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CHAPTER 7

J. T. ROGERS

The American theatre is chock full of inward looking plays that fester over small, personal family dramas (and an 'avant-garde' take on this theme is just a new dress on an old horse) which exist as if they have no connection to the large, more complex world we actually live in . . . Instead of going to graduate school, save that money and travel to see the world and expand your ideas and vision as a citizen and artist.

J. T. Rogers¹

Naomi Wallace is a self-identified socialist, a label which scarcely frightens the horses when she is in England but is more suspect in the United States. It follows that she sees the potential of theatre to address the injustices of a capitalist system. It also follows that she has a respect for history in a country which Gore Vidal called the United States of Amnesia. In J. T. Rogers's *The Overwhelming*, a character observes that, 'In America, you seem to have escaped your history.'² Wallace's vision of theatre, however, goes beyond a desire to explore past and present injustices in either country.

For her, theatre is necessarily 'an act of violation'³ as the playwright enters into the lives of strangers. Boundaries are breached which some might think inviolate as race, gender, nationality prove no bar to those committed to establishing a bridge between those otherwise seemingly distant from one another. She quotes Terry Eagleton as saying that 'Neighborhood is a practice rather than a locality.'⁴ Theatre thus becomes a means of exploring the nature of neighbourhood, the connection between those otherwise seemingly separated by time, space, experience. There is clearly an ethical dimension to such apparent transgressions, the co-opting of other people's histories and sensibilities; yet, outside of any political intent, shape shifting, time travel, are the stuff of drama.

Wallace wants to see her work as having utility. Rogers, who has also redefined neighbourhood, reaching out beyond America, has spoken of relevance. Both words are potentially suspect, as if theatre were to be pragmatically judged. In what way useful, and relevant to whom? For Wallace, indeed, a central question is 'Whom and what does my imagination serve. Where will I urge my mind to venture and roam, and to what purpose?'⁵ Theatre has been used as a weapon, a stimulus to action, but both writers are in search of something more. For both Wallace and Rogers, understanding is the first step. As she remarked, 'We are responsible for the education of our imaginations.'⁶ Rogers's education would take him to Rwanda and Sweden, into war and the possibility of peace, like Wallace assiduously researching his subjects the better to establish the authenticity of his work, though neither were interested in documentary theatre, the assembling and editing of material as if they were journalists reporting from the front line, though front line there might be. History was not simply to be laid out like a map on a table. It was to be inhabited in that the focus was to be on the human drama which lay beneath the passage of events, history being shaped by individuals rather than seen as a coercive force, a simple unwinding of inevitability.

The American theatre has hardly been devoid of political plays, and not merely in the radical 1930s and 1960s. They may not have been as prolific or, perhaps, as central as in Britain, where the state of the nation play was sufficiently common to earn that soubriquet, and plays frequently addressed international subjects, but in America issues of race, gender, sexual preference, identity politics, were staged, sometimes in theatre groups for which such were central concerns. For J. T. Rogers, however, 'I think most new British drama is outward-looking, whereas new American plays are inward-looking. Both are valid, I just have a strong preference for the former.' It was not a good description of his own early plays but reflected his direction of travel. Perhaps, too, the fact that Britain's National Theatre chose to stage *The Overwhelming*, the work of a man who at the time, he confessed, would 'not be able to be arrested in New York' and now, after twenty years of work was 'all of a sudden an "overnight sensation"' along with the fact that he was seen as 'an American playwright who writes like a Brit', may have underlined his affinity with a British theatre which did, indeed, often see drama as a social and political sounding board. So it was that he confessed, 'I still meet people in the New York theatre who are surprised to find out I'm not British.'⁷ He has said that when *The Overwhelming* (2006) was staged in London it was seen as a political play while in New York it was regarded as a family play.

What was, if not missing, then relatively rare, it seemed to him, were plays which acknowledged a world beyond America's borders. Certainly he felt an obligation to address that world himself. As he observed, in his Laura Pels lecture of 2008, in what is in many ways a manifesto, 'I realized that as a playwright I had to lift my eyes from my navel and look out into the world ... so that I could tell stories that dig under the surface of people and cultures that seem deeply foreign ... to me and find the connection between us. To try and understand what those connections mean.' Why? Because 'our stories – and this continues to be a hard lesson for me to learn – ... are no longer what is driving this world.' For him, the fact is that 'there is no separate "American Experience" any more. Our stories are just one part of a shrinking, interconnecting world. And if I don't make work that addresses this reality head-on, I'm simply writing about the past. The hard truth is that I don't have the luxury any more of making theatre that just reflects us ... why should the world listen to us if we're just talking about ourselves?'⁸

What he feared was that that kind of commitment was lacking and that audiences no longer turned to the theatre to see their world reflected. Attention, it seemed to him, had moved elsewhere. Film and television were more likely to engage them, television, anyway, being where playwrights increasingly worked. It was necessary, it seemed to him, to internationalize, to dramatize 'the stories of people from countries and cultures different from our own,' stories 'about how we are connected to these people and places ... About what these connections say about us ... About who we are in the face of this new and terrifying and fascinating world.' As a playwright and former producer, working in a small theatre, he was acutely aware of putting such stories on stage when audiences had a preference for the familiar and there was little encouragement from critics, indeed a degree of hostility.

Interestingly, and slightly confusingly, the first example of such a play which he offers, *Rafta*, *Rafta* ... is by the British Pakistani writer Ayub Khan-Din and is set in England. The second, *Betrayed*, is by a journalist, George Packer, and is adapted from his own non-fiction book *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*. The third is a semi-autobiographical rock-musical, *Passing Strange*, a first work by Stew (real name Mark Stewart), about an African-American man, also named Stew, in search of the real. Though he does visit Europe this is not where the play has its

being, and therefore hardly an example of the kind of work Rogers is calling for, but in a sense that is perhaps evidence of the paucity of available examples (though Lynn Nottage had set *Mud, River, Stone* in southeast Africa and Katori Hall would later set *Children of Killers* and *Our Lady of Kibeho* in Rwanda). More immediately relevant is his own play, *The Overwhelming*, set on the eve of the Rwandan genocide and significantly staged two years earlier at the National Theatre where it was directed by Max Stafford-Clark, whose reputation was precisely for seeking out the politically and socially relevant. He subsequently directed the American production at the Roundabout Theatre.

Nor was the venue for the British production, the National Theatre, without significance. This was no small pub theatre, important as those have been in Britain. It was the country's premier institution, the Royal Shakespeare Company aside. It suddenly gave Rogers a prominence which meant that those in the American theatre who had previously ignored his work now hastened to court him. In fact, both venues, along with the Royal Court Theatre, would turn out to be important to new American playwrights as well as staging classics of the American theatre. At the same time *The Guardian's* theatre critic Michael Billington welcomed the play for raising British audiences' eyes from domestic issues, distance having acted as an analgesic, with issues closer to hand having primacy.

Rogers' choice of the Roundabout Theatre for the New York production of *The Overwhelming* was in part because 'there had never been a play set in East Africa on a major New York stage, about which I felt a great responsibility, and a Roundabout production would make this a Broadway-like event.' Beyond that, though, there was an element of pragmatism because, 'I was very poor. I was in debt. I was determined to try and leverage this production so that I would no longer have to work a day job. In the not-for-profit theatre the playwright gets a percentage of the gate, just like in the commercial theater. I would make more money if the Roundabout did it because they were going to put it into the Laura Pels Theatre, which has a very large seating capacity for an Off Broadway theatre [400 seats]. Sixteen weeks at the Laura Pels versus four weeks at a smaller theatre downtown was a no-brainer.'⁹ Now, he hoped, he would be a fully professional playwright, though real financial independence would only come with *Oslo* (2016). Beyond that, *The Overwhelming* became his first play published in an acting edition.

For Rogers, the theatre was ideally suited to his sense of the need for what he called a 'mapless new world', in that it was a public space in which life could be breathed into characters whose experience, assumptions, possibilities, differed from those who saw and heard them act out their lives, even as those lives were not so different in their human qualities and content. Arthur Miller had believed that the theatre was a place in which he could have a conversation with America but his plays, perhaps to his initial surprise, reached out beyond the boundaries of his own country, and not simply in that his metaphors were available for translation by audiences in different places at different times. He also set them in other countries, in France, Czechoslovakia, South America. They reflected, after all, his own political internationalism married, as he was, to a Magnum photographer whose work took her around the world, while assuming the presidency of International PEN. Apart from anything else, there were few limits to the American imperium and understanding those beyond its own territorial waters a political no less than human imperative.

Of course, such plays were not lacking in America, from Tony Kushner's work to that of Wallace Shawn, but there was often the sense of swimming against the tide. For those shaping a season for subscription audiences, plays liable to fall outside their experiences could prove

less than popular which explains Rogers' rallying cry in his Laura Pels lecture at the American Repertory Theatre. It was, he ended by remarking, a conversation he wanted to initiate with those in the theatre the better to begin one with the audiences they addressed.

He was not, though, in his mind, a political playwright in a narrow sense. 'I write my plays,' he explained, 'not to score political points but because I am fascinated by these stories and think they will make great theatre.'¹⁰ Indeed he was surprised when his plays were regarded in Britain as indictments of American foreign policy, *The Overwhelming* being seen as a parable about the American invasion of Iraq: 'To which I thought, "Who knew?"'¹¹

In an article for *The New York Times* he explained what, after his early plays, would become his artistic creed:

As a playwright, I look to tell stories that are framed against great political rupture. I am obsessed with putting characters onstage who struggle with, and against, cascading world events – and who are changed forever through that struggle. While journalism sharpens our minds, the theatre can expand our sense of what it means to be human. It is where we come together in a communal space to hear ideas that grip us, surprise us – even infuriate us – as we learn of things we didn't know. For me, that is a deeply, thrillingly, political act.¹²

At the heart of a number of his plays is the question of trust, at a private and social level. Without it, the fabric of social life potentially tears. Yet at the same time, there are moments, situations, when the truth may not serve a higher purpose. In personal relations and public negotiations, discretion and even deceit may have a human sanction even as they have a price. The rupture to which he refers certainly has its political dimension but the struggle is not only with world events, though he wishes to bring those to the stage where what is secret or concealed is laid before audiences. It is within his protagonists who are aware of the compromises that are part of lives whose moral borders are indistinct, their fallibilities a marker not so much of their divided selves as of the complexities of everyday life and social existence alike. The stage becomes a place where public histories intertwine with personal ones, the challenge being to make both manifest.

