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Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Saunders, G. (2007) 'Under Redevelopment': Barrie Keeffe's and Caryl Churchill's New City Comedies. In: Henke, C. and Middeke, M. (eds.) Drama and/after postmodernism. Contemporary Drama in English (14). Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Trier, pp. 19-30. ISBN 9783884769362 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/31305/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

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‘Under Redevelopment’: The Tradition of City Comedy in Contemporary British Drama

In 1999, prior to the Broadway opening of *Closer*, Patrick Marber was asked about plans his next play. Whereas most writers become taciturn on this subject, Marber was unusually forthcoming: “What I want to write is a great big funny play, a huge bitter vicious laughter machine, a big Jonsonian public play” (Macaulay). In other words, Patrick Marber made it be known that he wanted to write a modern Jacobean City Comedy.

While to date Marber’s project has failed to materialize, previous work (with the notable exception of *After Miss Julie*), including *Dealer’s Choice*, *Closer* and *Howard Katz* have all formed part of a “loose trilogy of plays in and about contemporary London”(Buse). The 2007 production of *Don Juan in Soho* could justifiably claim to make this a quartet.

Indeed, the dramatization of London has been an ongoing concern of British dramatists since the mid 1990s, and can be traced from Simon Bent’s *Goldhawk Road* in 1996 to Samuel Adamson’s *Southwark Fair* in 2006. David Eldridge’s *Market Boy*, was also on at the Royal National Theatre in the same year as Adamson’s play and its performance in the Olivier – the largest of the RNT’s stages – was reminiscent of the ‘big Jonsonian public play’ that Marber spoke about.

It has been noted, “the first decade of the Jacobean age witnessed a sudden profusion of comedies satirizing city life” (Gibbons 3). At its height,

City, or Citizen Comedy attracted dramatists including Ben Jonson (often cited as the originator of the genre), Thomas Middleton and John Marston.

London in the early 1600s dominated not only the financial and commercial sectors of the economy but was also the centre of royal patronage and government as well as fashion and entertainment. It was also seen as the bait that attracted every form of human wickedness and depravity, and a source of the acquisitiveness that was believed to define the age.

As the vogue for Revenge Tragedy towards the 1590s waned, so too did the number of plays focusing on the city. Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) has been described as "the terminal point in Jacobean City Comedy" (Gibbons 152), so ending a dramatic convention many thought Jonson himself had inaugurated.

Yet there has always been an element of unfinished business about the genre. City Comedy has been said to be far ahead of the social and economic ideas of its own period (Haynes 11); an opportunity only ever partly met by its dramatists, who increasingly wrote in a formulaic way. As such, City Comedy required dramatists from a later period to more fully understand the possibilities it offered. However, it was not until the end of the 1960s when renewed interest came from a generation of dramatists via a series of adaptations. These included Edward Bond's version of Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1966) and Peter Barnes' version of Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1972).

However, it was Howard Brenton's and David Hare's collaborative play *Brassneck* (1974) that saw the first attempt at reappropriating City Comedy for a new age. Here, Brenton and Hare took themes and conventions from the genre and incorporated them into their own work by drawing attention to the "underlying grotesqueness, the monopathic characterisation and the evident indignation amounting often to sheer disgust" that could be found in Ben Jonson's city comedies (Peacock 1).

While *Brassneck* exhibited facets of the city comedy tradition, it did not constitute a complete rewriting. In contrast, the plays under discussion in this article, namely Barrie Keeffe's *A Mad World My Masters* (1977) Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), and David Eldridge's *Market Boy* all engage more closely with the original elements of City Comedy and continue an ongoing exploitation of the genre.

While a re-emergence of City Comedy began in the late 1960s, it was not until the advent of Thatcherism in the 1980s that it truly became viable again when Thatcherite and Reaganite economics drew explicit attention to the power of money in shaping both the individual and society.

City Comedy satirized the world of 1980s finance and its associated social groupings - the most conspicuous being the transatlantic phenomenon of "the yuppie." City Comedy, where Jacobean London's quixotic fashions and social customs were recorded and put directly onto the stage, suddenly found itself ideally placed to comment on the dazzling pace of change taking place in the modern city.

