Trying to understand

The Death of Margaret Thatcher—a play by Tom Green

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Tom Green's The Death of Margaret Thatcher, *at the Courtyard Theatre, London N1, through March 2*

Margaret Thatcher's period as prime minister (1979-1990) saw the wholesale destruction of the postwar social gains made by the British working class. Industries were devastated, welfare provisions were slashed, and social spending was cut in favour of privatisation. Thatcherite "modernisation" signalled an attack on the living conditions of millions. Unsurprisingly, she remains a hated figure for many working people. Anecdotes abound of plans already made for parties after her death.

Young British playwright Tom Green's latest play takes Thatcher's death as its starting point, and seeks to explore her influence through the polarised reactions to it. An indication of the importance of the effort can be seen by the hostility Green has faced from the right-wing press. The *Daily Mail* and former Tory party chairman Norman Tebbitt were among those queuing up to attack the play before it had opened, notwithstanding Green's statement that the play "is not an essay or a polemic. I would not even characterise it as anti-Thatcher."

One of the most visceral audience reactions during the play is to the sight of a character in a Thatcher mask.

However, Green achieves only limited success in the play. His failures are indicative of the negative impact of the very political legacy he seeks to address.

The play proceeds through three separate storylines. The main focus is a national television news broadcaster covering the story through studio reports and outside broadcasts. Studio anchor Jonelle (Alex Topham Tyerman) is determined to make the most of "the biggest bulletin of my life."

Meanwhile, Hoagy (Alan Freestone) starts visiting a therapist, Karen (Pamela Hall), because of his bizarre reaction to the announcement of Thatcher's death. Driving home from a visit to his father, Hoagy heard the news and started crying.

The last storyline follows a funeral director, Dudley (John Elnaugh). Dudley is initially unsure whether Thatcher will be given a state funeral. As he recounts his involvement throughout the funeral arrangements, Dudley gives the most thorough account of his own relationship with the Thatcher period.

At least one other storyline did not make it into the show, and several ellipses in the script suggest rewrites. Early press releases referred to the character of "a miner who vows to walk from the north of England to spit on Thatcher's grave." We are not shown this character—who had become a steelworker by the final draft—but are informed of his progress through reports from the journalists, who relate broader reactions to Thatcher's death.

Green is clearly aware of the enormous hostility Thatcher generates. Jonelle's first announcement of the death is greeted with canned hysterical laughter, which we later find her producer (Ian Mairs) has been playing through her earpiece. In part, Green has said, the play is a response to Thatcher's political rehabilitation by the Labour governments of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and to some of the public statements about proposed reactions to her eventual death. Elvis Costello famously wrote (in the song "Tramp the Dirt Down") that "When they finally put you in the ground, I'll stand on your grave and tramp the dirt down."

Green himself is part of the generation that has grown up in her shadow. Born in 1970, he says his earliest political memory was her election in 1979. He acknowledges that the play is "probably as much about me, one of 'Thatcher's children,' as it is about the woman herself." His recognition of these problems is praiseworthy, but he remains constrained by them.

The first false note is in having the official announcement of Thatcher's death attributed to the now Tory Prime Minister David Cameron. This fictionalised device alluding to the downfall of Brown's government (which gets a laugh) does allow Green to make a perceptive comment. Cameron will not agree to a state funeral for Thatcher as she was "too divisive." The Tories have struggled with her legacy. But what Green does not really address is why it is the Labour Party that has sought to rehabilitate her.

"Unless you were one of her fans," Green has said, "she was a monster, and yet that seems to have changed." If that has changed—and the depth of hostility borne out by interest in this show suggests it has not—this is only in the rarefied official circles of the Labour Party machinery. Green notes that her reputation has "been revived in some eyes," with Brown inviting her to tea at Downing Street.

Whatever Green's intention in writing Cameron as prime minister, the effect is to prevent him from tackling the legacy of Thatcherite politics throughout official politics in Britain. Indeed, Thatcher's real heirs are in government now.

Such problems are summed up in the character of Hoagy. As he tells Karen during their first session, this made him feel foolish as he is "not a political person, and certainly not a Tory." This could have been an opportunity to probe those social layers who have assimilated Thatcherism most thoroughly whilst ostensibly opposing the Tories, but Green elects not to investigate the characters too closely. When Hoagy quits therapy, it is because he is "scared of going any deeper."

This is a pity. Green suggests Hoagy's tears for Thatcher are

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displaced grief for his mother, but this is rather trite. The same rationale of displaced grief was trotted out to explain the reaction to the death of Princess Diana, without ever addressing how the media played the central role of canonising Diana and offering her as a locus for disturbed and confused feelings amongst layers of the population.

