

Book Reviews

Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century by Duška Radosavljević

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 275pp. (softback)

By Mark Smith

Duška Radosavljević's latest work draws on similar material and thinking to her collection of interviews *The Contemporary Ensemble*, also published in 2013. It provides an idiosyncratic but expansive take on contemporary questions relating to the role of the author and the nature of performance in an almost up-to-the-minute context.

Significantly, the author takes steps to avoid reliance on the almost continually redefined term 'devising', pointing out recent scholarship's struggle with the concept and the tendency to conflate the term with 'ensemble' (62). Radosavljević acknowledges the UK/continental European divisions in understanding of such methodologies, pointing out convincingly that these fault-lines stem from the historical tendency in the UK to conceive of 'devising' as non-text-based: an increasingly false dichotomy (82). Radosavljević usefully engages with such terms and ultimately chooses to consider 'theatre-making', 'text' and 'performance' and to exclude 'devising', where perhaps five years ago it would have been the on-trend terminology (see Heddon & Milling 2006; Govan, Nicholson & Normington 2007).

Radosavljević sets out clear and provocative terms of engagement at the beginning of the work, and pitches as one of her main theses the need for a new understanding of the division(s) of labour involved in contemporary (Anglophone) theatre-making practices. This is not, in itself, a novel line within scholarship on such practice: as early as 1969 Theodore Shank was arguing in the same terminology that 'because there is so much overlapping' among the 'activities' of playwriting, directing, acting and designing, 'it is more accurate to think of these terms as indicating rather arbitrary divisions of labour' (Shank 1969: 9).

But Radosavljević takes this work much further than

Shank's. Also central to its argument is the refiguring, common to many of the works Radosavljević examines, of the role of the audience as 'a co-creator of meaning' (149). This she links convincingly to the spirit – crucially *not* the ideology – of Brecht. Her argument moves swiftly from Brechtian audience engagement into considerations of community, through discussions of Theatre in Education in particular. More directly, though, Radosavljević links Brecht's interest in an engaged audience with the more ethereal, lingering sense of community felt by spectator/participants at Ontroerend Goed's controversial performances. She examines the ways in which community is expressed through the boom in networks such as the 'blogosphere' and forums like the *Guardian* comments pages. Radosavljević dissects mainstream critical reaction to the performances in question astutely, but prioritises such 'interactive' forums, all the while strengthening her case for 'relationality' as the dominant obsession of these performances, and, as mentioned, for the significance of 'the reinvigorated legacy of Brecht' (151).

Radosavljević's examples range from Brecht to Strasberg and Stanislavsky, from Cicely Berry to Croatian ensemble Shadow Casters. This admirable eclecticism is magnified by some quirky arrangements. Though Radosavljević's experience of Shadow Casters' work and interviews with their members form the final significant case study of the book, they crop up as something of a surprise witness. Unquestionably augmenting her observations on Ontroerend Goed's related work, but not even mentioned until Radosavljević announces, in the final chapter and somewhat abruptly, their last-minute substitution for any deeper consideration of Purcărete's production of *Faust*, which had been mentioned at length in the Introduction.

The work might also suggest significant questions which are not here noted, let alone addressed – such as the full implications of this reconceptualisation of theatre-making processes and the subsequent need for potentially earth-shaking reconfigurations in funding, marketing and copyright frameworks, such as those currently being fought over in the worlds of online music and other media distribution. When a work is considered, as Radosavljević considers Tim Crouch's *The Author*, 'not simply as the work of a playwright or an actor – nor as a work of a director

[...] – but as a work of theatre’ (which ‘includes the audience’) (158), how can or do such frameworks bend to accommodate it? Jacqueline Bolton, who is cited by Radosavljević, has made valuable opening ventures in reconsidering such structures in recent history (e.g. Bolton 2012), and here might have been an opportunity to press them further.

The assertions of the theatre-makers are at times left unpressured by Radosavljević – for instance Crouch’s invocation of the potentially rich and difficult term ‘story’ (159), or the claims on the part of various theatre ensembles that they involve a ‘relinquishing of directorial authorship in favour of dramaturgical facilitation’ (83). But in a work of this scope and momentum, such questions perhaps inevitably arise and subside as Radosavljević diverges from and returns to her main thrust: ‘modes of authorship’ and their relationship to what might be deemed ‘text’.