Using its "landscape of persons" (Haynes 10), City Comedy eschewed modern traditions of psychological verisimilitude and provided a form of drama that could react quickly and wittily to contemporary events, much as agit-prop theatre had done in the 1970s. *Serious Money* exemplified this. By abandoning naturalistic characterization, Churchill was able to produce a satire that not only lambasted the city's greed, but presented social observation and argument in a complex and rapid manner without the need for plot and character motivation to dominate. Despite some not seeing the play as a "lasting work" by Churchill (Fitzsimmons 80), the arguments presented in *Serious Money* about the mercantilism of the 1980s are just as wide ranging as more well known earlier plays such as *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1980).

This same energy is also apparent in David Eldridge's *Market Boy*. Despite being written nearly twenty years after *Serious Money*, similar reappropriations from City Comedy are incorporated in its re-evaluation of Thatcherism on the town of Romford during the 1980s. What is interesting here is that Eldridge had revisited the 1980s before in *M.A.D* (2004), but here he uses a very different dramatic form. In this more 'private' drama Eldridge draws parallels between family life and the Cold War, with its title referring to the omni-present threat of both nuclear and family Armageddon.

However, the self-consciously "public" nature of Jacobean City Comedy, with its large casts and numerous fast moving scenes, is more suited to the alternative account of the 1980s that we find in *Market Boy*. Here, everyone's personal history is claimed by the market community alongwith the town of Romford itself. The public space and spectacle of the market also

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show the rapid social change that marked the 1980s as we trace the changing social mores created through Thatcherism.

Yet, it is important to note that *Market Boy*'s borrowings from City Comedy are not self-conscious comparisons of the past with the present in the same way as Keefe's *A Mad World my Masters* or Churchill's *Serious Money*. While *Market Boy* evokes the past – namely Romford's past – through briefly resurrecting historical figures associated with the town, these cameo appearances are there to give a sense of an ongoing continuity to the life of the market.

In contrast, both *Serious Money* and *A Mad World My Masters* in their opening scenes deliberately link past and present. In the latter, Keefe assembles all his principal characters on Hackney Marshes through the event of a cockfight. This not only suggests Elizabethan / Jacobean London but also provides a frame by which to present the Sprightly family whose credo is based around such illicit activities.

Serious Money links the two ages in a piece of meta-theatre, more in keeping with City Comedy's self-reflexive device of the play within a play. The opening scene incorporates an extract, not from a Jacobean City Comedy but from a play written in 1692 by Thomas Shadwell called *The Stock-jobbers*. However, this introductory scene presents a world based around avaricious trickery familiar to Jacobean City Comedy, where worthless patents are sold, such as "a Mouse-Trap, that will invite all mice in, nay rats too, whether they will or no" (Churchill 1). This earlier play provides a historical link to the early beginnings of the stock market, which can then be directly contrasted with the sudden *coup de theatre* of the stage being transformed into the stock market of 1987.

The action of Shadwell's play can be read in two ways: as an indication that the spirit of avarice and duplicity are constant in whatever age they are practiced. Alternatively, the Jobbers intention to "turn the penny" (Churchill 2) through harebrained schemes involving Chinese Rope-Dancers and contraptions that allow a person to walk under water are indicators of a more innocent age, where chicanery is carried out by witty gentleman on victims who can afford to be gulled. The sudden switch to the dealing rooms of London in 1987 by contrast reveal a world where greed leads to committing larceny on a global scale, siphoning off money from Third World debt and even murder.

One recurrent feature and problem of city comedy is the contradiction between “commerce and celebration” (Wells 37). Whereas Jacobean dramatists evaded the contradiction between avarice and festivity by theatrical means such as “dramatic framings, doublings and disguises” in *Serious Money* this sense of festivity is lost through the all-encompassing desire to make money. While there are moments of exuberance, these involve gratuitous consumption and vulgar displays of wealth.

While the air of celebration in City Comedy manifests itself through the wit of gentlemen rogues such as Middleton’s Follywit, and Eldridge’s Essex market traders, Churchill’s characters on the London stock exchange conspicuously lack this quality. Here, insults and profanity substitute for wit; they also lack the imagination of their Jacobean ancestors in the methods they employ to gull their victims. The traders at Klein Merrick and LIFFE rely on low cunning and bravado, while their schemes lack the panache afforded through disguise or imaginative enterprise. Their tools for modern coney catching are the telephone, computer and fax machine, while their methodology involves a prescribed system of chasing money through a complicated set of bargaining procedures involving the buying and selling of shares on the world stock market.

