

---

Serena Guarracino

‘Elsewhere’ is here.  
The Politics of Space in  
Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*

**Abstract:** This article focuses on *Seven Jewish Children* (2009), by British dramatist Caryl Churchill. The piece, written and staged in a few weeks as a reaction to Israeli military intervention in the Gaza strip, was published on *The Guardian* with free license to perform for whoever guaranteed a collection for Medical Aid For Palestinians. Consequently, it has been staged worldwide, by both professional and amateur companies, in traditional theatres and other performing spaces, in the original language as well as in translation. Its sparse dramaturgy sketches out a symbolic space, especially through its use of deictic elements such as adverbs of place; in turn, such elements enter in a mutual relationship with the different material location of each performance, where new audiences are invited to place themselves both physically and politically. By conjoining an analysis of the playtext with the performance devised in an art gallery by ROOMS Production in 2009, this contribution discusses *Seven Jewish Children* as a significant instance of the way contemporary theatre engages with the international politics of space and place.

**Keywords:** *adverbs of place, British theatre, Caryl Churchill, Palestinian Question*

I come from there and I have memories  
(Mahmoud Darwish, *I Come from There*)

### Children ‘elsewhere’

Caryl Churchill is one of the most experimental among living British playwrights, and her recent production still finds wide resonance both in Great Britain and abroad. Her work tackles issues such as war, ecological crises and the nefarious effects of global capitalism on individual lives, and her explicit political stance, conjoined with a consistent formal experimentation, has long been challenging theatre practitioners who have chosen to stage her work. Here, I present a discussion of *Seven Jewish Children. A Play for Gaza*, an ‘instant’ play written in 2009 as a reaction to Israeli military intervention in the Gaza strip. The play is significantly poor of geographical references, and articulates its performance space through a subtle web of place deictics, especially adverbs of place. The analysis focuses on how Churchill’s text works, as it were, by ‘subtraction’, using few defining linguistic elements in order to prompt audiences’ participation. I will then move to the analysis of a production of the play devised not for a ‘traditional’ theatrical space, but for an art gallery. Here, the audience can move around and inside the performing space, redefining both the time and place coordinates of the

---

dramatic action. This analysis highlights the variables but also the necessities in articulating space and place while staging this play, in order to show how *Seven Jewish Children* contributes to shaping the performing space as a political space of engagement and confrontation.

This sparing use of language is typical of what has been defined the third phase of Churchill's career as a playwright. As Lizbeth Goodman argues, Churchill's writing can be divided in three different periods. The first period mainly includes radio plays and television scripts until the 1972 staging of *Owners*, a somewhat prophetic play on the gentrification of Islington, the London district where she resided at the time. *Owners* was Churchill's first theatrical hit and opened the second phase of her career, when she worked with the main London theatre companies of the Seventies – Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment among them – and produced early successful plays such as *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Most of these works were heavily informed by second-wave feminist concerns and centred on women's political demands for freedom and equality.<sup>1</sup> The third period, which lasts till the present day, is characterized by her consecration as one of the most influential voices of British drama, including being awarded an OBIE for her career in 2001.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cloud Nine* famously features cross-gender casting to reflect on the artificial constraints gender identity imposes on the individual, while *Top Girls* explores the themes of female genealogies and the relationship between women and power; for an analysis of both plays in relation to feminist movements see Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, 3rd ed. (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishing, 2010 [1997]), 31-45.

*Seven Jewish Children* belongs to this last phase, characterized by a disruptive minimalism. As Gobert notes,

producing texts [lacking] stage directions, identified speakers, and even plot forces us to find its dramatic meaning elsewhere: in the interaction between the script (given different shape in each production by actors and directors) and spectators (made to perform, too, as they generate meaning).<sup>3</sup>

This effort at experimenting with the relationship between the written playtext and the material conditions of each performance has contributed to define Churchill as “one of the most significant political dramatists in Western theatre”.<sup>4</sup> *Seven Jewish Children* expands on the work of plays such as *Hotel* (1997) and *Drunk enough to say I love you?* (2006) in explicitly conjoining dramatic experimentation and a concern for crucial political issues. It also follows suit by elaborating spatial coordinates both of the diegetic action and of the performance in idiosyncratic terms, creating a landscape where the audience must find their own collocation: these works can thus be defined, as Vicky Angelaki puts it, “textscapes ... elliptical, allowing space for spectatorial interpretation and critical initiative”.<sup>5</sup>

This aspect of Churchill's recent production resonates with the growing relevance of the theatrical space as a locus of political interpellation and negotiation. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued, since the 1950s Western theatrical practices have rejected the conventions of nineteenth-century theatre, in particular of established theatrical spaces, with the intent of bridging the gap between theatre practices and the everyday routines and concerns of the audience:

<sup>2</sup> See Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), 88-90, for an overview of Churchill's career until 1993; for an updated outline of her more recent production see Mary Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill*, Routledge Modern and Contemporary Dramatists Series (London: Routledge, 2014), and R. Darren Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 166.