Rogers was born in Berkeley, California, but spent part of the year with his mother in her apartment on East 10th Street in New York City, his parents being divorced, and part in Columbia, Missouri, which he has described as a sleepy small college town. As he explained, 'My parents are Berkeley grads, from the time when it was a hotbed of intellectual and political pursuit. My father was a political science professor. In lieu of sports, we'd talk about politics around the kitchen table when I was growing up. And my mother was a super lefty, deeply involved in politics.'¹³

As a result of his father's career as a political scientist who taught Southeast Asian studies, he spent two years in rural Malaysia and Indonesia, which he has said marked both his life and his work and would certainly seem to explain part of his fascination with other countries. As he has said,

The constant theme in both homes was a passionate engagement in politics and a deep knowledge of and interest in other countries – both my parents having lived, together and apart, all over the world. As a playwright, I spent many years working through and shedding different skins, trying to find my voice and the subject matters that truly

gripped me. It's only with hindsight that I understand that what my parents exposed me to, and what they raised me to value, would so inform my work. In essence, writing plays that delve into and are set against international and political concerns is simply me, as a writer, being called home.¹⁴

Though he apparently told his mother that his ambition was to be either a writer or a baseball player, in fact he had wanted to be an actor from the age of nine when he played in *Snow White* in a community-theatre production in central Missouri. It was, therefore, as a would-be actor that he enrolled in the North Carolina School of the Arts' Acting Conservatory in Winston-Salem. Amongst other alumni are Mary-Louise Parker and Jennifer Ehle (daughter to the actress Rosemary Harris and the writer John Ehle), the latter a year behind him. Ehle would later play the role of Mona Juul in *Oslo*. Asked who had been the most influential member of staff he named Bob Francesconi who had taught at the Moscow Art Theatre.

Despite the fact that he had begun to command leading roles he had also written monologues and short plays for his fellow students, including Ehle, and began to realize that he no longer wished to act. Even so, when he moved to New York he did audition for a number of shows, a process with which he was quickly disillusioned in part, perhaps, because he failed to land the roles, making money by catering and driving a trolley car in Central Park. At the same time, he believed that learning how to act had given him the tools for being a playwright. In terms of his writing, he was influenced by seeing a production in 1993, at NYU, of Tony Kushner's *Perestroika*, part of *Angels in America*, a play which was engaged with social and moral issues.

Back at the Conservatory he had met Gus Reyes who would direct his work for a decade and a half and who, together with Rogers and his wife, Rebecca Ashley, a choreographer, would go on to found The Next Stage Company. As he has recalled, 'We did plays, multimedia pieces, and dance. We got a nice little black box theatre on 46th Street, in St. Mary's Church. We did that for eight years. That was my education in the theatre. Then we closed it, because keeping a small theatre going about killed us. So, then I started over again.' His own early, unpublished plays, he described as 'Ersatz Mamet'.¹⁵

White People was given a workshop production by The Next Stage Company in 1998 before its premiere at the Philadelphia Company in 2000. That company had been established in 1974 with a mission to stage new works (it claims to have produced 140 new plays and musicals), 50 per cent moving on to New York and other major cities. *White People* did reach Off Broadway, though nine years later by which time he had produced further plays. Also 2000 had seen a production of the play by the Salt Lake City Acting Company, committed to producing contemporary American plays, and this led to a long-term relationship.

If in his later work Rogers would reach out into the world, *White People* engaged with an America in which social changes had left some of its citizens confused and angry, if unable openly to express their feelings. It features three characters: Alan, a teacher, in New York; Mara Lynn Dodson, a working-class woman in her mid-thirties, in North Carolina, and Martin Bahmueller, head of a company, in St Louis. What connects them is that they are white and uncomfortable with those who are not, but also that their marriages have proved fragile, their lives not what they had planned. In a series of intercut monologues, they reveal what they otherwise suppress as though the audience were priest/therapists.

Alan's wife is the real breadwinner while his career seems stalled as he teaches those who, for the most part, have no interest in what he says, not sharing his concerns or even his language.

Mara, once homecoming queen and captain of the cheerleaders at the state university, had married a star wrestler only to be saddled with a man who can now only hold down a menial job and with a child who has severe behavioural problems. Martin, meanwhile, alarmed by the complexion of his New York neighbourhood, has dragged his wife back to the Midwest from which she had escaped only for her to leave him to go east again. All three are aware that things are not as they wished, that their lives are slipping away, while clinging to what seem to them to be certainties no matter how dubious they may be, no matter that language itself seems incapable of expressing what they want to say or truly what they feel, except that their monologues, addressed directly to the audience, are confessionals of a sort, falling short because confession is blended with self-justification. They all feel that in some way society is drifting away from them, that they no longer know what is possible or acceptable, resisting, yet sensing that theirs is a losing hand.

Race, in particular, is a problem. The words they are used to are no longer permissible, those they are offered losing the sharpness, the edge which their own vocabulary once had. The wrong people have power if not by virtue of their position then by some claim whose validity escapes them and which they instinctively reject. History, which they thought secure, is now presented to them in a different way even as it explains something of who they are and how they think. South, Midwest, East Coast come together.

There is a reason the speeches are intercut. It is because, at whatever level, there is the same anxiety. Even as they insist on their own visions, trying to shape the world to their requirements, they share a sense that they are no longer in control. Mara's son's doctor is an Indian. She wants to insist that he has no right in the country, feels certain she is patronized, but this is what is on offer. Martin believes himself in control, wanting everyone to conform to his demands, even as he is aware that he is being denied the right to say what he truly thinks, that menial black workers have some hold on him which he cannot articulate but which is nonetheless real. The gulf, for him, as for the others, is not only between himself and the immediate world from which he feels alienated, but between himself and his family. Wife and children are mysteries embracing the very culture which baffles and disturbs him. Communication has become problematic.

Addressing the audience, as they do throughout, they can say what they sense they otherwise cannot and these internal monologues have echoes of David Mamet as in Martin's aria:

You wanna sip pina coladas on your sun deck, feel pure? That what you want? ... You wanna ring your hands at the world and know you are innocent? Look at your life. You think the price we are paying here today is enough? Don't come to me with 'bake sale, buy the right tuna, slip some homeless schmuck five bucks.' You wanna be absolved? That costs ... You want an even playing field, you wanna be clean, that costs ... come home, find your daughter raped in a pool of blood and there's nothing you can do? No? No? THEN SHUT YOUR MOUTH.¹⁶

When his own son is involved in a violent racist attack, Martin is bemused, not least because that son lacks his own inhibition when it comes to language, a language suppressed but available. When Alan and his wife are attacked by a group of black boys it is he who screams out obscenities. When he is confronted by one of his pupils for whom he had expressed admiration, he confesses that 'my mind says: Nigger. You filthy, ignorant nigger' (36). She

becomes 'Them'. The result is a mixture of shame, guilt, bafflement, along with resentment that he should have to acknowledge that what lies at the heart of such a confused response is an awareness that, 'I know in my heart, I am like everyone: What is different, what is strange, I do not like, I do not trust . . . They want possibility . . . But there's only so much possibility to go around' and 'before I take less, me and every person that looks like me would kill every person who looks like you' (37).

It is not that Rogers has no sympathy for these people. Quite the contrary. They each struggle to understand what is happening, why they feel as they do. They suspect their own growing irrelevance. Mara's love for her mentally damaged son is real enough, as is her frustration with him. She is poor but struggling to do what she can. Her plea is not without its force when she says,

don't tell me it's about 'history'! Don't tell me it's about 'making amends'! What's that got to do with me? 'Cause my great-great-granddaddy owned somebody else's? 'Cause my mamma wouldn't sit at the back of the bus? Guilt is not transferred through blood. I am clawing through life, just like everybody else! Now I know the world is changing, but I can change too! I am not ignorant! Just tell me what to do! Look at me! Look at who I am! . . . I WILL NOT BE ERASED! (35)

For a second, the language seems not quite her own and at that moment the other two characters' comments are interspersed with hers, Martin asking 'Where does this anger come from?' and Alan declaring that 'There is fear for a reason!' (35)

White People is a powerful and disquieting work, touching an exposed nerve. Its language can disturb audiences and is designed to do such, focussing, as it does, on the point where feelings, prejudices, anxieties, break surface, and though he would later look beyond America there are aspects of that work here. Direct address to the audience would become a familiar tactic as would a concern with the nuances of language, its ambiguities and suppressions. History bears on these characters as it would on those in the plays which followed.

The Salt Lake City Acting Company later commissioned and staged *Seeing the Elephant*, *Madagascar* and *The Overwhelming*. *Seeing the Elephant* (a nineteenth-century expression meaning gaining experience at a cost) was described by the actress Anne Cullimore Decker, who played the principal part of Vera, a woman in her sixties, as 'dealing with the deaths of her son and husband, and . . . with lots of emotions—guilt, confusion. She tries to be charming, effusive and outrageous, but underneath she's really sublimating and not facing life in its reality.'¹⁷ *Madagascar*, commissioned and given its first production by the Salt Lake Acting Company in 2004, had more of Albee and even Tennessee Williams about it than Mamet. It consists of a series of monologues though, for Rogers, 'The interesting thing about *Madagascar* is that when it's played, it doesn't seem like a monologue play at all. There are three actors, and because the other two are always on stage and, more importantly, play characters, including themselves as remembered by the other people on stage, at times even contradicting what they say when they're in their story, it's much more fluid, and for lack of a better phrase, play like, than, say, a traditional Irish monologue play that's all the rage of late, or *White People*.'