At one point, Karen asks about Hoagy's mother. He reels off a list of possible occupations and asks Karen to guess which is right. We never find out. We get no real sense of Hoagy's development or life.

Theatre has no responsibility to resolve the crises in its characters' lives, but Green here shies away from the implications of his own narrative. Instead, through a series of dream sequences involving Hoagy and Karen in various states of undress, Hoagy's vague recollections of Thatcher are subsumed into sexual and embarrassment fantasies. It is somewhat disappointing.

Hoagy seems less concerned with Thatcherism than with his relationship to media broadcasts about her. This also seems to be the main preoccupation of Green and director June Abbott. Abbott has said that the work put Thatcher's death "on a par with events such as the death of Kennedy or of Princess Diana."

This preoccupation with the media could be interesting, given its role in implementing and promoting Thatcher's agenda. The breaking of the print union in 1982 was an important step towards smashing existing social conditions. But none of the characters in the newsroom storyline have any direct history linking them to broadcasting in the 1970s and 1980s. Given the way in which today's media was shaped by Thatcherism, this might have been useful.

The producer expresses some hostility, but this peters out. Instead, Green satirises outside broadcasters who have no idea where the north of England is, and who give reports without any concrete information. The mannerisms of television journalists are effectively portrayed. Jonelle has a stilted, mis-stressed delivery, while Bobby (Craig Murray) and Dana (Leanne Elms) play out all the clichés and tics of local reporters.

This is amusing enough, but it does not get us very far. The jokes themselves are not quite strong enough to sustain the device. Instead, Green gives us a rather silly subplot involving Jonelle's sexual relationship with the producer, with some gratuitous nudity. Jonelle ends up a laughing-stock among her colleagues, who send each other topless photos of her taken by the producer.

Abbott has said the piece is about "how people are affected by [Thatcher's] death in different ways. None of them talk about whether they were for or against her."

Really? Is such a scenario in any way credible or is it merely a reflection of her own views? In fact, in the play, it is only the reporters who end up having no interest in her death at all. News of Jonelle's indiscretions completely overshadows the coverage of the funeral.

Dana has been sent to follow the progress of Michael Connolly, the now former steelworker, as he walks from Hartlepool to London to spit on Thatcher's grave. Connolly refuses to speak to the press, so we never get a direct statement of his feelings, but an ever-larger crowd gathers and accompanies him south. And Jonelle reports trouble in Nottingham between local Conservatives and people holding a party under the banner, "Maggie! Maggie! Maggie! Dead! Dead! Dead!" Mourners at the funeral are outnumbered by 100,000 (silent) protesters.

This writing is frustrating. Green deserves credit for having tried to imagine counter-positions, but he seems unsure how to handle them. They are not incorporated into the drama, but are recounted only as offstage events. The ability to show conflict is one of the main advantages of drama. Any one of the events recounted along the route of Michael Connolly's walk would have provided a dramatic opportunity to explore the ongoing class conflicts that embody Thatcher's legacy, but that opportunity is never taken.

Dudley, more than any other character, expresses his relationship with Thatcher openly. Perhaps because of this, Elnaugh's is the most satisfying performance. In 1981, aged 22, Dudley had written to Thatcher during the trial of Peter Sutcliffe urging the reintroduction of the death penalty. (Sutcliffe, the "Yorkshire Ripper," was convicted of the murders of 13 women and attacks on 7 more between 1975 and 1980.)

Dudley conveys much of the political thinking of Thatcher's supporters. He says that Thatcher received letters each week from people offering to act as executioners. He was convinced that hanging would return, he says, being sure that "if anyone would do it, it would be her."

Dudley is a well-written and well-performed character, as he has a real history connecting him with the narrative. Here, Green comes closest to achieving his aim of looking at "what [Thatcher's] impact has been and why she continues to be such a compelling and controversial figure," as he put it in one interview. Dudley, alone of all the characters portrayed on stage, is able to express something of the real attitudes of the time—albeit supportive—and what actually happened during the years of Thatcher's premiership. A similar expression was absent for the oppositional sentiment embodied in Connolly's long march.

Green's play is evidence of a concern with what has shaped the contemporary political landscape. However, he has been unable to get to the heart of the matter here. "I don't want to express a political stance," he tellingly told one interviewer. This pose of lofty detachment is itself a political as well as an artistic position. One does not need to insist that Green should have produced a piece of didactic agit-prop to understand that, on some things, it is impossible to abstain. This limits the available dramatic possibilities, and it has prevented him from exploring his subject as fully as it should be.

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