<sup>4</sup> Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 34.

The policies that underpinned theatre's appropriation of new spaces attempted to shift the threshold between the theatre and other domains of everyday life, create shared communities between actors and spectators, and institute a participatory form of democratic activity.<sup>6</sup>

No theatrical space, of course, is neutral or can be perceived as such during a performance; on the contrary it is articulated, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has argued, a "self-contained field of internal relations"<sup>7</sup> where the audience's worldview is as part of the performance as the delivered playtext or the performers' bodies and gestures.<sup>8</sup> One of the avowed aims of *Seven Jewish Children* is to question this worldview by taking a firm stance against warfare, but also giving a nuanced portrayal of the subjectivities engaging in armed conflict, hence asking the audience – whatever their previous thoughts on the situation in the Middle East – to question their vision and reconsider their position.<sup>9</sup>

The play was written and staged in a few weeks as a reaction to Operation Cast Lead,<sup>10</sup> which took place between December 2008 and January 2009 in the Gaza strip. Timed just before presidential elections in Israel, the operation was claimed to be a way to stop Hamas from firing Qassam rockets towards the Occupied Territories, and was conducted first through air raids and then with land troops. It eventually claimed an estimate 1,000 dead and 5,000 wounded among the Palestinian population – mostly unarmed civilians, also due to the use (first denied, then confirmed) of white phosphorous by the Israeli army. Humanitarian associations (among which Amnesty International) and the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously censured the disproportionate use of military force and the numbers of civilians among the victims.<sup>11</sup>

While the straightforward feminist approach of the Seventies has apparently waned in the face of the fragmented landscape of contemporary gender politics, Churchill's later works such as *Seven Jewish Children* make use of gender as an entry point to tackle issues such as large-scale warfare and genocide and the impact of technological development on human lives and on the environment. It is indeed girls who become central characters in plays that criticize the repressive reality created by armed conflicts: as in the previous *Far Away* (2000), which follows a woman's coming of age in a dystopian world of all-out war,<sup>12</sup> the 'seven Jewish children' are all girls and this, as Mary Luckhurst comments, "suggests that Churchill believes that girls suffer greater oppression than boys".<sup>13</sup>

However, the fact that the children featured in the play are girls can only be inferred from other characters' lines. The first and only stage direction of the playscript makes clear that the audience never sets eyes on them:

No children appear in the play. The speakers are adults, the parents and if you like other relations of the children. The lines can be shared out in any way you

<sup>6</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Policies of Spatial Appropriation" (trans. Michal Breslin and Saskya Iris Jain), in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz, eds., *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 219.

<sup>7</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space (1998)", in Biodun Jeyifo, ed., *Modern African Drama* (New York-London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2002), 435-6.

<sup>8</sup> See Tiziana Morosetti and Serena Guarracino, "Introduction: Postcolonial Embodiments in Contemporary Performance", *Textus* 30.3 (2017), 7-26, esp. Morosetti's discussion of the political use of theatrical space, *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting, although beyond the scope of this writing, to investigate *Seven Jewish Children* as a sort of contemporary agit-prop play: although its pro-Palestinian position may be clear enough to earn the definition, the play is devised in order to eschew easy affiliation with a political line or program, and different contexts have appropriated its fundamental anti-war vision in different ways.

<sup>10</sup> The name of the operation (*Mintza Oferet Yetzuka* in Jewish) refers to Hanukkah celebrations, and in particular to the *sevivon* (or *dreidel* in Yiddish), the toy spinning top with which children traditionally play during the festivities. As Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri notes, "the name *cast lead* thus reminds us not only of the Lord's intervention on behalf of the Jews, but also of the innocence of a toy": an innocence which casts a dark shadow on the operation, which has claimed the lives of about three hundred Palestinian children. See Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri, *The Normalization of War in Israeli Discourse, 1967-2008* (Lanham-Boulder-New York-Toronto-Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013), 43.

<sup>11</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *White Flag Deaths: Killing of Palestinian Civilians during Operation Cast Lead* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009); and Amnesty International, *Israel/Gaza. Operation 'Cast Lead': 22 Days of Death and Destruction* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The war described in *Far Away* sees not only human armies, but animals and natural elements taking sides in a global war where elephants and Koreans, birds and Japanese people, grass and light are all involved in military actions; see Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2003); for a discussion of Churchill's dystopian plays see Paola Bono, "Caryl Churchill: uno sguardo profetico", in Roberta Falcone e Serena Guarracino, eds., *Terra e parole: Donne / Scrittura / Paesaggi* (Bologna: ebook@women, 2016), n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill*, 22.

---

like among those characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time and child are different.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), 2. Hereafter in the text, with Roman numerals marking the scene and Arabic numerals for the page of the quotation in this edition.