Radosavljević also presents three interviews, with Simon Stephens, Philip Ralph and Tim Crouch, as useful appendices. A fourth appendix proves even more helpful and unusual: it is a form of ‘script’ for Ontroerend Goed’s controversial interactive show *Internal*. For those who only followed at a distance the critical storm around it but did not experience the performance itself, the text presented here provides a flavour of what the furore was about, as well as illuminating Radosavljević’s own reading of the company’s work.

There are, then, some oversights and other oddities in Radosavljević’s work – at one point she seemingly ascribes the coining of the phrase ‘dead white males’ to Nicholas Hytner in 2007, for instance, and some of the linguistic tics, such as a tendency to describe most phenomena as ‘interesting’, begin to grate. But Radosavljević’s intervention is timely and surveys a vast amount of ground with great speed. In moving from personal engagement with specific performances to dizzyingly fast-moving overviews of key scholarship in the field(s), she raises questions of the apt metaphor for theatre-making in terms of text: adaptation, translation, faithfulness, musicality, or something else. In her adoption of ‘theatre-making’ rather than the both more blurred and more apparently restrictive ‘devising’, she argues that the latter term ‘increasingly requires to be seen

as a ubiquitous creative methodology [... rather than] a genre of non-text-based performance' (p68). Hence Radosavljević's *Theatre-making* certainly offers a valuable contribution to discussions begun in earnest by the likes of Heddon and Milling and Govan, Nicholson and Normington. Perhaps most significant is the way it shifts the terminology away from questions of 'devising' and hence opens the field to wider considerations of how new work is actually being made in 21st century contexts.

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***Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990-2010* by Liz Tomlin**

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, 226 pp. (hardback)

By Catherine Love

The postmodern and poststructural discourses of the last few decades have confronted both scholars and artists with a seemingly intractable dilemma. Following Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (xxiv) and the work of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, the notion of an originary, non-ideological 'real' has rapidly lost its authority, leading to the widespread acceptance of postmodern relativism. How is it then possible to make a statement about the world when all truths are subjective and contingent?

It is into this precarious landscape that Liz Tomlin's new book intervenes. Her choice of opening quotation, in which Her-

bert Blau posits that ‘we’re not quite sure where we are’ (1), is an apt primer for the investigation of the real and the radical that follows. While uncertainty may be endemic, however, Tomlin puts forward an appealing argument for plurality and self-reflexivity in the face of relativism. Embracing the left’s political application of the word ‘radical’ in the context of Marxism, as well as its origins in the Latin for ‘roots’, Tomlin’s book proposes a project of ‘digging down’ (5). Her study utilises a fresh reading of Derrida to challenge some of the binaries within contemporary theatre – between dramatic and postdramatic, text-based and non-text-based – that his poststructuralist critique has previously been employed to support, and interrogates the dominance of this poststructuralist narrative in current performance theory.

Where Tomlin significantly departs from other work in this field is in her striking rejection of the binary established by Hans-Thies Lehmann between the dramatic and the postdramatic. Ever since the publication of Lehmann’s seminal text *Postdramatic Theatre* in 1999, the vocabulary put forward by this study has permeated throughout the theatre and performance ecology, leading to a new rift between ‘radical’ postdramatic work and its ‘traditional’ dramatic counterpart. Tomlin’s analysis is refreshing in its questioning of this straightforward division, as well as its interrogation of the postdramatic’s claims to radical intent.

In doing so, this book also represents a more sustained and nuanced exploration of ideas that Tomlin has previously explored elsewhere, offering an intriguing development of her own thesis in regards to the postdramatic. In a 2009 essay for *Performance Research*, while usefully breaking down divisions between ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ theatre, Tomlin’s argument remained simplistically wedded to the notion of the ‘no-longer-dramatic text’ (‘Poststructuralist performance’ 57). Here, however, the ‘ever-widening of the postdramatic boundaries’ (52) to admit texts that seem to unsettle the dramatic model is abandoned in favour of the acknowledgement that both dramatic and postdramatic theatre is, following Derrida’s insights, ‘always already representational’ (76). Tomlin subsequently proposes that poststructuralist interrogation might instead lie in ‘practice that explores ways of exposing and acknowledging its

own representational structures and narratives, and examines all notions of the real' (76).