Explaining what had sparked the play, he said that, 'I had an image of an older woman coming onto the stage, hearing the click clack of her heels on wood. She sat down, and in my mind I could hear the sound of a cello, and she was speaking to us. I didn't know what she was

saying, but there was something mysterious and a bit spooky about it. That sent me off to the races, and it was quite a long time before I realized, oh, these are the connections between these people. Hopefully now it's clear and well-made, entertaining for the audience and thought-provoking, but there was a bit of blind faith, unnervingly at times, working on it.¹⁸

The action, which does, indeed, begin with the sound of a cello, moves backwards and forwards through time as it is gradually revealed that Nathan and Lilian, now in their sixties, had had an affair while her husband was away, a husband who subsequently died. June, Lilian's daughter, gives her blessing but her brother (Paul, to her, Gideon to his mother) is alienated and leaves, telling his mother, it is because 'so much of what I believe in is a lie' (38).

The story moves on. He has been missing for years, his mother waiting in a hotel room in Rome, hoping for his return, a room occupied by all the characters at different times, characters remaining on stage throughout. What follows are monologues addressed in part to an audience and in part to themselves. There are other characters who help to tell the stories but they are played by the same actors.

Paul's disappearance is literal but it emerges that he had been disappearing in another sense, not able to find himself, not fitting in, escaping from himself and already tense with something unknowable before he left. The relationship with his mother is not good knowing, as he does, of her betrayal, information kept from her even as it is one reason for his disappearance. He leaves for Madagascar as an aid worker. For six months he writes to his sister but never his mother having learned, he tells June, that 'people can't be trusted' (34). The letters then stop.

Lilian's relationship with her daughter, meanwhile, has become distant, never as strong as that between her twin children. She is not even sure what June does. This is not a family emotionally or even physically close, living in different places, emotionally withdrawn from one another and even hostile. As Lilian says, 'she does not care for me. It would be best in her eyes if I were gone . . . Not dead, but . . . absent.'¹⁹

When June calls, after her brother has been missing for two years, to say that it must be assumed he is dead, Lilian commits suicide by drowning. For a while, for years, June resists the same logic, one day receiving a postcard with the cryptic message, 'I'm . . . still . . . here' (40). Who is? If it is her brother, it is not sufficient. She also commits suicide, preferring pills. The postcard is found, its message scratched out until it is illegible. For Nathan, Lilian's adulterous lover, who finds it, while a secret 'is an answer waiting to be revealed . . . a mystery,' is 'just that: a mystery,' (41) even as he also says, 'it's the hidden connections between actions which fascinate' (16). So, with the play, whose images recur, dreams melding into reality, works of art reflecting relationships, connections broken but still tenuously there.

The play begins with a projected image of a fragment of the Eleusinian Relief of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, the latter married to the god of the underworld, Hades, with a boy poised beneath them, Rogers having studied Greek and Roman mythology. Demeter is a goddess of abundance, as Lilian is rich, while Persephone is queen of the underworld. The Eleusinian Mysteries were secret religious rites concerned with three phases, loss, search and ascent, as the abducted Persephone is restored to her mother. In *Madagascar* it is the boy who is lost, for whom the search seems fruitless and for whom there is, it seems, no restoration though the play ends with June recalling their childhood games in which Madagascar was a magical place full of 'wonderful, wonderful things' (43).

When Nathan visited the Metropolitan Museum to see the Eleusinian Relief he realized that the fingers of the figures are missing: 'what they were giving, reaching for, it's impossible to

tell. No one knows what they held, or what was supposed to happen next. Just another mystery' (42). Mystery, indeed, is both the subject and the method in a play in which people's inner lives remain a cipher not to be decoded, in which secrets, truths withheld, erode not only trust but the ties that were supposed to bind.

For the most part, reviewers were intrigued but found it gnostic, Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, confessing that he found a 2010 production 'somewhat baffling'. The following year, reviewing an Evanston production, Scotty Zacher, in *Chicago Theater Beat*, suggested that 'there's too much deliberate or perverse mystery-mangling in this tortuous witness to an escape that remains maddeningly evasive. There are too many blanks for the audience to fill in without finally feeling that the playwright hasn't played fair with the facts.'²⁰ *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Chris Jones, meanwhile, commented on its puzzle-like structure seeing it as 'a very smart and stimulating piece about three wealthy, neurotic Americans trying and failing to connect,'²¹ surely a somewhat reductive interpretation of a play which invites its audience to address more than the mystery of a missing man, let alone the plight of neurotic Americans, though the word connection is, indeed, crucial, and not only to the characters. It is a play in which fragmented narratives, contested memories, shifting perspectives, missing facts, suggest those elements of experience which stubbornly refuse to render up their meaning, pieces of a human jigsaw which never quite cohere. Loss, in particular, is an irremediable fact, a wound never to be healed or even fully to be inhabited.

In 1994, between April and July, 800,000 people were murdered in Rwanda, 10 per cent of the population. A quarter of a million women were raped, the resultant children (those not aborted or killed at birth) called *les enfants mauvais souvenir*. Rogers has recalled being shocked by reports of the genocide, not least because he knew nothing of Rwanda and found the reports confusing. He began to read about it, at first for interest but then as a playwright wondering how he could address it: 'I became more and more fascinated by the intricacies of the political situation, and the sort of moral vacuum and the terror that people were going through . . . And slowly the dramaturge in me took over and I began to think, "Well, if you were there, Rogers, facing a situation like this, what would you do, when all your decisions or all your options were monstrous."²² He studied the language, Kinyarwanda, and even a map of Kigali. The question remained, how could he deal with an event so overwhelming.

'From the beginning,' he explained, 'I wanted to tell a story that a Western theatre audience would invest in. If I was going to write about the politics of a place deeply foreign to everyone watching then the form of the play would need to be something that they could sink their teeth into . . . My ah-ha moment was choosing to set the action right before the genocide. This way . . . the spectre of what is to come knocks on the door, louder and louder as the play progresses. Letting the audience imagine the unimaginable seemed the most dramatically effective choice, and the most ethical.'²³

Though in *The Overwhelming* a French diplomat rejects the idea that imperialism played any role in what happened as 'the argument of college students,' (66) in a note to the play Rogers explains both its historical context and the significance of its title. He recalls that in the late nineteenth century the Belgian king, Leopold II, launched a campaign to conquer the Congo basin, the result, over time, being the death of millions, the word in the Mongo language for this being, in translation, the overwhelming. Where do historical events have their beginning? What would be seen as an African genocide had its antecedent in colonial greed. This was the world captured in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which the true darkness lay less

in what Europeans chose to call the dark continent because of its supposed savagery, than in the imperial powers. The Welsh American explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who titled his books *Through the Dark Continent* and *In Darkest Africa*, made a deal with the same King Leopold and boasted of destroying Congolese towns, a statue of him in Kinshasa being pulled down in 1971.

This is not a play which insists on a post-imperial guilt, though it is invoked and the significance of events in Rwanda is seen as reaching out beyond its borders even as in America a deliberate decision was made to suppress or ignore news of what was happening there once the killing had begun. A Freedom of Information request subsequently revealed that though the word genocide was being used within the administration little more than two weeks after the violence broke out, President Clinton had decided against involvement. Rwanda had no resources of value and the disaster of American involvement in Somalia militated against committing Americans to prevent the slaughter, even as the UN lost men and withdrew.

As Charles Woolsey, a US Embassy official in *The Overwhelming*, remarks, 'this country's so small, "Rwanda" has to be written outside the borders. Little arrow pointing to it' (78). Four years later, in the capital, Kigali, Clinton apologized for his inaction and for failing to name the killings genocide. He believed that if they had intervened they could have saved a third of the lives that were lost. Indifference, as the play implies, has its cost though, of course, as we were to discover in Iraq, so does intervention and Rogers' play explores the ambiguities of the Rwandan situation as it does of the individuals who constitute it. Perhaps that is one reason that he calls for parts to be doubled. There are villains but this doubling is a reminder that that role has been shared. There are echoes of former brutalities as there is a foreshadowing of those still to come. Motives are ambivalent, trust betrayed, reality and truth a matter of political convenience and hard to penetrate. It is a play about a time and a place but it is equally about personal and public deceptions. Precisely located, it is nonetheless a reminder of other failures of the human imagination and moral responsibility.

Rwanda is 85 per cent Hutu and 14 per cent Tutsi, though it was the Tutsis who had power. There was a history of animosity between the two groups, themselves in large part a product of Belgian colonial rule rather than an essential difference of identity. Economic pressure led many to cross the border into Uganda before returning to do battle. For a while it looked as though peace could be secured and maintained by a UN presence with power being shared. When the Hutu President's plane was shot down, however, the killing began, the UN withdrawing most of its troops.

Rogers' play is not offered as an indictment but as his own journey into the heart of darkness and, as with Conrad, that darkness reaches out beyond those preparing to kill their neighbours, as elsewhere, and at the same time, they did in the former Yugoslavia where an estimated 133,000 died, a conflict which also had its roots in history.

Having finished the play, Rogers asked his agent to send it to the National Theatre feeling that a work requiring eleven actors and set in francophone Africa was more likely to be staged there than in America. Even so, he was surprised when he took a call from the National's Artistic Director, Nicholas Hytner, asking him to fly to London. *The Overwhelming* was to be staged by the National in association with Out of Joint, a touring company founded by Max Stafford-Clark, which had premiered plays by David Edgar, Caryl Churchill and David Hare, Timberlake Wertenbaker, in other words writers who, like Rogers, wrote plays set outside their own society, addressing issues of immediate relevance.