The seven children, one for each part in which the text is divided, are always elsewhere while, on stage, their family discusses on what they should be or not be told about the present situation. No *dramatis persona* is mentioned, and it is in the hands of the director and actor/s to decide how many characters to introduce and who delivers which line. As for the children, it is the formula through which characters address each other or the audience that makes the children's gender assignment explicit: "Tell *her* it's a game / Tell *her* it's serious" (I, 2; my italics).

Consequently, the gendering of the children from the title as girls plays a pivotal role in shaping the play's grammar of space and place, and this use of theatrical space makes gender identity in the text perform a highly symbolic, more than a pragmatic function. The ideological use of the 'child' as justification for violent and oppressive policies in a situation of conflict – *everything* is allowed to keep the child safe – is undone by the introduction of sexual difference in the picture; the girl child represents a subaltern subject position, subjected to oppression by the same system that pretends to protect her, and this, more than a biological gender identity, is what this gendering process points at.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> By reducing the girls to the ultimate unrepresentability within the performing space, Churchill here seems to echo Gayatri C. Spivak's concept of the subaltern subject not only as always, at least in discursive terms, feminine, but also as intrinsically unable to "know and speak itself": see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 272.

Apart from the shared condition of the absence of the child, the seven parts of the play are differentiated in terms of time and place. The play traces the history of the state of Israel, from the Holocaust until the present day: the first scene describes the persecution of Jews by the Nazis; the second follows the reconstruction of collective memory through family narrations in the aftermath of the war; the third sees the family leaving for Israel; while the last four follow the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from the early scrambles for land and water to the increasing military interventions, bulldozing of Palestinian settlements and refugee camps, and the condemnation of Israeli policy by international humanitarian organization.<sup>16</sup> However, with the exception of the title and of another instance (discussed below), no geographical or historical reference is given within the dialogue of the play. The founding characteristic of the diegetic as well as of the performing space of *Seven Jewish Children* is not any clear and specific location, but its consistently being 'another' place from the one where each child is.

The script gives only the sparsest information about the performance space, and in what measure it should reference the historical context of each scene. The chronological collocation of the first three scenes is quite easily identifiable; the first, for example, has the adults discussing while the girl is in hiding from the men who are looking for her: "Don't tell her they'll kill her / Tell her it's important to be quiet" (I, 2). In a few lines, the scene conjures up the well-known imaginary of Nazi persecutions, and even sustains (but does not spell out) the identification of the girl with the icon of Jewish victims of the *shoah*, Anna Frank.

<sup>16</sup> It is far beyond the scope of this article to offer an overview of the Israeli-Palestinian question; it is also a very hard endeavour to find nonpartisan reports on the matter especially after the current failure of the peace process. This is also due to the post-9/11 polarization of the conflict between different incarnations of the "Islamic state" on the one hand, and Europe and the US on the other, a context in which the situation in Palestine is alternately used by different factions to support ongoing warfare. For a recent and unbiased outline of the conflict since the founding of the State of Israel see Neil Caplan, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Contested Histories* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

---

The second scene includes references to a picture of the family, where the character/s points out the people who survived and those who have been killed: “Tell her *this* is a photograph of her grandmother, her uncles and me” (II, 2; my italics). The use of a deictic element (the demonstrative pronoun) makes the presence on stage of a picture of some sort necessary, thus shaping the space and its contents without the need for a stage direction. These forms of deixis are a founding element of the dramatic text, as Susan Bassnett already argued in a 1985 essay, which confronted the issues of theatre translation:

It now seems to me that if indeed there is a gestural language in a text, then there is a way of deciphering it and therefore of translating it, and so far one of the most hopeful lines of enquiry seems to be that of the *deictic units*. Since these units determine the interaction between the characters on stage, they also determine characterization and, ultimately, feed into the other codes of performance.<sup>17</sup>

Bassnett here follows Alessandro Serpieri’s insights on the role of deixis in dramatic literature;<sup>18</sup> and although she later reconfigured her theory by downplaying the possibility to univocally identify and analyse a “gestic text” with the same clarity as the verbal language of a playscript,<sup>19</sup> deixis remains one of the specificities of a text written for the stage. The mention of “*this* picture”, in the line quoted above, implies the existence of a material object, a prop with which the actor/s are supposed to interact; in much the same way, the repetition of the pronoun ‘her’ throughout the text creates its referent, i.e. the girl around whom every scene is constructed.<sup>20</sup>

The choice of removing the girls off-stage defines the space of the play by repeatedly referring to a character (the girl) who also defines a place, the ‘elsewhere’ where she is located. The first scene is again exemplary in this respect, as it is the only one that gives any idea as for the whereabouts of the girl: she is not on stage because she is somewhere (possibly nearby) hiding – from her persecutors but also, in the actuality of performance, from the audience. The space where the events of the play unfold is constructed around the fact that on the material level the girl never comes out from her hiding place: her absence constitutes the space of performance (whatever that may be) in opposition to the place from where her presence may be not just evoked, but concrete, bodily, made flesh.

