Simon Stephens and Pornography

Simon Stephens, born in 1971, grew up in the neoliberal and utilitarian atmosphere of Margaret Thatcher’s period in office. His immediate cultural influences were punk music and film directors like Paul Thomas Anderson, David Lynch, and Martin Scorsese. Like all experiential theatre, his work embraces a radical individualism.

Accordingly, Pornography, first performed at the Hanover Festival and at Deutsches Schaupielhaus Hamburg in June and October 2007*, focuses on subjective perceptions of traumatic historical events. Stephens wrote the play just three weeks after the 7 July 2005 London bombings. Very unlike porno-graphic depictions of stark facts, however, Stephens’s play portrays the traumatic real of the terrorist attacks as a sublime absence, a precarious void. We sense that something catastrophic has happened, but instead of watching the spectacle, we are asked to fill in blanks: the brief mentioning of the size of a rucksack; the leader of the suicide bombers perceiving in much detail the landscape on the train from Manchester to London; dashes replace names of characters; scenes are presented in a reverse numbering – like an uncanny count-down.

Pornography rests upon the intertextual framework of Shakespeare’s As You Like It, particularly, Jaques’s melancholy speech of “The Seven Ages of Man”: the bomber representing the soldier, the eighty-two-year old woman symbolising old age, the final series of fifty-two miniature obituaries echoing Shakespeare’s final stage of total oblivion. As Jaques’s speech is a pessimist portrayal of the meaninglessness of human life, in Stephens’s play we encounter a dysfunctional British society and consumerist mentality which breeds alienation and a – pornographic – objectification of everyone and everything.

The fact that neither Islam, American colonialism, al-Qa’eda nor politics are mentioned at all is no cop-out on Stephens’ part. By letting us observe what seems just an ordinary day to the terrorists, Stephens, in a subtler fashion, asks questions which – in the face of 9/11, London, Paris, Beirut, Kabul, ISIS, and much more – seem both overdue and highly topical: What makes people radicalise themselves? What makes them despise the lives of others as much as their own? Stephens finds no answer, yet besides all the fragments he shores against his ruins, there remain some flickers of hope.

Martin Middeke

* Pornography received its British première at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, on 28 July 2008.