Rogers and Max Stafford-Clark visited Rwanda. For all his earlier stab at Kinyarwanda, he spoke neither that language nor French relying on survivors in America for translations. What they learned on their trip necessitated certain minor changes in the text. Extracts from some of their interviews are included at the back of the published text, along with a brief piece by the BBC's Fergal Keane, who covered the genocide and who explains that genocide was a state policy. Jean-Pierre Sagahutu, one of those interviewed, confirmed that, 'It was systematic. Taxi drivers killed taxi drivers, doctors killed doctors. All knew each other here. Colleagues killed colleagues. My father was a doctor. Another doctor killed him' (136–7). A woman called Serafina describes her own experience: 'My husband was killed on the night of 7 April 1994. My mother and two children were killed. My children were burned alive . . . Killers found me hiding . . . they raped me . . . A man came by . . . he took my baby, he took him to a big tree and beat his head . . . then hung him by his feet' (137). The interviews were overwhelming (and there is a reason for the play's title beyond its literal root) in their particularities as in their aggregating impact.

How to write about such a situation, to stage such events? As those who sought to address the Holocaust in fiction, drama, art, discovered not only did any attempt necessarily fail to capture the reality of what happened but there was also the risk of appropriating the experience of others for aesthetic and, indeed, commercial effect. Beyond that, how could language capture what lay outside of language, except that in one interview a woman, who had been raped and contracted HIV as a result, bearing a child by her rapist, says, 'I . . . always wanted to be an actor. That is why I am telling you this. The theatre is important for this – to tell this' (140).

For Fergal Keane, himself a journalist, the 'theatre can reach an audience, and convey truths, with a power that can elude those of us who operate in the strict language of the news bulletin or the newspaper dispatch . . . a play can entertain, challenge, upset and anger an audience; at its best it can make them think deeply about the world in which they live and be prepared to challenge orthodoxies and lies' (133–4). For him, *The Overwhelming* was an antidote to the indifference which had characterized responses to the genocide, a call to action not only in relation to Rwanda, now fast disappearing in the rear-view mirror, but to subsequent horrors. He names Darfur but that, too, has slipped from the headlines, only to be replaced by other challenges to our sense of a shared humanity.

For all his concern with getting details right, for interviewing those involved in the genocide, Rogers was clear that he was acting as a playwright and not a journalist any more than he saw his plays as political interventions. As he remarked in the context of *Oslo*, but with immediate relevance to *The Overwhelming*,

I'm interested in political theatre not as agitprop cause-based theatre . . . What theatre does that journalism doesn't do is that, in journalism, you lay out the facts; you explain this is what happened so the reader can be informed. But theatre doesn't do that. What the theatre does is to keep asking questions. It doesn't provide answers. So, as a playwright, I want to show more and more complicated voices of people who aren't normally on the stage. And then I'm going to put them on the stage as flesh-and-blood human beings. The anxiety was that people would get upset simply because of the theatrical act of putting everyone on the stage and humanising them.²⁴

At the same time, there are those for whom addressing the specifics of a contemporary situation nonetheless has the feel of the journalistic and with the same longevity. It was an accusation with

which David Hare was familiar. As he explained, 'The charge against topical theatre is that it dates. The charge is always, "You are just a journalist running along behind the truck taking notes." But if you write about something that has underneath it a classical conflict then writing that kind of theatre, which may be about something extremely contemporary, is curiously lasting.'²⁵

For Rogers, events in Rwanda were less to be confronted directly than refracted through an outsider, an American who believes himself engaged with the world but nonetheless fails to understand what confronts him. Unlike his compatriots, for whom such events seem little more than a rumour from a place they could not locate on a map, he does travel there but for him it is material for a book, as for his wife it is for an article. In that sense, here is Rogers confronting his own dilemma.

As the play opens there seems to be a fragile peace. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the rebel group largely consisting of Tutsis, had agreed to an accord with the government. Signed in August 1993, it would fail by April 1994. The play is set in Kigali, in early 1994. Into this situation comes Jack Exley, a professor of international relations. Reassured by press reports of an improved situation, he brings his family with him only to be told by Charles Woolsey, a US Embassy official, that assassinations are frequent. When the two go for a drink at a hotel, Charles remarks of their waiter, 'His wife was killed last week. Abducted. Raped. Cut up. Someone thought she was an RPF accomplice. They'll come for him. Matter of time.'²⁶

Exley is accompanied by his African-American wife, Linda, who publishes 'personal essays. Narratives of self' (22) but now has a commission to write about Rwanda or, rather, 'my personal experiences here,' (28) insisting that she is 'from here' since her ancestor had been taken to America in chains. It is apparent to all who meet them, at the French Embassy and elsewhere, that they are unaware of the situation into which they have come. Their personal dramas take primacy. For Exley, travel may have been in the name of research, with an ethical and even philosophical dimension, but it seems equally to have served a more private function to do with career and familial tensions. In an attempt to bond with his son, he recalls an apparently idyllic trip to Bali with his former wife in which he was 'relaxed,' evidently not his normal state, a time which was 'transforming' gifting him a 'clarity' which he now hopes to recreate following his divorce and a subsequent honeymoon in Peru.

This is a family which has brought its own drama with it. Exley has divorced his first wife to marry his student, only for that first wife to be killed in a car crash. His second wife has abandoned her own career, which is not what she thought she had been promised. Meanwhile, his son, taken out of school in his last semester, treats them both with disdain, he having barely seen his father in three years. It is not, however, only Exley's wife who, whatever his declared commitments, is concerned with the self. The book he plans, it transpires, is his last hope for tenure. If he fails to write it, he will lose his job, a job in an undesirable university anyway. He is not even on sabbatical but unpaid leave. His motives, then, are not what they seem. A native saying – 'A man who tells all is naked. A naked man is weak' (54) – would seem to apply to him. Exley lies to his son, while his son lies to him. Truth, it seems, is a rare commodity on a private and public level. Here, the South African NGO worker, Jan Verbeek, insists, 'everyone lies' (93). As the French diplomat, Jean-Claude Buisson, observes, 'the straight road is seldom the one to walk,' (67) or as another character observes, 'To speak the truth is good, but to speak all truth is not' (82). There are, it seems, some truths which are dangerous.

For his part, Exley has come to meet a doctor friend who will feature in his new book about those around the world who resist the idea of history as a series of events beyond anyone's

control. People, he insists, 'aren't being swept along, they're doing the sweeping' (31). As evidence, he points to Benigno Aquino who had protested against the Marcos regime in the Philippines, only to be reminded by Woolsey that he had been shot dead. His point, though, he insists, is that 'we're the ones that have to be willing to stand up and make a difference. That's how history moves forward. One pebble redirects the river!' (34) For Samuel Mizinga, a Rwandan government official, this is something only someone blind to the situation in the country could believe. For him, it is history that has precipitated a situation in which mere survival is at a premium, even as, lapsing into his native tongue, he expresses his hatred of the Tutsis insisting that, 'We will fill the rivers with bodies . . . We will cut them, everyone' (36). The speech is not translated. Language is a door which can be slammed shut as well as opened.

Indeed, language, as used in the play, is both an expression of the gulf between the characters, a gap of understanding, and a way of retreating from communication, a switch of language being also a change of perspective. There are various acts of translation in the play as speeches delivered in one language are rendered in another but words have their own history, their own context, so that communication is freighted with assumptions which are not shared. Beyond that, language, here as elsewhere, is also a facilitator of violence. For the Hutus, Tutsis are cockroaches as in Vietnam the Viet Cong (itself an invented term designed to belittle) were gooks, while for the Nazis Jews were parasites. When the threatening Mizinga, the government official, remarks that soldiers are looking for cabbages, unbeknown to Linda he is referring to their hunting Tutsis. 'I am,' he says, 'translating from Kinyarwanda to French to English. So much is lost' (50). They speak past each other, meanings deliberately or inadvertently obscured. In the next scene Linda tries to buy cabbages in the local market only to be warned that the seller is 'a filthy Tutsi whore' who 'will poison you and you will die' (53). Here, even to speak English is to invite danger, this being the non-native language spoken by Tutsis as the Hutus speak French, both languages recalling the colonizers (after the genocide the language of government was changed from French to English).

For Jean-Claude Buisson, of the French Embassy, Rwanda is part of *la Francophonie*, their sphere of influence. He rejects Linda's suggestion that America has no interest, having trained the Tutsi rebels. The internal battle, it seems, has other players so that guilt spreads out into the world which will affect surprise and shock when the genocide begins. Clinton's non-involvement at that time conceals America's earlier finger in the pie. Though it is not explored in the play, the United States had ignored Uganda's assistance to the Tutsi rebels who had invaded in 1990 and, indeed, increased armed support for that country.

Fergal Keane quotes a French historian of the genocide as describing Rwanda as 'a claustrophobic, airless hell,' (132) but, for all his apparent confidence, Exley finds it impossible to read this country. He greets what seems to him to be an experiment in democracy, blind to a country on the brink of collapse in which violence and fear are principal determinants. 'Stop thinking like an American,' (69) a South African tells him. He even unknowingly locates his family in what is apparently little more than a brothel. It is not that his belief in the need to resist a corrosive fatalism is without its force. Indeed, that, as Fergal Keane had indicated, lies at the heart of the play, but that he brings with him a naivety which undermines his confident assertions. Offered warnings of the dangers of Kigali, he prefers to believe his own sense of things, even as the man he has come to meet seems to have disappeared or, as he is told, does not exist.