The absence of the girl from the space of performance allows for a symbolic Child to take shape in the words of the adult speaker/s, a Child who slowly becomes a means of control over people’s thoughts and actions. The subject introduced by the deictic pronoun ‘her’ works as a rhetorical representation of the ‘reproductive futurism’ recently emerged in queer theory, in particular through the work of Lee Edelman. Edelman argues that the symbolic Child’s right to safety becomes the moral justification for repeated acts of violence over real children: this justification cannot be refuted, because “[h]ow could one take the *other* ‘side’, when

<sup>17</sup> Susan Bassnett, “Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts”, in Theo Hermans, ed., *The Manipulation of Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 98 (my italics).

<sup>18</sup> See for example Alessandro Serpieri, “Ipotesi teorica di segmentazione del testo teatrale”, *Strumenti critici* 32-33 (1977), 90-137.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. Susan Bassnett, “Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability”, *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 4.1 (1991), 99-111.

<sup>20</sup> The opening “Tell her”, and its negative counterpart “Don’t tell her”, as emerges here and in the following quotations, work as a refrain for the whole play, in a relentless succession of broken lines with little or no punctuation which may suggest a delivery more akin to poetry than to naturalistic speech. However, the playtext includes no indication as to the tone of the dialogues (or monologues), and as a result productions broadly differ in this respect.

---

<sup>21</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

taking any side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side of ... a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends?”<sup>21</sup> This fantasy of the Child is not only repressive for those who are on the wrong side of the conflict, but also for the resident population: any sacrifice must be made in the name of the future child, so that “our present will always be mortgaged to a *fantasmatic* future in the name of the political ‘capital’ that those children will thus have become”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Being against a child’s well-being is an ethical impossibility; and yet, in a world where not all children are equal, being for the child means to authorize and support discrimination and violence against children. This emerges more and more clearly as the play progresses. In the sixth scene adults still hesitate to share with the girl the more violent aspects of the clashes in the occupied territories, especially those involving children: “Don’t tell her the boy was shot” (VI, 5). Yet in the long monologue towards the end of the play – the only line that consists of more than one sentence and is provided with punctuation – the speaker endorses violence over children as the necessary counterpart of the Child’s well-being:

Tell her about the family of dead girls, tell her their names why not, tell her the whole world knows why shouldn’t she know? Tell her there’s dead babies, did she see babies? tell her she’s got nothing to be ashamed of... tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? tell her all I feel is happy it’s not her. (vii, 7)

To solve the contradiction that allows violence over children in the name of the Child, a widespread pedagogy is necessary: what should one tell (or not tell) to children about a conflict that happens in their name and kills young humans just like them? It is necessary to teach one’s own children that those ‘others’ are not like them, that they belong to a different space; yet the inherent ethical pitfalls of this rhetoric surface in the play’s use of spatial deixis, especially adverbs of place. These elements create a performance space that undermines the binary logic of us/them as well as of here/there, elements whose connotation changes as the family moves from one place to another. The safe space the character/s are struggling to create thus becomes unattainable, as remote as the one where the seven Jewish children are forever hidden.

### Shaping the performance space through adverbs of place

*Seven Jewish Children* is wilfully sparse of geographic references, thus giving its concerns a universal scope; nonetheless, the only two toponyms mentioned in the play clearly locate the events in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the third scene the family is packing to leave the place where they are at the moment – which could be in Europe or the United States, or any other place where Jewish refugees found shelter in the aftermath of the Second World War. Among the

many things one can tell the child to make her leaving this place more bearable, the one closing the scene is: “Tell her about Jerusalem” (III, 4). No mention is made of Palestine, only of a promised land or better “*our* promised land” (IV, 5), as one character states in a later scene, as clashes with the Arab population make clear that the relocation has not been as easy as expected: “Don’t tell her they said it was a land without people / Don’t tell her I wouldn’t have come if I’d known” (IV, 5).

The piece itself, on the other hand, is subtitled “a play for Gaza”. This is the only place, together with the paratext explaining the conditions for performance, directly referring to the events that brought Churchill to write the play. *Seven Jewish Children* was written and staged as an immediate reaction to the news from the war zone, itself an ‘elsewhere’ from the comparatively safe London where the play was first staged, at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, on February 6, 2009. Concurrently, the play was published in *The Guardian*, with free license to perform and a request for a collection for Medical Aid For Palestinians, which was also beneficiary of the sales of the script printed by Nick Hern Books.<sup>23</sup> This accessory information contributes to geographically locate the events; the spatial coordinates of the script itself remain more elusive, articulated – with the exception of the aforementioned reference to Jerusalem – only through a relational dichotomy of adverbs that define the ‘here’ of the performance space against a ‘there’, the ‘home’ against an undefined ‘away’.