However, the combination of avarice and innocence, reminiscent of Jacobean City Comedy can be found in Barrie Keeffe’s *A Mad World My Masters*, where the Sprightly’s use disguise sees them revel in the sheer enjoyment of taking part in trickery for financial gain: as such, their actions can be more benevolently judged as acts of cleverness than greed. This important element is missing from Churchill’s *Serious Money* and the tone of hollow bacchanal is exemplified by the song “Five More Glorious Years” that closes the play:

These are the best years of our lives, let wealth and favour be our guide
We can expect another five, join hands across the great divide [...]
So raise your oysters and champagne, and as we toast the blushing bride
Pon crystal mountains of cocaine, our nostrils flare and open wide (Churchill 113)

“Five More Glorious Years” also refers to the re-election of the Thatcher government and a continuing celebration of the city, yet Eldridge’s *Market Boy* is far more explicit than Churchill in making connections to the frenetic energy of the market being shaped through Thatcherite economics. This even includes placing the figure of Mrs Thatcher on stage. Here, Romford

Market becomes a set piece in miniature for her experiment with ‘popular capitalism.’ In a scene where a prospective Labour candidate has been jeered and pelted by the market traders who announce, “We’re with Maggie,” Mrs Thatcher asserts, “This is my market, do you understand me? Mine! No one preaches in this free market except me!”(Eldridge 53)

Yet much of the appeal of *Serious Money* in 1987 came from its spontaneous response to events as they happened. While the song *Five More Glorious Years* implies that the greed and hedonism of the city cannot last, Eldridge with the benefit of hindsight can show the aftermath of Thatcherism, when the economic recession of the early 1990s set in. This affects the characters from Romford market such as the Meat Man’s bankruptcy and eventual suicide, to Snooks the former London bond dealer returning to plead for his old job after the stock market collapse.

Vital features of City Comedy arise from its chosen locations. Ben Jonson’s comedies are a case in point. *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) is set in the Spitalfields area of London, while *The Alchemist* is set in Blackfriars. Hackney Marshes in Barrie Keeffe’s *A Mad World My Masters* also functions as a meeting place for illicit activity, as do the trading floors in *Serious Money*. However, in Churchill’s play location becomes arbitrary, whereby financial acquisitions are made by telephone via trading markets around the world. London as a city with a distinct identity is made nebulous, whereby location becomes defined via two ends of a telephone, computer or a fax machine. This uncertainty as to where financial transactions take place accounts for the traders believing that they are above the law. Stockbroker Greville Todd explains that financial malpractice is looked at differently elsewhere:

Dammit, why should he die for something that’s not a crime? (It’s not illegal in America, Switzerland, Japan, it’s only been illegal here the last few years.)(Churchill 27).

The blurring of location in *Serious Money* is based on an actual event known as ‘Big Bang’ which took place in the City Of London in 1986, “when the markets were opened to foreign banks and the distinction between jobbers (who had shares available) and brokers (who bought and sold shares on their clients’ behalf) was abolished” (Churchill, Preface). Although a modern event, there is something Jacobean in the idea of “Big Bang” as it brings to mind the plague that affected London throughout the

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summer of 1610 when *The Alchemist* was written. It too was unpredictable and its effects were felt both by those who inhabited the city and those well beyond its environs. The plague is used by Jonson as a metaphor for the forces of chaos “reproducing illicit forms, mixtures, boundary violations of all sorts” that are met by order through “regulation, documentation and analysis” (Tennenhouse 164). The chaotic elements in *The Alchemist* are the opportunist criminals Doll, Face and Subtle, who take advantage of the confusion and terror caused by the plague to commandeer Lovewit’s house. Order is finally restored by Lovewit himself, who not only regains possession of his house but profits from the criminal activity during his absence. Likewise, the feeling of wholesale spree in *Serious Money* is threatened when the Department of Trade and Industry are called to investigate claims of insider trading. However, unlike *The Alchemist* where order is readily restored, in *Serious Money* no one is brought to justice for insider trading, or for the murder of Jake Todd. The song *Five More Glorious Years* that closes the play seems to confirm that the riotous excesses, “crossing forbidden frontiers,” (Churchill 113) will continue unabated.