That man, Joseph, does exist for the audience in so far as he addresses it directly reading letters he has sent to Jack. He speaks, though, from the past, already, perhaps, a ghost, denied by

the Rwandans having run into trouble with the authorities. Little by little a sense of menace deepens. Joseph, it turns out, was a Tutsi. Meanwhile, beyond his fate, Rwandans are suffering from AIDS, malaria and sleeping sickness apart from the gathering political storm. The word 'overwhelming' is one that Joseph uses when working on AIDS. As the doctor observes, 'you have to be here to start making sense of this place. Before I came I read everything, thought I was a bloody expert. Then I got off the plane' (45). As Woolsey observes, 'People, even people we think we know . . . they're not the same here as when they are away from here' (79).

The first act ends with the arrival of Elise Kayitesi, Joseph's Hutu wife, who not only confirms that her husband has disappeared but that he had previously been imprisoned when the Tutsi rebels had crossed the border from Uganda. This is news to Exsley who was even unaware that he was married and had children. Their friendship, it seems, forged when they were college roommates, did not extend beyond the professional, further evidence of the limits of his awareness or even interest.

When he goes to the police to report Joseph as a missing person he receives no help. As a Tutsi, he is regarded as an enemy. What he does receive is a denunciation of President Clinton for not intervening on behalf of the Hutus and a warning that a cleansing is about to begin. As Elise remarks to Linda, 'If people like you understood, this country would be very different. We are beaten, we are starved, we are killed, and you do nothing. To you, we are nothing' (82). The real concern is indifference. The UN force are described by a major in the UN mission as 'a small, dirty Band-Aid on a large festering wound . . . do you think the world cares?' (87–8). The death of eighteen American soldiers in Somalia the previous year had stunned the United States but he points out that the ninety UN soldiers who died trying to rescue the Americans had barely registered, perhaps because they were from Pakistan and Malaysia, a different colour and hence invisible.

Here people are seldom what they seem. Mizinga is a member of an extremist party who, according to Jan Verbeek, 'makes Idi Amin look like a choirboy,' (94) even as he insists to Linda that she must trust him, trust being nowhere evident at a private or public level. 'So who am I supposed to trust?' (101) Exley asks, as Elise advises Linda: 'Do not trust a husband who does not trust you,' (113) while Joseph advises that 'Trust is to be earned' (115).

Is Joseph, who now suddenly reappears, taking refuge with the Exleys, a doctor seeking to save lives or a spy for the RPF with blood on his hands as Buisson alleges? It turns out that he has passed information which led to the death of what he characterizes as rapists and killers. He who holds a list of those he wants protected had a list of his own. Slowly the threatened violence becomes immediate. A Tutsi woman is killed with the connivance of a man who Exley and Linda had assumed was simply their servant. Gunfire sounds through the city. The guard outside the Exley's house has disappeared. A rock comes through the window. The telephone is dead. When Mizinga enters to take Joseph away Linda offers him the list of people at risk insisting 'WE DO NOT BELONG HERE! THIS IS NOT OUR PROBLEM!' (128) an American woman effectively spelling out American policy. To protect his family, Jack offers Joseph up as Mizinga says, 'This will mean nothing to you soon. All of us, we will mean nothing. This is so unimportant to you. You will go home and forget' (129).

The play ends, though, not with Joseph being taken away but with him turning to the audience, the light now singling him out, as he speaks the words of a letter he had sent and which was part of the correspondence that had brought the Exleys to a place they would never understand and where their moral compass would go awry, though in truth it had already been

faulty before they arrived. 'I have hope,' he says, even as hope had died, as would nearly a million people.

We are left, then, it seems, with irony. Beyond the play the genocide is about to begin. No one in *The Overwhelming* can be said to be innocent. Even naivety carries a burden of guilt. There is failure at every level. Exley's book will never be written. His career is over. The tensions within his family will surely break it apart. The UN is on the verge of a failure that will be repeated elsewhere. The various foreigners, with motives of their own, can do nothing but observe, their detachment in itself rendering them culpable. Yet there is a residue in that the play itself is an antidote to the indifference it indicts even as its acknowledgement of ambiguity is a resistance to the Manichaeism which is the tinder for genocide.

Plays have a way of beginning when the action is already underway. The consequences of past events, previous tensions, are slowly realized and resolved. In *The Overwhelming* we never quite reach that point. The action is not completed. Instead Rogers brings us to the edge, to the point where we know that nothing will stop what is about to happen. Any order, any sense of a coherent moral world, is about to disappear even as we can trace that fact back to its beginnings. History is not a force independent of human will, an inevitability. It is a construction to do with power exercised in the name of abstract ideas made concrete, whether they be those of colonialism, sectional or personal advantage. There is an opacity to genocide which seems to defy analysis, understanding or representation. Here, Rogers addresses that problem not by staring into the abyss, from which no light emerges, offering accounts of atrocities that prompt the mind to retreat, but by placing before us those who see the world through a lens clouded by falsehoods, deceptions, concealed motives, human failings, in a context in which right actions are not always clear, in which trust and charity have proved inadequate and hope denied.

The genocide ran its course and ended. Some were brought to justice. Others justified their crimes, still believing their own propaganda. It now lies in the past, fast receding. Like other such spasms of human dereliction, however, its aftershocks continue to threaten. A group of countries met in 1996 under the aegis of the UN determined that such events would not recur. They duly signed a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide but a similar Convention had been signed in 1948. They were, it seems, swimming against a tide and that is partly where the relevance – Rogers' key word – of *The Overwhelming* lies. At the time of the play's production, genocide had already occurred in Darfur. Further ahead lay the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in Myanmar.

Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, thought it an 'honorable' work but found the Exleys 'obtuse to the point of idiocy,' while praising it for avoiding 'the woodenness of the lecture podium.'²⁷ Charles Spencer, reviewing the earlier British production, though, had greeted it as not only the best play he had seen that year, but the most entertaining.

Rogers' next play was prompted by a commission to write for the British Tricycle Theatre, which had a reputation for producing verbatim plays. This time, though, they wanted to address the situation in Afghanistan. To do so they approached twelve playwrights whose plays were, together, to cover that country from 1842 to the present. The total running time would be seven hours. Rogers was the only American. The title for the show was *The Great Game*, a phrase first used by the explorer Arthur Conolly, a British intelligence officer, and popularized by Rudyard Kipling. It referred to the battle between the Russian and British empires for domination of central Asia.

For the British playwright David Edgar, the Tricycle was here moving away from its work based on literal transcripts: 'Theatre of fact tends to surface, as in the '50s, when people simply

don't know what to do with history. When the Berlin Wall came down, and there was all that talk about "the end of history" . . . now I think people are moving out of that a bit and saying, "Let's take the facts and make something new out of them."²⁸ Rogers' play, *Blood and Gifts*, features an undercover American involved in supplying guns to a warlord, in the 1980s, for use against Soviet troops, only to discover that they would subsequently be used by the Islamists. Nor is he the only agent for whom the war in Afghanistan is part of a wider conflict. Russia, America and Britain were all engaged in that odd gavotte which secret intelligence agencies are inclined to dance, each pursuing their own national agendas even as they are aware that national priorities are liable to change. Meanwhile, they are required to establish relationships with those who they might betray as they in turn might betray them. And all the while there are those with lives at stake in a great game which is liable to seem such only to those who can return to the safety of Washington, London or Moscow even as the lives to which they return bear the marks, the fractures and dissolutions, which are a product of their profession, though this level of complexity would await his decision to revise the play.

Not only was the production of *The Great Game* a success in England and America but it attracted the attention of the military in both countries. Head of the British army, Sir David Richards, arranged for it to be played before members of the military and those involved in policy making. In the US it was praised by General Petraeus and with the support (though not financial) of the Pentagon presented to their personnel. In the words of the Pentagon's Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, Doug Wilson, "There is an assumption that the arts and our men and women in uniform are from different planets. It's not the case. The arts can provide a means to discuss and explore and, in this case, learn about the history and culture of a very complicated country. It is tremendous food for thought."²⁹

That may be true but it is interesting that the theatre should be addressing a knowledge deficit on the part of those already waging a war in a country whose history and culture were evidently little known and whose complexities were hardly addressed by politicians or those required to risk themselves seemingly on behalf of those whose loyalties were beyond easy comprehension.

By the time of the American production, however, Rogers had withdrawn his twenty-minute play from the cycle because he realized that he wished to develop it as a full-length play. It was replaced by a work from fellow American, Lee Blessing whose best-known play was *A Walk in the Woods*, a play, set in Switzerland, about American and Soviet arms negotiators, and as such perhaps a precursor to Rogers' *Oslo*. The result of Rogers' revision was an expanded cast list and an increased complexity, moral no less than in terms of plot. As he told Alexis Soloski in *The New York Times*, 'I'm not very good at polemic or strong public opinions . . . If I'm any good as a playwright, it's because I'm always good at seeing the other side . . . Every person is complex and complicated and maddening and difficult.'³⁰

If trust had been a central issue in *The Overwhelming*, so it would be again in *Blood and Gifts* dealing, as it does, with spies and a clash of cultures. Covert action is what it is because it involves deception on all levels. Truth is relative depending on who is speaking, on motives not always easy to understand, perhaps even by the speaker. As Rogers remarked, "This is a hard play in the sense that when it works it pushes back – hard – against the American ethos that everyone speaking to you is honest and true unless you know otherwise. We are a lucky people indeed that that is our default position. For most of the world it's the opposite, whether this ethos is born out of recent traumas (Rwanda, say) or a longer, sometimes jaundiced national history (much of Europe, say). This is a play firmly rooted in the latter worldview."³¹

While it is not hard to understand what he means when he speaks of Europe, where for decades the Soviet Union held countries in thrall and truth was a rare and dangerous commodity, his comment on America, if not ironic, suggests a touching idealism since faith in major institutions (government, the church, the media, business, the police) has declined with deeply damaging effects. The internet, meanwhile, has become a natural home to conmen, racists, terrorists, misogynists, purveyors of what President Trump would call fake news even as he himself had difficulty in distinguishing truth from lies.