<sup>23</sup> Caryl Churchill, “Seven Jewish Children”, *The Guardian*, February 26, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/26/caryl-churchill-seven-jewish-children-play-gaza>, accessed 19 September 2017; and Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*, 8.

Given the relatively brevity of the play, consisting in only 1,302 words, and the lack of stage directions, even the rather small amount of adverbs of place featured here is particularly relevant. Adverbs of place represent a specific form of deixis in theatrical texts, as they contribute to shape both the imaginary space of the events and the extradiegetic space of performance: what is ‘here’ or ‘there’ indicates what is on and off-stage but also, diegetically, a location which is defined through a relationship of continuity or discontinuity to the space the characters occupy. In *Seven Jewish Children* these coordinates help to define the character/s through the place they are in, and their investment in its safety for the child – a child who is both ‘elsewhere’, because off-stage, and ‘here’, sharing the space the character or community of characters (and of characters and audience) constitute.

Table 1: here

1	Tell her we’ll be <i>here</i> all the time (I, 2)
2	Don’t tell her she doesn’t belong <i>here</i> (III, 3)
3	Tell her of course she likes it <i>here</i> (III, 4)

The adverb of place ‘here’ recurs three times in the play (Table 1), and in all cases it aims at constituting a shared space between the family and the child. In instance 1, the adverb encompasses both the place of the speaker/s and the ‘elsewhere’ occupied by the child; on the contrary in instances 2 and 3, both from

the scene when the family is leaving, ‘here’ is a hostile place, to which child and adult/s do not belong (although the girl cannot be told that), and that must be left for another place, a ‘there’ which she will like “even more” (III, 4), where “it’s sunny” (3), but especially where her ancestors lived (4).

Table 2: there (adverb)

1	Tell her it’s sunny <i>there</i> (III, 4)
2	Tell her her great great great great lots of greats grandad lived <i>there</i> (III, 4)
3	[Tell her of course she likes it <i>here</i> ] but she’ll like it <i>there</i> even more (III, 4)
4	Tell her we’ll be <i>there</i> in no time (VI, 5)

It is significant that of the four recurrences of ‘there’ as an adverb of place (Table 2), three occur in the third scene, once in explicit opposition with ‘here’ (instance 3 in Table 1 and instance 2 in Table 2). In opposition with a ‘here’ of discrimination and painful memories, ‘there’ represents the beginning of a new existence, a place where “no one will tease her” (III, 4). The place-name “Jerusalem” (III, 4), the only one mentioned in the playscript, closes this very scene, sustaining the identification of the deictic ‘there’ with the actual city and, at the same time, with the symbolic New Jerusalem, the “holy of holies” and the “place of the presence of God” from John’s Book of Revelation.<sup>24</sup> In this overlapping of geographical location and symbolic place, the connotation of ‘there’ expand to include a larger project of safety and happiness, to which the girl is blessed to be part of: “Tell her she’s a special girl” (III, 4).

This connotation changes as the action relocates to actual ‘there’. In the last four scenes, ‘there’ as adverb of place recurs only once, and marks the negotiation of movements that is part and parcel of everyday life in Israeli settlements. Scene six opens with mention of a swimming pool and the checkpoints that the adult/s and the child will encounter in their journey there; but of course, as Jewish Israeli citizens, queues do not apply to them, and hence they will be “there in no time” (VI, 5). The swimming pool opens and closes the scene as a symbol for the life that the family is trying to build in the new place, and that is suffering impediments due to the scarcity of resources and the presence of Arab communities: “Don’t tell her the trouble about the swimming pool / Tell her it’s our water, we have the right / Tell her it’s not the water for their fields” (VI, 5). The final line of the scene, “Tell her we’re going swimming” (VI, 6), helps to define the swimming pool as the ‘there’ of peaceful and comfortable life which the conflict is making unreachable.

Together with ‘here’/‘there’, the ‘home’/‘away’ dichotomy also contributes to the shaping of the play’s spatial politics. ‘Home’, understandably, is featured both as adverbial and as noun, and as adverb collocates with ‘going’ and with ‘come’ respectively (see Table 3). ‘Home’ is thus spatially superimposed with ‘there’, reinforcing the idea that the family, wherever it is at the moment, is not and does

not feel in any way ‘at home’. However, this is true for the adult/s speaking but not for the child, who is apparently wary of leaving her friends behind and must be reassured that “she can write to her friends, ... her friends can maybe come and visit” (III, 3). The distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘home’ and ‘away’ does not belong to the child, but to the adults who superimpose their sentimental geographies onto hers.