Following Tomlin's thorough, succinct and remarkably clear survey of poststructuralist thought and theories of the post-dramatic, the remainder of the book consists of an examination of how this intersects with contemporary performance practice. Tomlin moves smoothly through a number of different performance models, including citational aesthetics, verbatim theatre and experiential participation, in each instance linking these practices to her discourse on the real and investigating their claims to radicalism. Her examples range from the rejection of traditional characterisation in the work of Forced Entertainment and the Wooster Group to the one-to-one work of Adrian Howells, effectively illustrating how various arguably radical performance interventions have set themselves in opposition to 'dramatic theatre' across the two decades of her study, as well as emphasising the multiplicity of current performance practices.

In her introduction, Tomlin explains that she has structured the chapters with the intention that each might be read independently, but the sheer complexity of the ideas under examination means that none of these sections fully stands alone as hoped for. Instead, they slot persuasively together in support of her central thesis, collectively probing poststructuralist performance's often uninterrogated claims to a radical politics of form. Tomlin also, importantly, warns against the emergence of a new totalising narrative from the ubiquity of practices that unquestioningly espouse the radical narrative of poststructuralism and produce a series of unquestioned postdramatic conventions which might be just as stultifying as the dramatic model they oppose.

Hopes for radicalism within contemporary performance, however, are not entirely quashed. Tomlin's decisive move is her suggestion that a fractured, unsettled understanding of reality is not incommensurable with the notion of a radical performance practice today, making this a vital contribution to the study of poststructuralist performance and its political potential. While we may accept that every narrative is contingent and ideological, Tomlin argues that this 'does not equate to the acceptance that any given narrative is thus beyond ideological analysis or

distinction' (6) and that the favouring of one narrative over another can still have a 'real' impact on the 'ideological shape of the historical period in which the work is situated' (7). In other words, we may not be able to appeal to a foundational understanding of 'the real', but our narratives themselves still have a 'real' impact on the contexts – political, economic, social, artistic – within which they are circulated.

Countering a narrative of radicalism that has stubbornly pitted itself against the dramatic model of theatre, Tomlin instead argues that the 'poststructuralist imperative [...] demands a radical practice that is not based on the reification of its own conclusions, but on a self-reflexivity that can serve to always and already destabilise its own manifestations of authority' (207). Taking its lead from Derrida's deconstructive project, the self-reflexivity that is advocated by Tomlin is equally applied to her own work, which she wisely posits as the start of a new discourse, opening up her conclusions for further intellectual debate.

While *A Theory of Modernity* is absent from Tomlin's concise survey of postmodern philosophy, this call for 'self-reflexivity' seems to invite a dialogue with Agnes Heller's concept of 'reflected postmodernity' (1), implying a postmodernism that reflects upon itself and demands the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions and their impact. Much as Heller reclaimed the notion of responsibility for the postmodern age, Tomlin's convincing new formulation of the 'poststructuralist imperative' might just rescue the idea of performance's radical potential for scholars and practitioners alike.

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***Modern British Playwriting: The 1950s* by David Pattie**

London: Methuen Drama, 2012, 281 pp. (softback)

By Christopher O'Shaughnessy

David Pattie's *Modern British Playwriting: the 1950s* is a careful and perceptive contribution to the Methuen Drama series *Decades of Modern British Playwriting*. It is different in tone to Chris Megson's book on the 1970s partly, one suspects, because post-war 1950s is not within living memory of the writers, or not so easily recalled (123), and therefore the section giving an overview of the 1950s does not have the consistent, almost personal, perspective of Megson's book. Nevertheless there is a painstaking and convincing evocation of this 'festival of change' (145), its censored culture and uncertain politics in the first chapter: *The British Theatre 1945-60*.