America went to war in Iraq on the basis of a lie as decades earlier Americans had been told they were winning in Vietnam shortly before rescue helicopters landed on the roof of the US Embassy in Saigon while other helicopters were pushed into the sea from aircraft carriers in the haste of evacuation. So there seems something of a paradox as Rogers invokes American innocence even as he writes plays which equate innocence with a misreading of the world leading to consequences at home and abroad. At the same time, in *Blood and Gifts* he does present a CIA agent with honourable motives even as there is a political current tugging at him and a family which pays the price of his commitments. Slowly, compromises blur the ethical connection between means and ends. Tellingly, the published version has an epigraph from William James: 'Whenever two people meet there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is.' The only aspect of that which seems implausible is the suggestion that it is possible to know who a person 'really is'.

The play was commissioned by Lincoln Center Theater and developed at PlayPenn in Philadelphia, and New Dramatists in New York, but, perhaps significantly, once again premiered at the National Theatre in England (in September, 2010), though some reviewers objected to what they saw as its naivety, in particular finding his portrait of the mujahideen implausible. Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, welcomed it as 'a lament for America's tragic innocence,'³² but five days later the same newspaper's theatre blog featured a review which criticized what its author, Lara Pawson, saw as its condescending portraits of Afghans and Pakistanis, along with a misunderstanding of the mujahideen,³³ a view endorsed by the BBC's John Simpson who had reported from Afghanistan and detected what seemed to him a confusion between the mujahideen and al-Qaida. In America, by contrast, Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, greeted it as 'a superb new play' with 'the taut grip of a spy novel by Graham Greene or John le Carré ... lucid and compelling' while Rogers' 'knowledge of the hearts and minds of his characters is as deep as his grasp of the geopolitical games being played.'³⁴

Blood and Gifts is an epic play, set in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Washington, which Rogers himself has described as a sweeping historical and political thriller located against the actual events of the Afghan war, following the lives of five members of different espionage forces. What interested him in part was the shifting alliances between them and the price they each pay in terms of their sense of self and their relationship with others. The surprise, perhaps, is that it is laced through with humour, evidence that these are characters who can, at least for a second, step back from the earnestness of the causes they separately embrace, even as their humour has a caustic edge. Both the CIA and MI6 agents are granted an integrity, a commitment, lacking in their respective countries where cynicism combines with indifference, the latter confessing that for his government, 'This mission here, we're just not a priority ... No, no, we have to save the resources for the *real* problems. Let's not worry about the Russians invading a country the size of France, about two million refugees starving in tents. No, no, that

would be *incidental* to the Cold War. Yes, *incidental* because these poor buggers here aren't *occidental*.³⁵

It is a statement which seems to speak for the morality of these two men, anxious to persuade their respective governments of the necessity for involvement, but, as with *The Overwhelming*, part of the force of the play comes from an assumed knowledge of what lay ahead. Acts have consequences. For of course the fact is that Russian involvement, which the two Western agents work to subvert, would give way to American. Afghanistan would become a priority though less because that would be part of the Cold War, by then a memory, than because of terrorism and the subsequent battle against those the Americans had armed, ironically the very arms which the two agents had sought to secure believing themselves to be committed to right actions.

By May, 2015, indeed, it has been estimated, by Brown University's Watson Institute, that 149,000 had been killed in the Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict since 2001 when the US invaded, this including 31,000 civilians killed in Afghanistan. In the course of the war, 2,371 members of the American military and Department of Defence personnel had died (it would rise by a further 18 in 2017), along with 1,100 allied troops, most of them British. 3,500 civilian contractors also died. The number of Taliban and other militants killed was estimated at 35,000.³⁶ Despite a major withdrawal under President Obama, in September, 2017, President Trump ordered the deployment of an additional 3,000 US troops to Afghanistan making 14,000 troops stationed there, sixteen years after 9/11, though in 2019, in the face of military advice, he would announce a planned withdrawal.

These facts lie outside the play but they create a backward pressure on its events as we witness the foundations laid for years of violence. *Blood and Gifts* is not a history lesson, even as it takes us back to the beginnings of America's involvement (and less significantly Britain's), and has a deal of explaining to do to audiences whose knowledge of the Afghan war is presumably limited. What interests Rogers, though, is precisely the efforts of individuals to understand the world into which they are thrust and their determination to make right decisions in a context in which it is not always clear what those and their consequences might be. They, and their Russian counterpart, are required to be obedient to those who, at a distance, decide how the game is to be played, but bring their own values to the table as they enter an occluded ethical environment.

Their job requires them to bring gifts, literal and otherwise, buy influence, offer commitments, personal and political, but they, and those they deal with, act on a faith easily compromised. They are agents in more ways than one in that they are subordinate to others even as they try to be actors in a drama which they like to feel is of their own devising. It was Winston Churchill who commented on the futility of waging war in Afghanistan: 'Financially it is ruinous. Morally it is wicked. Militarily it is an open question, and politically it is a blunder.'³⁷

Rogers is not out to indict but to dramatize moral quandaries, explore that point at which the public world impinges on the private. He is aware, too, that for those who conduct covert operations there can be an excitement, a challenge, that is seductive. The world in which they move may be morally and strategically confusing but it can seem more real than the conventionalities of life at home, the demands of personal relationships. Indeed, the personal is sacrificed, wives abandoned. They are absent when children are born, as is the case of the British agent Simon Craig, while the American, James Warnock, leaves his wife to face the death of a child alone. Craig's wife, indeed, ultimately abandons him, taking their children with her. Even the Soviet agent, Dmitri Gromov, confesses that his wife tells him to 'Stop caring

about politics! Care about your daughter,' (101) a daughter who herself is evidently about to give birth while refusing to identify the father. Betrayal, it seems, takes many forms.

Rogers' research for the play involved meetings with Jack Devine, who had been second-in-command at the CIA, and Steve Coll, author of *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden*. The play covers the period from 1981, when the CIA became involved in Afghanistan, to 1991, when it withdrew. It was, he said, to move rapidly with each scene flowing or smashing into the next without pause. As in *The Overwhelming*, speeches were to be delivered in more than one language: in this case Pashto, Farsi, Urdu and Russian, as well as English. Besides Washington, it is set in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where different groups and nationalities are brought together, in conflict or fragile alliance.

The pivotal figure is James Warnock, a CIA station chief recently married who, on landing at Islamabad Airport, encounters the Russian Dmitri Gromov. It is not an accidental meeting. They are both masquerading as what they are not while both are aware of their mutual roles. Warnock then reports to Colonel Afridi of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). He bears the gift of a revolver, the first of many gifts in the play as alliances and relationships are consolidated, the first, too, of many weapons that will be delivered, albeit at this stage in the conflict ancient stock itself evidence of the tentativeness of the proposed alliance. He is there to initiate a relationship, the US as yet only hesitantly involved in what is happening over the border. They are joined by Simon Craig of MI6 who brings news that the Chinese will contribute equally ancient weaponry to arm the mujahideen. With the Russian invaders only two hundred and fifty kilometres from Islamabad, and armed with tanks, neither offer is regarded as a serious contribution but for Warnock what matters is deniability. He is not only here to deceive the enemy but those at home not likely to favour such a policy.

Immediately they run into difficulties. Who are they to arm in a situation in which different Afghan factions are at odds given that there are seven principal commanders? Here, no one trusts anyone and clearly neither of the Western operatives entirely understands the world into which they have been thrust, making linguistic and other mistakes. 'Who can I trust?' (13), Warnock asks, a question which, as we have seen, recurs in Rogers' work and which is central to this play. 'The Afghans' he is told by Craig, 'are charming, semi-civilised, and utterly untrustworthy.' He gives his word that his American counterpart will be kept in the loop only for Warnock to ask if his word is, 'any good' (15). The answer to that is revealed when he promises that he will support Pakistan's chosen warlord while actually supporting his rival, Craig commenting, 'I shouldn't believe a word you say, should I?' (50) and this despite the fact that his superior had taught him that, 'Without trust, we cannot do our job. Those who prove they can be trusted, you hold on to, at all costs' (80). That same man, however, later proves duplicitous when it serves what he sees as a higher purpose. 'We are,' he explains, 'not there to liberate the Afghan people. We are there to keep the Soviets from winning the Cold War' (81). It also transpires that when Warnock had previously served in Iran they had abandoned their contacts to torture – one forced to watch the rape of his daughter – and death. So much for holding on to trusted people at all costs.

If Rogers is to explore the intricacies of Afghanistan and the principal players, he warns at the beginning that unravelling them will not be without its problems. One leader, supported by Pakistani intelligence, is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Islamist, cruel, culturally misogynist, who would be known as the 'Butcher of Kabul'. He is hated by the Afghan man Warnock courts. Meanwhile, for the Pakistanis, for internal reasons, the war is to become a religious one, with

fighters welcomed from other Muslim countries. The man who eventually proves most effective, however, is not supported by Pakistan allegedly because his is the wrong sect of Islam, Ahmad Shah Massoud, whose army is described by Colonel Afridi as 'full of Shia', he having assembled an army of ethnic and religious minorities. Massoud would be assassinated in 2001 two days before the attack of 9/11, Hekmatyar having previously tried to do so. Again, the play stops short of this as *The Overwhelming* had stopped short of the genocide. History works backwards as what is not yet known reflects back on what is. The agents gradually become little more than 'a lousy break mechanism' (50).

When Warnock meets his Afghan contact, Abdullah Khan, he pays him money, but for information on the ISI rather than the Russians. There is, it seems, no trust even between supposedly cooperating intelligence services. There is more than one game being played in the Great Game. Challenged, Warnock denies having served in Iran or speaking Farsi, in both cases a lie but lying is a part of his craft as a spy. He is not what the Embassy declares him to be while in Washington politicians lie about the venture in which he is involved as those same politicians require the Afghan leader to lie to secure their help.