Table 3: home

adverb	
1	Tell her we’re going <i>home</i> (III, 3)
2	Tell her ... the country is waiting for us to come <i>home</i> (III, 4)
noun	
3	Tell her this wasn’t their <i>home</i> (IV, 4)
4	Don’t tell her <i>home</i> , not <i>home</i> (IV, 4)

‘Home’ registers the shift of the play’s imaginary landscape once the much coveted ‘there’ is finally reached. The adverb, signalling movement, becomes a noun, not a space but a thing on which a right of property can be claimed. Thus ‘home’ is preceded by a possessive and a negative, remarking that it belongs to the speaker/s and not to ‘them’ (Table 3, instance 3); indeed, as the family settles in a house formerly inhabited by someone else, the girl must not be told that “Arabs used to sleep in her bedroom” (IV, 4). The attempt to erase the Arab presence in the Occupied Territories, however, also results in the impossibility to appropriate the word and idea of home: as a consequence, ‘home’ as noun always depends on verbs in the negative, with even more emphasis due to the repetition of the negative particle in instance 4. The adult/s do not want to associate the concept of ‘home’ to the Arab population, as this would jeopardize their own claim over land and infrastructures; yet they cannot claim it for themselves either.

Table 4: away

1	Tell her they’ll go <i>away</i> (I, 2)
2	Tell her she can make them go <i>away</i> if she keeps still (I, 2)
3	tell her they’re going <i>away</i> (IV, 4)

‘Away’, differently from ‘here’, ‘there’, and ‘home’, does not define a specific place, and as such is not strictly a contrary form to ‘home’; yet it does define a movement away from something, while ‘home’ (when used as an adverb of place) defines a movement towards a destination heavy with emotional and symbolic import; and it is in this respect that the two words are considered here. ‘Away’ defines a separate place from the one both the audience and the character/s inhabit, including the child: as in the case of ‘here’, but in an oppositional way, it

---

circumscribes the space the absent child and the present adults share, and in this sense its work is pivotal to the grammar of space and place elaborated in the play.

The adverb recurs three times in the text (Table 4), and in all three cases it indicates the desired removal of some danger from the space the adults and child live in. In the first two instances, the danger is represented by the persecutors the child is hiding from; in the third instance, though, ‘they’ are the Arabs who once inhabited the ‘home’ and are now wished out of the territories now occupied by Israeli settlers. This echo channels an overlapping of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the persecution of Jews by the Nazis, a superimposition enhanced by the fact that, with the exception of the speaking adult/s, no other character is to appear on stage; and although many stagings, as will emerge from the following section of this article, have made full use of the creative freedom awarded by such a scarcity of authorial directions, none to my knowledge has peopled the stage with non-speaking characters, the ‘they’ that this use of the adverb ‘away’ clearly intends to push into a different space.

The use of adverbs of place in *Seven Jewish Children*, hence, constitutes an imaginary geography where the connotations of ‘there’ and ‘home’ shift from a safe haven to a problematized space expropriated by violence and inhabited by foreign bodies that have to be pushed ‘away’. This loose but at the same time clear use of deixis to define the space where the events unfold opens up to different performing practices as the play has been staged in different locations across the world. The relative few means necessary to stage the play in full has allowed practitioners from different languages, contexts, and locations to engage with Churchill’s text and give its geography of conflict a tangible, material location: as Gobert rightly puts it, “without characters, plot, speech prefixes, or stage directions, the play is an inkblot. It guarantees only that disparate meanings will emerge in the imagination of those who apprehend it”.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 167.

### ***Seven Jewish Children* on the global stage**

It is impossible to offer a full report of all the productions of *Seven Jewish Children*; the strong political import of the play and the relative paucity of means necessary to stage it has made it especially popular among fringe and non-professional companies, whose efforts are often ephemeral and hard to trace. At the same time the minimal length of the play – which at its sparsest can last as little as under ten minutes – has made digital testimonies easy to produce and disseminate: a research with keywords “*seven jewish children*+*churchill*” entered on Google’s Video section offers as result of around 1,340 hits, which include advertising clips, news reports and cast interviews, together with full performances of different length, sometimes split in multiple videos. Moreover, these search keys only partially account for the performances of the play in translation: just to mention a few, two different translations of the text are available in Italian, both with a solid performance

---

history;<sup>26</sup> four translations are available in Spanish;<sup>27</sup> and although the play has been accused of anti-Semitism, it has also been translated into Hebrew, and staged in the streets of Jaffa in 2009 under the direction of Samih Jabarin, who was subsequently arrested for his anti-war activism.<sup>28</sup>

As emerges from an even cursory exploration of online resources, performance spaces have varied widely, from 'legitimate' theatre premises – starting from the Royal Court where it was first performed – to occupied spaces where theatrical practices are part of an activist network directly involved in local politics: in Italy, for example, the piece was staged in Rome, both in the theatre Teatro Lo Spazio (September 17, 2009) and on the premises of Teatro Valle (on March 12, 2012), which at the time was occupied by a collective of artists and practitioners after a long period of neglect, and was home of many initiatives of civil theatre until its clearing out in 2014. And indeed, the play often resonates within spaces where the political role of theatre in the local community is already deeply rooted, and where pro-Palestinian activism is part of a wider agenda of civil action. An exhaustive overview of the material spaces that have hosted *Seven Jewish Children*, and of the ways in which the political geography of the play interacts with them, is far beyond the scope of this article; to offer a concrete example of how a mise-en-scène can both enact and manipulate the spatial politics of the text, the following pages are dedicated to the analysis of one staging whose specific characteristics offer some interesting perspectives on the way the play can be used to shape the audience's perception of 'here' and 'there', of 'home' and 'away', and their own location into it.

