 2008: 34). The avenues for socially-approved sexuality even for the mild transgressions of flirtation or fantasy *within* a heterosexual context are thus presented as providing the potential for self-realization and fulfilment. The implicit contrast is not only with those whose desires and actions are clearly unlawful—the sex offenders—but also with those who simply diverge from the heterosexual norm.

The play’s focus upon the repercussions of a law involving child sex offenders left several reviewers bemused or unconvinced by Weigh’s concern for such people (Spencer 2008). However, the play’s examination of the dynamics of fear and intolerance and the contrast of Self and Other presents significant analogies with other contemporary media concerns. I would particularly note analogies with international politics and the discourse of the War on Terror and even with sensationalism and xenophobia in the political discourse of migration notoriously revived in US politics in the 2015-2016 period.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, most reviewers failed to see much beyond the specific legislation addressed in the play or else saw Weigh’s focus on rural Iowa and the iconic *American Gothic* painting as evidence of a simplistic, distorted perspective of American people and culture. Several also questioned the characters’ apparently collective obsession with such crimes or wondered too literal-mindedly about the apparent *plague* of such offenders in a supposedly small community. One critic for instance wondered why the tiny community of Eldon, Iowa should seem to be ‘packed to the gills with paedophiles’ (Sava 2010).

Another, in a review of the (London) Bush Theatre production for the *New York Times*, concluded that Weigh had ‘fall(en) into the time-honoured trap that mistakes an outsider’s rather banal observations for what the writer might himself consider a blistering critique’ (Wolf 2008). Arguably most impressive was a home-grown review for the Belvoir Downstairs production in which Diana Simmonds looked beyond specifics to recognize the play’s ‘universal and thought-provoking’ character (2007). Simmonds identified the play as a

‘warning’ about ‘the temptation and terror of absolutes; the grey areas hiding in the shadows of black-and-white beliefs; and the dreadful attraction of mass hysteria and facile political solutions’ (Simmonds 2007).

CULTURAL RESONANCES: TERRORISM, IMMIGRATION AND FEAR

The political discourse of the so-called War on Terror during the George W. Bush administration and the mass-media’s swift and almost universal adoption of the term raised the spectre, as an observer commented in 2004, that this culturally-enshrined media discourse in support of that ‘unfolding fight’ would potentially make that ‘struggle ... a perpetual feature of American life’ (Miller). Arguably, recognizing such a pervasive media-embraced narrative is essential to a proper understanding of the message and significance of Weigh’s play. Analogies can be found between *2000 Feet Away* and such pervasive cultural narratives in terms of the play’s examination of collective hysteria, seemingly insurmountable conflict and the temptation to violate customary moral standards in pursuit of security. In this regard, as Ian Shuttleworth observed in his *Financial Times* review of the London production, Deputy represents a balanced moral perspective as someone who ‘tries to enforce the law while remaining civil to all ... who does not quite understand the ramifications of the situation but is well aware that they are many and unpleasant’ (Weigh 2008).

Of course, Deputy’s desire to act justly is not unconditional. For instance, he is not won over by A.G.’s attempts to distinguish himself from other offenders through a self-pitying, sentimental account of the ‘feelings [that] grew’ between him and Boy (Weigh 2008: 100-101). Though Deputy perhaps accepts that there are worse people than A. G., he rejects this plea for understanding and condemns A.G.’s actions, declaring that he ‘would cut [his own] hands off’ before he ‘touch[ed] a person’ (Weigh 2008: 103).

But, certainly, Deputy’s moral disgust notwithstanding, he significantly refuses to support those who advocate or carry out extrajudicial measures. The Deputy draws an analogy between the problem at hand and the tale of the Pied Piper. While he acknowledges the community’s desire for security—‘that the town’s got to be free from rats’ (Weigh 2008: 115)—he rejects the vigilantes’ self-righteous and expedient subversion of the law. However, while rejecting such moral violations, he understands that his own position is untenable; for without such absolute, radical measures—likened to the river in which to drown the rats—the Piper, engaged like Deputy in implementing an ineffective measure, ‘would be bound to the

rats for ever' (Weigh 2008:115). The Deputy thus recognizes the problem's irresolvable nature, and foresees a future of endless, fruitless vigilance.

2000 Feet Away was clearly designed to resonate with contemporary political media-discourse and will continue to do so. For example, American audiences who attended the Chicago Steep Theatre production in May-June 2010 may have noted analogies between the play's scenario and popularized debates concerning the War on Terror and the Patriot Act during the 2000s and this play would continue to resonate a month later in July 2010 when the US Department of Homeland Security launched its campaign to promote vigilance in the community with the slogan, 'If you see something, say something' (www.dhs.gov). Consider, by way of analogy, the woman who visits Deputy to tell him insistently of a rumoured report about a man who 'drives slow...past the girls doing calisthenics' (Weigh 32, 33); moreover, she feels compelled to manipulate the law to drive the feared man away by applying to register a childcare centre in her home (37). Like the military concept of the pre-emptive strike and other expedient policies intended to ensure security, the legal processes presented in Weigh's play unravel as the community suffers the insecurities of indefinite vigilance—the obsessive surveillance of others by people who live in fear and inform on neighbours and, yet will themselves break moral or legal injunctions, claiming exigent circumstances.

Further resonances or analogies with sensationalist political discourse continue to emerge of course. Donald Trump's defamatory populist pronouncements in June 2015, characterizing Mexican immigrants as people who are 'bringing drugs' and 'crime'—capped by the claim that '[t]hey're rapists' (Trump 2015)—is a case in point; an argument used to incite fear and resentment, made despite statistics that show that foreign-born individuals, far from being more criminally inclined, are in fact half as likely to be incarcerated in US State or Federal prisons as US-born individuals (Lee 2015). Indeed, the politics of fear, characterized by the vagueness of a nevertheless allegedly pervasive threat, was illustrated in Trump's same speech in which he speculated about similar threats 'from all over South and Latin America, and... probably—probably—from the Middle East' (2015). Consider, in the same tenor, Senator Ted Cruz's controversial calls in March 2016 for 'Law enforcement' to be 'empower[ed]...to patrol and secure Muslim neighbourhoods' (Zezima and Goldman 2016). It is precisely this sense of the currency of public hysteria and its manipulation in the media and hence its importance in the political process and in social and cultural life that is

so powerfully exposed and dissected in Weigh's debut play through his focus on one specific controversial subject.

CONCLUSION

Far from being merely a banal regionalist satire that deals ephemerally with a specific piece of legislation, Anthony Weigh's *2000 Feet Away* engages deftly with political debates popularized in the global media. The media continues to play a decisive role in modern society and politics, from controversy still surrounding sexual identity such as debates over gay rights, to populist political discourse which exploits the fear of the Other, whether of immigrants—illegal or otherwise—or of the public vulnerability to terrorist attacks. Weigh's dramatic portrait of a small community's response to a threatening presence in its midst is a vivid, powerful and intellectually pertinent appeal to modern society to consider the dangers of the politics of fear and intolerance and of the consequent prospect of a life of perpetual anxious vigilance.

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Figure 2: The police deputy and A.G.'s parents—the latter dressed for the town's annual American Gothic Lookalike Competition. *2000 Feet Away*, Chicago's Steep Theatre 2010. <http://alisonsimple.com/156753/2000-feet-away-steep-theatre/>

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