The four playwrights chosen to represent the era and introduced in Chapter 2 are T.S. Eliot, Terence Rattigan, John Osborne, and Arnold Wesker - with individual essays on the achievements of those playwrights in Chapter 3. In scope, the book is in tune with works focused on a specific period like Dan Rebellato's *1956 and All That* which maps and interrogates playwriting across the decade.

Fifties theatre is portrayed as a post-war phenomenon of old certainties giving way painfully to a surfeit of new disparate creative initiatives, this phenomenon resisted stubbornly in the public arena of West End theatre with its pre-war adherence to plays reflecting middle-class or upper-class concerns (72). Several strands of potent theatre are identified by the author as emerging side by side, for example: the more traditional well-made dramas of Terence Rattigan and J.B. Priestley; the poetic dramas of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry; the contaminating originality of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht; and the 'kitchen-sink realism' of John Osborne and Arnold Wesker. Though Osborne had suggested a new theatrical momentum with *Look Back in Anger*, according to Pattie's analysis of the harlequin nature of this playwriting era, there seemed no real certainty as

to which strand or initiative would eventually be in the ascendant (73).

This is a thought-provoking interpretation, notwithstanding Rebellato's well-known evaluation of this period, given that Osborne's play is still seen by some critics (Billington, Gillemann, Sierz) as the revolutionary turning point in fifties theatre. Innovative writing was tolerated and praised in small presentations, but there was no infrastructure to sustain the budding revolution (73). In this, as Pattie says, 'the 1950s British stage was a true mirror of its time: like British society, British theatre was subject to an incomplete transformation - and uncertain how far, and how fast, the changes that began during the decade would go' (73). This uncertainty is reflected, to some extent, in the somewhat safe choices of the four representative playwrights. Safe because each represents a known fifties trend e.g. the sudden popularity of verse drama; the survival of the well-made play not only in Rattigan but still identifiable in Osborne and Wesker. An unsafe choice like John Whiting might have illuminated further how a more idiosyncratic and visceral playwrighting talent prefigured the violence of Edward Bond and Sarah Kane (58).

A reevaluation of Eliot's drama is long overdue and Sarah Bay-Cheng provides a tantalising critique of the later plays - *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman* - finding that in all three 'the theatre itself becomes a place where the illusions of social behaviour and identity, so often taken for reality, are exposed as empty performances' (97). Insights like this could well lead to renewed directorial appraisals but Bay-Cheng is curiously dismissive of the import of her own evaluations: 'one can only conclude that Eliot's various dramatic attempts, though interesting, failed' (118). Such a sweeping conclusion does not acknowledge phenomenally successful productions of earlier work such as Michael Elliot's 1979 production of *The Family Reunion*. Misleadingly, Bay-Cheng perpetuates the Steiner myth that Eliot wrote his plays in blank verse* when, actually, he wrote them in free verse.

No especially new insights are offered for the work of

*'The recent plays of T.S. Eliot give clear proof of what happens when blank verse is asked to carry out domestic functions. It rebels.' Steiner, 244.

the remaining playwrights. Rattigan, Osborne and Wesker are all seen as forced by the social pressures of the period to write plays depicting the emergence of an individually complaining voice, often despairing, tortured and crushed but occasionally achieving very real victories of self-actualisation (124, 170, 188). Pattie suggests that the plays of Terence Rattigan - *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version* and *The Deep Blue Sea* - are not so much coded expressions of a suppressed homosexuality as articulations of a private human voice at odds with the world in which it finds itself (145). There is very little interrogation of Rattigan's often faultless stagecraft, much admired by present-day writers such as David Mamet, and how a consummate literary technique may be responsible for their dramatic power.

Luc Gilleman views John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer* and *Luther* as 'a sentimental theatre for a changed Britain' (147) and for all their political volatility are essentially melodramatic, straining against the structures of the well-made play. Gilleman references the closing dialogue of *Look Back in Anger* to prove his point but entirely misses the possibility that the images of squirrels and bears in the text might denote a moment of embryonic spiritual growth for both Jimmy and Alison.