Most performances, while differing in the number and gender of characters and the assignation of lines, as well as in the use of scenery and props, tend to operate in a traditional theatrical space that separates the performers from the audience, and also respecting the play's chronological linearity from the first to the last scene. A different take is offered by the mise-en-scène devised by the ROOMS Production, which took place in Chicago in March 2009.<sup>29</sup> Using the space of an art gallery, instead of a traditional theatre, the production brings down the barrier between performers and audience by having the latter wander around or sit at the rectangular table at the centre of a single room; the performers are sitting at the same table, performing the scenes from the play simultaneously, with the exception of scene seven which is projected on one of the walls (Fig. 1). The play hence becomes a looping performance installation, where the audience can experience different moments of the play in any sequence they prefer. The chronological sequence is undermined, as everything (the persecution, the war, the journey to the promise land) is happening at the same time – it is happening now.

<sup>26</sup> The play was first translated into Italian by Masolino D'Amico in 2009, and the by Paola Bono in 2012. The translation by D'Amico is unpublished and deposited by Agenzia Danesi Tolnay; the one by Bono is included in Caryl Churchill, *Teatro I. Hotel, Cuore blu, Lontano lontano, Abbastanza sbronzo da dire ti amo?, Sette bambine ebreo*, ed. Paola Bono (Spoleto: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2013), 175-183.

<sup>27</sup> The Spanish translations have been the object of an extensive comparative study, including a broad press report of performances; see Paula Tizzano Fernández, "On *Seven Jewish Children* – Explication and Implication in Terms of Ideology", *Letras vivas*, [http://travisbedard.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Tizzano\\_-\\_On\\_Seven\\_Jewish\\_Children\\_-\\_Explication\\_and\\_Implication\\_in\\_terms\\_of\\_ideology.pdf](http://travisbedard.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Tizzano_-_On_Seven_Jewish_Children_-_Explication_and_Implication_in_terms_of_ideology.pdf), accessed 7 September 2017.

<sup>28</sup> See *Seven Jewish Children: Street Play by Caryl Churchill (Hebrew)*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqvytWeN-Qo&t=177s>, 3 maggio 2017; for the debate on the play's supposed anti-Semitism, see Charlotte Higgins, "Churchill's Gaza Play Accused of Antisemitism", *The Guardian*, 18 February 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/feb/18/caryl-churchill-gaza-play>, accessed 7 September 2017. Most criticism refutes this accusation, including Gobert (see *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 167).

<sup>29</sup> The production is available on Youtube in two parts; see *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part One - Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OBA30Ax51s>, accessed 26 September 2017; and *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part Two - Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV3iAskzQkg>, accessed 26 September 2017. The actual conditions of performance are shown at the beginning of the first video and at the end of the second, while the rest features a shooting of each individual scene.



Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part Two – Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*. Transition between scene 5 and 6.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Fig. 1 and the following figs. 2 and 3 were produced by the author from the video of the performance available on YouTube (see note 29). We have tried to contact copyright owners where possible.

The chronological progression is preserved in the stage props, which highlight the role of communication and recording in creating a shared history and collective identity. All scenes feature characters interacting with some kind of recording

apparatus, with two exceptions (Fig. 2): the first, an elderly man, and the fifth, a young soldier, both talking into an old-fashioned phone. These are the two scenes set in conflict areas, one representing persecution and danger, the other victory and triumph over the enemy: “Tell her we won / Tell her her brother’s a hero ... Tell her we’ve got new land” (V, 5). The two scenes mirror each other, and may either be the two sides of the same conflict or one the consequence of the other, the former persecution justifying any means to obtain land and safety for the following generations.

On the other hand, the characters featured in the five remaining scenes negotiate what is to be recorded on a device that is different for each situation. The man and the woman reminiscing on the family picture annotate their stories on a memo pad; a woman thinking about how to



Fig. 2: Screenshots from *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part One – Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, scenes 1 and 6.

---

convince the girl to move ‘there’ is writing on a typewriter; another couple negotiating what to tell the girl about the early difficulties of life ‘there’ are recording their voices with a tape recorder; two women discuss swimming pools and checkpoints while writing on a computer, erasing and rewriting constantly. Neither spectators nor characters are the beneficiary of the telephone conversations, letters, notes and recordings produced in each scene, but someone else located ‘elsewhere’: what happens in the room is one node of a wider network of conversations, along whose lines an international community holds itself together in the face of adversity.