Big Bang also reappropriates the traditional City Comedy motif of conflict between young and old marrying for love over dynastic advantage. Instead, the inter-generational conflict in *Serious Money* comes from ambitious Traders such as Durkfield and the older established Bankers who still maintain that they run the City. Durkfield is a creature forged out of Big Bang and shows marked similarities with his Jacobean counterpart who, ‘owed their power not to the possession of land, like old feudal nobility [...] but solely to their business ability (Knights 88). In Jacobean City Comedy, this antagonism dramatized an underlying anxiety that older, feudal forms of class structure were being challenged in a political climate that actively endorsed the promotion of aggressive free enterprise, which quickly bred and promoted “new men” like Durkfield and Grimes. It is also not difficult to see that with sudden access to wealth and power these men suddenly represented a threat to the older generation. Zackerman, one of the bankers in *Serious Money*, believes that following Big Bang a new order will emerge that will ruthlessly crush all in its way:

The financial world won’t be the same again
Because the traders are coming down the fast lane [...]
If you’re making the firm ten million you want a piece of the action (Churchill 15).

Here, the fight to obtain wealth is motivated by class just as much as greed. Men like Grimes represents a threat to the old elitist order. In remembering his schooldays, Grimes recalls that he had already been consigned to mediocrity:

My school reports used to say I was too aggressive
(but it's come in quite useful)
My old headmaster wouldn't call me a fool again [...]
I could kiss his boots the day he kicked me out of school (Churchill 12).

Churchill represents the established gentry, (who we encounter together with the new breed of trader at a hunt meeting), as essentially moribund. She achieves this purely through the repetitious and trivial content of their language:

MRS CARRUTHERS. The hound that I walked goes up front with the best.
FARMER. The best of the pack is that cunning old bitch.
LADY VERE. His fetlocks swell up so I'll give him a rest (Churchill 16).

However, Churchill does not simply pit the old aristocratic order against the new. Just as it should not be taken as fact that natural antagonism existed between established gentlemen and the new merchant class in Elizabethan and Jacobean London (Gibbons 33) - so we see representatives of the old order in *Serious Money* such as Jake and Scilla Todd slipping easily between the worlds of old and new money.

While class antagonism exists in *Serious Money* between the aristocratic bankers and the 'oiks' who run the trading floors, the inter-generational struggle of Jacobean city comedy is instead transformed into a war involving the forces of old money generated by the banks against the brash new money coming from the world stock-markets. Class subsequently becomes irrelevant in terms of being able to hold one's own on the trading floor. When money is the all-important commodity, accidents of birth are seen as irrelevant. Scilla Todd, a LIFFE dealer is the aristocratic daughter of a wealthy stockbroker but has defected from her class to work "down with the oiks, it's more exciting" (Churchill 11). Here, class becomes a commodity indistinguishable from the pork bellies or coffee sold on the exchanges. Class is something to be bought as a life-style accoutrement rather than for any intrinsic worth it may hold. In *Serious Money*, the only necessity for class is as a means to be 'classy', as when Grimes speaks of a company "recruiting a whole lot of Sloanes / Customers like to hear them on the

'phones / Because it don't sound Japanese" (Churchill 11). It is the outward veneer of respectability that class gives that is prized - nothing else matters because the traders are certain that the future belongs to them rather than the older ruling classes. By the end of the play Churchill seems to envisage a new hybridity of class holding sway, bred from the chaos of the trading floor represented by Scilla: "I've the cunning and connections of the middle class. And I'm tough as a yob" (Churchill 110).

By contrast, the Sprightly family in Keeffe's *A Mad World My Masters* and Eldridge's *Market Boy* represent those lower down the social order, and while they display ample guile and cunning are never destined to escape from the confines prescribed by their class. Fate, and eventually the class system itself, conspire to keep them in exactly the same position that they started. For the Sprightly's, part of the problem lies in their lack of naked ambition - even their scheme to collect the life insurance policy of twenty thousand pounds is modest. Gran wants the money so she can "soak [her] varicose veins under the Niagara Falls and get fucked by a couple of young lithe Greek studs," while Vi simply wants the money "for a deposit, on a three-bedroom, end-of-terrace house in Harlow, with an integral garage" (Keeffe 16). Horace Claughton, the man who stands between their obtaining the payout is finally amazed that, "They went to all this trouble... two deaths...for a mere twenty thousand pounds?" (Keeffe 53).