John Bull sees Wesker's plays as enabled by the zeitgeist of the fifties and, in their reflection on the legacy of the second World War, prefiguring the 'state of the nation' plays of Hare and Edgar with the trilogy *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*. Wesker's characters are interpreted as lone (mainly Jewish) voices negotiating their way with difficulty through political and familial minefields from 1936 to 1959 (174/175).

A *Documents* section covers, via appropriate interviews drawn from the Theatre Archive Project *, the emergence of social phenomena like Theatre Workshop, the Lord Chamberlain and censorship, the Royal Court Theatre, the initial impact of Beckett and Brecht on British theatre practitioners and the contribution of influential critics like Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson.

What emerges vividly from this book is the evaluation

*A collaboration between the British Library and De Montfort University.

of the promise verse drama once had, given its ability to attract high quality directors (E. Martin Browne, John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier) and star actors (Edith Evans, Alec Guinness, Tyrone Power). Pattie himself provides a brilliant mini-critique of *Murder in the Cathedral*, which he thinks is ‘arguably Eliot’s most successful play’: ‘it dramatises the murder through a set of shifting poetic registers which make use of the striking images of his early poetry’ (80). It is a shame there is no re-assessment of Christopher Fry’s remarkably successful fifties work. The fact that Eliot is excluded from the *Afterword* in a book which discusses four playwrights who, each in their own way, are concerned with issues of transcendence, is not so much an oversight - considering the vitality of the production cited above - but more a real injustice to a dramatist who, arguably, has had more academic attention than all three of the others put together, and continues to be seminal in the theatre not only as an influence on later playwrights like Derek Walcott and Sarah Kane but also through Andrew Lloyd Webber’s ubiquitous musical, *Cats*.

That said, David Pattie’s *Modern British Playwriting: the 1950s* portrays the period as an era searching in a multitude of ways for a cultural identity, with playwriting as a manifestation of this. The acknowledging of the variegated nature of post-war playwriting results in a stimulating, discursively rich addition to the series which is bound to provoke further discussion. The very extensive Notes, Select Bibliography and Index are excellent.

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***Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009* ed. Dan Rebellato**

London: Methuen Drama, 2013, 340pp. (softback)

By Catriona Fallow

Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009, is the last in the Methuen *Decades* series that seeks to chronicle the ‘nature of

modern British playwriting' (vii) from the 1950s into the beginning of the new millennium. Unlike other recent publications which also consider new writing in the 2000s such as Aleks Sierz's *Rewriting the Nation* (which privileges contemporary, singularly-authored, naturalistic plays that are typically set in the UK in particular urban, underprivileged social contexts), the contributions to *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009* note and endorse a growing commitment to collaboration, an increasingly urgent sense of enquiry into global events (frequently in the Middle East and Africa) and also explore the limitations of realism or naturalism. The work of five playwrights – Simon Stephens, Tim Crouch, Roy Williams, David Greig and debbie tucker green – is discussed at length, illustrating these subtle but nevertheless crucial shifts in British playwriting from the previous decade.

A contextual introduction by editor Dan Rebellato, 'Living in the 2000s', offers insights into a range of topics from domestic life, society and culture to science, technology and politics. Rather than offering a chronological account of the decade, this introduction moves from topic to topic using a range of linguistic registers and forms, conveying a sense of the way information was presented and consumed in the 2000s: fast and furious. Tables detailing 'What things cost', quotations from influential cultural figures and timelines of events such as 'The Banking Crisis', 'The War in Iraq' and major terrorist attacks present key information while also establishing a necessarily global context for later discussions of the content and political imperatives of the featured plays and playwrights.

In Chapter One, 'Theatre in the 2000s', leading online theatre critic or 'blogger', Andrew Haydon focuses on some of the significant shifts in British text-based theatre. For the most part, Haydon eschews much of the 'main stream' repertory and West End productions of the early 2000s, looking instead at wider artistic trends, such as the growing popularity of verbatim, multimedia and site specific/sympathetic theatre, as well as tracing shifts in theatre criticism and making a compelling argument for the role of the director as 'author' (77). In so doing – and in stark contrast to critics like Sierz – he advocates for a 'future where old divisions between 'New Work' and 'New Writing''

(98), or ‘the nominal division between newly written plays and almost any other form of theatre that had been arrived at by another route’ (40), has dissolved to create space for collaboration, where ‘“Britain’s Best’ nationalism’ has embraced internationalism and where ‘even the most rigid theatre spaces [have] begun to question their relationship with their audiences.’ (98). His sentiments prefigures some of the perspectives that are explored further in the following chapter.