The action moves on two years. It is 1983. Now the mujahideen, gathered in the Frontier Province of Pakistan, near Jalalabad, have been armed with new sniper rifles. American involvement has clearly increased. In addressing them Warnock implies, without overtly stating, that they should use them to assassinate Russian officers inside Pakistan, while denying any such plan when challenged by Gromov. He urges Khan to join forces with the warlord financed by ISI only for him, not unreasonably, to reply, '*No one can be trusted*. I not join forces because, now, in Afghanistan, I not know who is trust and who is serpent' (38). Somehow, amidst the violence and confusion, the betrayals, Warnock, and his British counterpart, cling to the idea that, 'We're here to do what's right. And *that* matters,' (43) while back in Washington and London there are those for whom this is no more than a sideshow.

In the second act, the action moves on a further two years. It is 1985 and Khan is in Washington to appear before a committee where he is required to deliver a speech crafted for him in praise of America's assistance and in support of further funding. His job is to conceal the truth that they are losing the war. As Warnock explains, 'if he doesn't tell them what they want to hear you get nothing!' (66) What he really wants are Stinger missiles to shoot down Russian helicopters and for that he will do as they wish later insisting that 'I lied not for me but for my people' (97). By this stage, and for all involved, lying has become the common language.

Again, the action moves on, first to 1987, with the Russians in retreat and the war shifting into a religious conflict, then to 1988, as Craig and Gromov prepare to leave, their private and public worlds in disarray. Finally, as the pace picks up, the action moves to 1999. In Afghanistan there is civil war. Khan's son has been killed, he finally revealing that his deputy, Saeed, whom Warnock had once asked to be his spy, was, in fact, that son, only one of the secrets which constitute this world of conspiracies, plots, deceptions, a loss, though, which for the father means more than any abstraction, any invocation of freedom. For his part, Warnock has come to retrieve unused Stingers only to find that Khan has sold them to the Iranians and allied himself with Hekmatyar, the man he had previously hated. He now sees Islam as the only way forward and so a new logic begins, a process which will, as he says, 'cross oceans' (124). The play ends as he and his men cry, 'Allahu akbar!' (125). 9/11 lies only three years ahead.

For Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, Rogers was 'that rare creature: an American dramatist who writes about global issues' and *Blood and Gifts* 'a complex, demanding play'

which ‘grippingly explores the public world and the fatal consequences of America’s anti-Soviet obsession.’³⁸ For Charles Spencer, in *The Telegraph*, however, while it ‘works well as a Cold War espionage drama . . . an entertaining, well-plotted thriller’ with ‘plenty of sharp humour and political savvy in the dialogue’ it was ‘the wrong play at the wrong time.’ Instead of concentrating on the past, he suggested, Rogers should have offered ‘an up-to-the minute account of what’s happening on the ground in Afghanistan now. Is the conflict winnable? What is life like for the troops?’ He was also happy to offer advice about how it might have been improved if there had been scenes involving ‘the terrifying real-life warlord and Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,’ but ‘Both dramatist and the NT seem to be cravenly safe about portraying the full unpleasantness of militant Islam.’³⁹ It was an odd review given that, as in *The Overwhelming*, Rogers was interested in exploring the origins of conflict, the degree to which past actions determine subsequent events, as he was in the motives of those who believed they could shape history to their will, blind to the price to be paid for bad faith in private and public life alike.

By contrast, when it was staged, the following year, at the Lincoln Center Theater, Charles Isherwood in *The New York Times*, called it ‘a superb new play,’ an ‘engrossing, illuminating’ work which ‘gives a remarkably lucid and compelling account of how the American and British view of Afghanistan as a vital front in the Cold War against the Soviet Union shaped the calamitous recent history of the country.’ His ‘knowledge of the hearts and minds of his characters,’ he added, ‘is as deep as his grasp of the geopolitical games being played.’⁴⁰ Responding to the West Coast premiere at La Jolla Playhouse in 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer, Charles McNulty, confessed that while, ‘Plays about war-torn regions are about as enticing as turnips on the dessert menu . . . “Blood and Gifts” presents its historical material in a fleet-footed manner that keeps the scenes compact, flecked with surprising comic notes and full of foreboding,’ while insisting that ‘the play makes a strong case for the inescapability of history and the strategic necessity of examining conflicts from a plurality of ever-shifting perspectives — two areas that have long bedevilled American foreign policy.’⁴¹

If *Blood and Gifts* was indeed in some ways a thriller this reflected the fact that while Rogers has noted that ‘the structures of genre get short shrift from critics’ there is ‘something in thrillers, melodramas and even screwball comedy – depending on the project – that give you an underpinning that is wonderfully useful for holding a script together. You can take structural elements from a genre but then do something completely different with them. I think there’s something very satisfying and compelling about experiencing a well-told tale, regardless of what the subject matter or ideas are.’⁴²

Rogers’ next play came about fortuitously. As he explained in an article in *The New York Times*,⁴³ when *Blood and Gifts* was ending its run at Lincoln Center Theater he met Terje Rød-Larsen, a UN special envoy who had talked to the cast about working as a negotiator in the Middle East. During their conversation he learned that he and his wife, Mona Juul, Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Norway Mission to the United Nations, had been directly involved in the negotiations which led to the Oslo Accords in 1993, the peace deal between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). There had, he discovered, been a diplomatic back channel that had made the accords possible.

What followed was a year of research and interviews with those directly involved which convinced him that, ‘Here was the stuff of theatre – events that were almost preposterous in their strangeness: clandestine meetings, often run by those who had no experience with such things; people’s lives constantly put at risk; governments threatened with calamity; emotions

rising and falling at an operatic scale; people pushed to the brink of what they thought possible as friendships were fused and torn apart.⁴⁴

In a country which leans into the future, the past can often seem irrelevant. In a country which tends to celebrate its exceptionalism what goes on elsewhere can appear beside the point unless its vital interests are perceived to be under threat. Intervention, at one level or another, may seem required but all too often it proves difficult to read another culture, interpretation requiring more than linguistic equivalence. Vietnam, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Iraq, the evidence accumulates of mis-readings, dark secrets kept not only from allies but from those at home enrolled in what George W. Bush referred to as an American crusade, itself evidence of a failure of historical and cultural awareness. In *Blood and Gifts* Rogers sets out not only to guide his audience through the complexities of foreign entanglement but more profoundly to explore the nature of betrayal, the ambiguity of motives, the effect of trust denied, that extends beyond the world of espionage, state obfuscations and international intrigue.

Commissioned by Lincoln Center, *Oslo*, was developed over three weeks at PlayPenn. The process involved writing and re-writing, leading to two staged readings. This time it opened first in America at Lincoln Center, in March, 2017. It won a Tony Award and moved to London's National Theatre in September of the same year. In his mind it was an intellectual thriller, albeit laced with humour. Indeed, he re-read Noel Coward plays as part of his preparation. It is also, though, as in *Blood and Gifts*, a play in which human negotiations are a key to more than the resolution of political concerns.

The characters in *Oslo* are all based on real people and carry their names. The words they speak, however, are Rogers' even as they accurately reflect the views of those on whom they are based. It is thus simultaneously factual and, on one level, fictional. It is not a transcript snatched from history but a crafted drama. The stakes are high, peace between those who publicly refuse to speak to one another. The issue, as ever in Rogers' work, is trust, the very quality which has disappeared not only from the politics of the Middle East but also from the America which at the time of the American production had seen an election in which very little could be trusted, not the President, not the rhetoric of those who courted and then wielded power, not the media, not least because it turned out that a foreign power had been a player in the game.

Here, by contrast, was a play in which rational people, motivated in part by tribal myths and realities, nonetheless learned to seek what they might have in common. It is a play about a journey. The destination is clear, the route not so. Asked what the play was about he replied, 'What would it be like to sit across from your mortal enemy, to have the courage to see them as fellow human beings, and then to find that you are the one profoundly changed by that seeing?'⁴⁵ It is also a play which tests the proposition that human connections can triumph over an authorized rhetoric, physical proximity close a gap of understanding. As in *Blood and Gifts*, it stages the tactics and strategies of those who construct their own narratives, who have motives and objectives of their own, and yet here can imagine a commonality whose denial has created the necessity for the dialogue to which they commit themselves.

The Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO were signed in Washington in 1993. There is an iconic photograph of the signing featuring Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, in the presence of President Clinton. But this was not a triumph for American diplomacy. It was the culmination of conversations, over time, with a rhythm of their own, initiated by those who had no dog in the fight, simply personal skills wedded to an understanding of human nature and with more

than a touch of legerdemain. Those involved did not appear in the photograph even though without them it would not have been taken.

The play, which takes place between April 1992 and September 1993, has seventeen characters, plus a number of supporting roles, and multiple scenes. For all it is three hours long, it moves with considerable speed, indeed in a note Rogers observes that, 'Each act gallops along as one long unbroken scene – with time and space constantly shifting, events swivelling between cacophony and stillness, and characters slipping back and forth between speaking to each other and to us.'⁴⁶ And, indeed, throughout the audience is addressed, making details clear, claiming intimacy often with an ironic, joking tone, humour being equally one means to bring people together, that and the alcohol which flows in the various meetings, lowering inhibitions, personal and political. If we are to watch a secret history unfold we are, it seems, to be privy to its workings.

The principal movers are Terje Rød-Larsen, Director of an institute for applied science, and his wife, Mona Juul, an official in the Foreign Ministry. When the play begins it quickly becomes clear that they have already initiated secret conversations with the Israelis and Palestinians as two telephones ring and gnomic messages are passed, much to the bewilderment of their guests, including the man about to become Foreign Minister and his wife, herself an executive of Rød-Larsen's institute. Neither had known anything about the meeting which is, it appears, imminent. Later, it becomes apparent that we are entering the story late and that the telephone calls were deliberately contrived to commit the incoming Minister. There is a game being played with the audience no less than with the Minister-to-be. It becomes apparent that there are many pieces in this jigsaw for those involved but also for those required to watch it assembled.