Similarly, in *Market Boy*, the last scene offers a quick resume of what befell its principal characters. Apart from Jason and Nut-Nut, people's vistas are still confined to Essex with the majority never moving far beyond the market. This attitude is articulated best by the "Girl" who's "got a café on South Street" but has "Never met the right one - I should move out of Essex, really, and give myself half a chance" (Eldridge 126). The only other person who has moved on from Romford Market is the eponymous "Boy" of the play's title. Like Snooks at first he works in the City, but unlike the Essex traders in *Serious Money* - and again with the hindsight of being written in 2006 - the Boy "retrained - joined an ad agency IT department. Second guessed the dotcom boom [...] and funded my own digital agency" (Eldridge 126).

Unlike the pessimism that ends *Serious Money*, where men like Grimes seemed to be in the ascendancy and the stock market unassailable, *Market Boy* ends on a note of optimism and self-recognition. The Boy, unlike

Churchill's Yuppies or the Jacobean coney-catchers, whilst inculcated from a young age with the instinct to sell recognizes his good fortune and knows "better than anyone there are limits to what the free market can achieve" (Eldridge126).

Whereas in Jacobean City Comedy "everyone is driven by sheer (sexual) desires" (Muller 352), in *Serious Money* the obsession to make money have become petrified into a mood of sterility. This is illustrated in the wooing scene between Zackerman and Jacinta Condor who are kept apart by busy schedules and the restless desire to make money rather than love.

JACINTA. Maybe we could drink some English beer

I have a meeting at eight,

It won't go on late.

Maybe at half-past nine?

ZAC. No, I don't think... (Churchill 67-8).

The feeling of wariness about sex can be explained in part by the threat of AIDS. By 1987, the full implications of what many saw as a contemporary plague had only just begun to be assimilated. Although one could argue that nervous jokes about "the pox" abounded in Jacobean City Comedy, the mood of fear was far less extreme. Dramatists and adulterers alike were more than aware that long before syphilis could claim its victims other mortal scourges would have struck first. This atmosphere of sexual caution against the pursuit of money binds, albeit in a negative manner, the themes of sex and money which so dominate traditional Jacobean City Comedy. Jacinta Condor sums up this new relationship:

AIDS is making the advertisers perplexed. Because it's no longer too good to have your product associated with. But it's a great marketing opportunity. Like the guys opening up blood banks where you pay to store your own blood in case of an accident and so be guaranteed immunity. (It's also a great time to buy into rubber). (Churchill 60)

Barrie Keeffe's *A Mad World My Masters* comes closest to the frank sexuality we are familiar with in Jacobean city comedy. AIDS had yet to appear in 1977, and so we find Horace Claughton's behaviour ruled by the whims of priapism. It is through this weakness that the Sprightly's plan to compromise Claughton in a scheme involving Vi disguising herself as an Angela Rippon look-alike striptease artist.

It is also interesting that both Keefe and Churchill dispense with the figure of the Courtesan in their city comedies, although in *Serious Money* one can still detect elements in Jacinta Condor, whose characteristics of ruthless cunning and avidity place her somewhere between the courtesan and adroit witty female of Jacobean comedy. Jacinta uses her guile to escape unpunished for the act of embezzling aid money, and in an ironic twist to the harmonious endings of Jacobean City Comedy announces a forthcoming marriage: "Jacinta marries Zac next week and they honeymoon in Shanghai. (Good business to be done in China now.)" (Churchill 111).

However, the ending of Churchill's city comedy mimics and satirizes the final scenes of Middleton's *A Mad World My Masters* and Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605), where "under the surface of a light, though aggressive City Comedy there is the threat of death and complete extinction" (Muller 359). These darker concerns also occupy Brenton and Hare's quasi-City Comedy *Brassneck*, which draws together these motifs of sex, death and money even more forcefully in the play's final scene, set in a strip joint aptly named "The Lower Depths Club." Here, the entrepreneurial Bagley family have decided to look for a new market in the trafficking of Chinese heroin:

VANESSA. Poppies. It comes from poppies. A bleeding tender flower.

CLIVE. Customers?

ROCHESTER. School kids (Brenton & Hare 102).

Brassneck ends with a toast to "The last days of capitalism," and arguably this is the chief concern of the contemporary reappropriations of City Comedy, where the innocent confidence tricksters and mountebanks of the Jacobean stage have been superseded by a corporate business ethic that can deal without pangs of conscience in commodities like heroin and the nuclear arms trade in order to "turn the penny."

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