Chapter Two, ‘Playwrights and Plays’, comprises separate critical discussions of the work of five seminal playwrights and three of their texts produced between 2000-2009: Jacqueline Bolton on Stephens’s *One Minute*, *Motortown* and *Pornography*; Rebellato on Crouch’s *My Arm*, *An Oak Tree* and *The Author*; Michael Pearce on Williams’ *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, *Fallout* and *Days of Significance*; Nadine Holdsworth on Greig’s *San Diego*, *The American Pilot* and *Damascus*; and Lynette Goddard on green’s *dirty butterfly*, *stoning mary* and *random*. Offering a range of dynamic, clearly articulated points these contributions are perhaps best understood when read in dialogue with one another which reveals several striking points of commonality.

Bolton, for example, effectively plots the debate between the singularly authored ‘writing’ versus the collaboratively developed ‘work’, describing how Stephens’ career is ‘distinguished by a willingness and enthusiasm to work collaboratively’ – most notably with German director Sebastian Nübling – and concluding that, ‘to work creatively in the theatre [...] is to embrace and engage with the intangible energies, in order to collectively explore their potential’ (124). Similarly, Rebellato emphasises that, while Crouch is the focus of his chapter, his work is often developed collaboratively, specifically with fellow practitioners a smith and Karl James (127). Holdsworth also insists that, in addition to Greig’s work as a solo playwright, ‘collaboration at home and abroad has been a hallmark of Greig’s output’ (169).

Elsewhere, Holdsworth argues that, while a key figure in contemporary Scottish playwriting, ‘the passionate internationalism of Greig’s writing’ (170) is often overlooked, a fact that her chapter seeks to redress by focusing on his works set in the

US and the Middle East. Similarly, though describing William's work as 'rooted within a British social realist style and urban geography' (146) Pearce also suggests that he is a playwright with certain international concerns, 'turn[ing] his hand to the Iraq war' (161) in *Days of Significance*. Later, Goddard describes how green's casting of white British actors to perform stories typically associated with black people in Sub-Saharan Africa in *stoning mary* 'unsettles familiar associations with these stories as specifically African issues by situating them within the context of a wider/(global) world' (201).

Goddard also argues that this particular casting decision points to green's 'experiments with theatre realism' (200) while also suggesting that green's formal morphing of rhythm and language is a way of breaking from black playwrights' 'usual concerns with identity politics depicted through social realism' (193). Careful to distinguish between realism and naturalism, Bolton suggests that part of Stephens' international success (particularly in Germany) is due to his plays testing and perhaps revising 'established ideas of naturalism even as they subscribe to a naturalistic rationality' (103).

Each of these contributions usefully extends popular understandings of the playwrights in question while also challenging the supposed generic parameters of 'New Writing', complicating assumptions about what modern British playwriting can or 'should' be during the first decade of the new millennium and in the future. In addition to the critical work of the contributors, Chapter Three, 'Documents', offers a range of interviews, process documents, diary entries and edited scenes from each of the playwrights that provides more, fascinating insights into their work and creative processes.

Modern British Playwright 2000-2009 is a clear, nuanced and immensely readable text that should prove useful and enjoyable to students at all levels as well as to a wider, non-academic readership. While some readers may seek it out for a specific chapter a featured playwright or for a general introduction, many will find it hard to resist reading the volume in its entirety. This is testament to the quality and clarity of the material and to the careful way in which each contribution has been considered and curated as part of a wider, on-going dialogue on the future of

British playwriting. *Modern British Playwright 2000-2009* not only sheds light on its specific areas of investigation, then, but also invites reflection on where we are now and, crucially, where the next *Decade* may take us.

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