Rød-Larsen's approach is a gradualist one. Issues are to be addressed separately and by individuals, not as part of public negotiations, a process not without its risks. He outlines his views in a lecture to which Mona allows the audience access because, as she says, 'That is what I needed you to hear. Because this idea, this *process* is what drove everything – *everything* we said and did. As you watch, and judge, remember that' (18). She continues to address the audience as she describes the beginnings of their commitment. On visiting Gaza, they had witnessed two boys, from the different sides, with weapons in their hands, evidencing the same fear, the same desperate desire to be anywhere but where they were: 'there, in that moment,' she explains, 'for us, it began' (19). What they wished to do was to give the two boys a different narrative, a different fate.

Mona becomes a guide to the action, joined, on occasion, by others, establishing a relationship with the audience as she does, with such skill, with the various parties to this unlikely conspiracy. We know, of course, that the attempt will both succeed and fail. There will be an accord but it will ultimately collapse. There will be no peace. Yet the validity of the attempt itself proposes the possibility of hope even as it will suggest its fragility. For American audiences, still numb from an election which had divided the country as never before, here was a play, about a distant conflict, albeit with political relevance, which suggested that people of good will need not despair in the face of the seemingly implacable. Divisions could, if not be permanently closed, then negotiated.

The meetings are not to be held between principals, deniability being essential, even as this back channel would have no significance if there were no endorsement at some level. Ahmed Qurei is Finance Minister for the PLO, Yair Hirschfeld a professor of economics from Israel, and it is on the common ground of economics that they make the first contact, respecting one

another's work. The risks are high for everyone involved. The secret once out, all stand to lose. Both sides have their factions, their internal politics always an issue. The strategy is to establish personal relations outside the negotiations so that they meet as individuals and not simply delegates, personal trust generating the possibility of genuine engagement. The question is whether this is to be a kissing dance, or a dance of death. Four cases of Johnnie Walker Black are, perhaps, to mark the difference. The drink certainly inspires them to share jokes as shared food creates an environment in which familiar public positions momentarily defer to human interactions, though always in the context of the larger issue.

From time to time, actions on the ground intervene. Israelis are killed, Gaza is sealed off. Palestinian and Israeli crowds form on either side of the stage shouting protests. The pressure to break off the talks is clear but they continue, as in Northern Ireland they would in the face of similar provocations. Such events underline the urgency of the project, though Rød-Larsen facilitates this by lying to the Palestinians when they ask for a guarantee that the Israelis will upgrade their representation, a breach of trust which he himself had warned against. Qurei, unaware of this, insists that, 'this one speaks truth . . . He does not lie,' even as Foreign Minister Holst, speaking to Rød-Larsen, insists of Qurei that, 'If you trust him, or the Israelis, you are an even bigger fool than I thought' (53). But then he says of Rød-Larsen that, 'for months . . . you have looked *me* in the face, and you have lied' (52). When a leak occurs, Mona proposes a press release denying the report. 'We are not lying,' she says, 'We are choosing our words carefully' (65). Edward Albee once spoke of theatre as lying in the direction of truth. The negotiators do no less but we are back with the dilemma explored in *Blood and Gifts*. Trust is the pre-condition for the talks and yet trust is betrayed in the name of the talks. Can it be that truth has a destructive edge while lies become the necessary language of human interactions? The very nature of these secret conversations relies on denial of their existence. When Arafat leaks news of the back channel to the Jordanians, Qurei offers the assurance that, 'rest assured, when the Chairman is forced to speak of things he does not wish to . . . he ensures that his words make no sense whatsoever' (52).

Rogers' plays are themselves negotiations in which his characters are seldom sole possessors of truth and audiences required to confront the ambiguities of motives and actions. In this play the negotiators' role is precisely to mediate between those who see the world differently, to grant an integrity to their views. Much the same could be said of the playwright whose plays work by virtue of his resistance to a Manichean approach to his characters and, indeed, interpretation of human nature. He does not write morality plays, even as morality is a concern. In like manner, audiences are challenged to lay aside public images, political rhetoric, to engage with moral and political debates as expressed through characters whose own anxieties and vulnerabilities are made palpable.

With act two the Israeli's upgrade their representation and if their representative, Uri Savir, new to the group, seems cold and suspicious his very presence means that the conversation has moved on. It also turns out that he is excited by the privacy and joins the others in a joke at Rød-Larsen's expense. Champagne flows and he unbends still more, an enthusiast, it turns out, not only for jazz but for the possibility of a settlement. They battle one another but slowly edge towards an agreement.

Act three begins with the arrival into the procedure of Joel Singer, an Israeli lawyer who represents Yitzhak Rabin directly. He is simultaneously an indication of the success of their efforts and a challenge to them coming, as he does, to query key details of the proposals though

it seems clear that the general principles are not to be challenged. The back channel is now to become the official channel, while those involved in the Washington talks are not to be informed that they only constitute a ruse, a necessary deceit. The legal document now shaped by Singer, however, turns out not to be aligned with the agreement so painfully negotiated, there being disagreements on the Israeli side. It seems everything is lost until Mona upbraids them and sends them back for further discussions, she, once again, proving a key figure.

Finally, the deal is sealed by Arafat and Peres, the latter on the condition that the Americans are lied to, being told that the channel is closed. For 'what is a lie,' he asks, 'but a dream that could become true' (98). Even as open warfare breaks out in the Lebanon and financial support for the PLO is withdrawn, plans continue as they become ever closer as individuals, mocking their masters. Finally, the deal is done though even in Washington, as it is about to be celebrated, arguments continue. At the ceremony there are no seats for Mona and Larsen. Their role is finished. They had never been the principal actors except that without them nothing could have been achieved. The ceremony is concluded though we learn of what followed from those who had played their roles, the death of Holst, renewed violence in Hebron, the assassination of Rabin, suicide bombers. In 2000 the Second Intifada begins. In 2002 the PLO is defeated by Hamas, Arafat dying in 2004 and Peres in 2016.

To balance this litany of failure, Rød-Larsen insists that without Oslo there could have been no peace between Israel and Jordan, no withdrawal from Lebanon and Gaza, no Palestinian Authority. The final defence, though, advanced by him as he addresses the audience, is that they had created a process which could be used again, in other places and other circumstances. They had created possibility.

The political negotiations of *Oslo* are choreographed. So, too, is the play, with scenes swiftly moving in space and time. In an inner room men argue; in the outer they relax, discovering human connections absent from their discussions. Political appetites alternate with literal ones, food and drink not only sustaining them physically. Pressure is exerted and then relaxed. Mona steps in and out of the action, a midwife to assist in the birth of something new but also a go-between for characters and audience alike. Information is filtered through her as through the unfolding action. The facilitators are neutral in a neutral country but so, too, is the writer who grants integrity and its denial to both sides. They are composing an agreement, Rogers a drama, humour integral to both. There is a rhythm to this back-channel plot as there is to a play which orchestrates language and characters alike.

They lie to further a project which is to have a truth of its own. The playwright lies to give a shape to experience, to uncover the human mechanism whereby differences can be reconciled. For the negotiators, the real had first to be imagined, envisaged, before being realized. For the writer, the imagined was a route to an understanding not only of a process but of those who saw beyond the immediate and seemingly un-reconcilable to a sense of harmony. To be sure, failure lay ahead for the project but the process itself proposed human possibilities whose denial had been seen as inevitable. As Rød-Larsen says, in a speech addressed to the audience: 'My friends, do not look at where we *are*; look behind you. (*He points behind*) There! See how *far* we have come! If we have come *this* far, through blood, through fear – hatred – how much *further* can we yet go? (*Points ahead*) There! On the horizon. The Possibility. Do you see it? Do you? (*He waits. He stares at us*) Good' (115).

For Marilyn Stasio, in *Variety*, reviewing the Lincoln Center production in 2016, it was 'unequivocally fascinating,' adding, 'Would that some playwright would write as gripping a play

about some contemporary political issue,⁴⁷ except that, though set in the past, *Oslo* does, indeed, deal with contemporary political issues as those with opposing views, with differing temperaments, objectives, ultimately need to negotiate the terms on which they can coexist. When it moved to Broadway, Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, found it 'as expansive and ambitious as any in recent Broadway history' and the production, 'thrilling,' the play 'a marvel of expository efficiency and exciting showmanship.'⁴⁸

On the other side of the Atlantic, Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, confessed that he 'went into *Oslo* expecting to be informed, and fairly confident of being interested. I did not expect to find myself following the plot as eagerly as if it were a whodunnit to which I didn't know the ending, or often to be laughing – or to find myself once on the brink of tears.'⁴⁹ For *The Independent* reviewer, Paul Taylor, Rogers 'occupies the role of chief foreign correspondent amongst American dramatists,' finding the play itself 'a marvel of theatrical dexterity and nimble exposition . . . a remarkable play.'⁵⁰

'If you had told me that three hours of Norwegian peace negotiations, with the Palestine Liberation Organisation thrown in, would be a Broadway hit and go to the National and the West End,' Rogers confessed, 'I wouldn't have put money on that.'⁵¹ He should have done. *Oslo* won multiple awards, not only the Tony Award for Best Play but the Obie Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Drama League Award, and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. The boy from the Midwest, who had initially set out to be an actor, had finally and definitively arrived. Also, speaking in 2017, he detected a change in the American theatre for which he had long been calling: 'We do seem to be having a renaissance. I spent years railing against the state of American culture but recently I've wondered if maybe I should stop yelling. Four new American plays about politics are up for the Tony this year [besides *Oslo*, Lucas Hnath's *A Doll's House: Part 2*, Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Lynn Nottage's *Sweat*].'⁵²