Guided through the room only by furniture and by numbers assigned to each character or group of characters, the audience finds itself as the intruder in the intimacy of the house, the foreigner eavesdropping on private conversations – a feeling heightened by the fact that, in the actual loop performance, the scenes were performed at the same time, forcing audience members to close in to individual scenes to follow the dialogue. Moreover, as much as spectators move around, the child and her ‘elsewhere’ is not available to them as it is not available to the characters. The separation between girl and audience, as well as between girl and characters, is inscribed in the text, but the fact that spectators share the same space as the characters (instead of the equally remote space of the parterre) and the use of distant communication devices completely removes her from ‘here’: she cannot be hiding under the table in the first scene or packing her toys in the next room in the third; she is somewhere indistinctly far. Moreover, the use of notepads and recordings may even imply that this communication is not intended for a present girl but for a future one, an imagined child for whose well-being, using Edelman’s words, the characters’ present and safety is mortgaged.



Fig. 3: Screenshot from *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part Two - Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, scene 7.

---

<sup>31</sup> The call is actually a video played in loop.

This spatial economy is brutally overturned in the last scene, where a couple, projected on the screen, is on video call with the room (Fig. 3).<sup>31</sup> The addressee of the imperatives “Tell her/Don’t tell her” suddenly becomes not an unknown subject located elsewhere, but the audience standing in front of the screen, who is directly interpellated by the characters to take responsibility for the girl. In this scene, the girl all but literally enters the room: the location of the conflict, previously on the other side of a phone line or of a computer screen, is now here, and the separation between place of utterance and place of reception, is both implemented by the removal of the actors’ bodies from the room, and questioned by the fact that now it is the audience who shares the girl’s space, who needs to take a decision about what to or not to tell her.

This interpellation is embedded as one possibility of the playscript: depending on whether it is staged as a dialogue or a monologue, the imperative opening each line can be addressed to another character or directly to the audience; and this can also shift from scene to scene.<sup>32</sup>

Subsequently, the ‘here’ in instances 1 and 2 of Table 1 can include the audience or exclude it behind a theatrical fourth wall, while the ‘there’ in instance 4 of Table 2 can situate the audience in opposition to the characters, locating them on different sides of the checkpoints. Yet in the ROOMS production this situation is complicated by the fluidity of the performing space itself, and by the fact that the audience can literally move at leisure, sit at the table or look over the shoulders of the characters writing on the typewriter or computer. Moreover, spectators do not need to experience the text chronologically; hence, for example, the shift of ‘home’ from destination (adverb of place) to thing to be acquired (noun) may work very differently: in particular, instances 3 and 4 see the audience inhabiting the same place formerly occupied by the Arab family, as the deictic demonstrative pronoun underlines: “Tell her *this* wasn’t their home” (4; my italics).

From this very limited overview, it can be argued that *Seven Jewish Children* has succeeded in creating an international space in which a conversation on the consequences of war is taking place. Every performance reverberates in this space while creating one of its own, where place/s and character/s can even radically differ from any other. In each performance, the audience is required to take a stand, which is both physical – being there for the performance – and political.<sup>33</sup> Yet, complex mechanisms of interpellation and empathy prevent this stand from being part of a dichotomy opposing pro-Palestinian activism and Israeli supporters: on the contrary, starting from an uncompromising condemnation of violence and warfare, the play allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the political situation in Palestine. Palestine is not ‘elsewhere’, but part of a global landscape of conflict: as a consequence, the play points to collective responsibility and shared concerns as the only available starting points for the peace process.

<sup>32</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this contribution, it must be noted that the choice between monologue and dialogue has considerably affected translation choices when the play has been staged in foreign languages that differentiate between the imperative second singular and plural person. The two Italian translations, for example, have made different choices in this respect: D’Amico’s translation was staged as a series of monologues and subsequently features “Ditele / Non ditele”; while Bono’s was staged as a multiple character interaction, and hence reads “Dille / Non dirle”. For the translation by D’Amico see *Sette bambine ebreë*, directed by Francesco Randazzo, Teatro Lo Spazio (Roma), 17 September 2009, <https://vimeo.com/6879866>, accessed on 5 September 2017; the translation by Bono, on the other hand, is available as *Sette bambine ebreë – un dramma per Gaza*, directed by Marta Gilmore, Angelo Mai (Roma), 24 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK1VKPN69h4>, accessed 5 September 2017.

<sup>33</sup> As Marco Pustianaz has recently argued, the collective recognition of an event as theatre by an audience founds theatrical practice as such; this mutual recognition marks the creation of the performance space but also the ‘dawn’ of the spectator, who is born and dies as the performance begins and, eventually, ends; see Marco Pustianaz, “Crepuscoli dello spettatore. Attività, inattività e lavoro dello spettatore nell’economia performativa”, in C. M. Laudando, ed., *Reti performative: Letteratura, arte, teatro, nuovi media* (Trento: Tangram, 2015), 98-100.