

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe

Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann

Podcast Contribution, Author: Lesley Löw

Drama:

Carol Ann Duffy & Rufus Norris: *My Country: A Work in Progress*. London, Faber & Faber 2017

## ***My Country:***

### **A dramatic Work in Progress by Carol Ann Duff & Rufus Norris**

#### **Speaker 1 (female)**

*Britannia, my name is Britannia.*

*I am your memory, your dialects, your cathedrals,*

*your mosques and markets (...)*

*I have breathed you in, like air,*

*and breathed you out as prayer, or speech, or song.*

*I am your heartbeat and I take your pulse.*

*Who else but me can praise your ancient, living language as a jewel?*

*Or trace our wars in raised, ugly scars on her flesh? (...)*

#### **Author:**

*My Country: A Work in Progress* is a play about Great Britain and Brexit, Britain's relationship to the rest of Europe and the European Union. Written by the poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy and the National Theatre director Rufus Norris, the play gives an insight into current debates within the United Kingdom.

#### **Speaker 2 (male)**

What does it mean to be Poet Laureate?

#### **Author:**

Taking up a tradition from classical antiquity, the first British official poet laureate was John Dryden in the 17th century, establishing the office in the royal household. The poet laureate is called to "write poetry for court and national occasions", but he also has many other roles and public commitments. According to Duffy, the first female poet laureate, the importance of the position has changed, along with the general role of poetry. In BBC's *Front Row*, Duffy explains:

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**Speaker 3 (female)**

*“The role of poetry as I see it is to provide the music of being human to call into question what needs to be questioned, to praise what needs to be praised. So whoever the laureate is needs to be very clear that they’re honourably being seen to use poetry as best they can and not to compromise“.*

**Author:**

The play is made up of the people’s voices, interspersed with poetry. As Duffy states:

**Speaker 3 (female)**

*„Poetry matters to people in this country, poetry is a place we can go to for comfort, celebration, when we're in love, when we're bereaved and sometimes for events that happen to us as a nation“.*

**Author:**

The plot: Britannia has called Caledonia, South-West, Cymru, Northern Ireland, East Midlands and North East to an important meeting – to discuss the looming decision to Remain or to Leave the European Union. The allegorical figures begin to speak as representatives of their region but then continue as the voices of individual people from all over the United Kingdom. The play came to life through a team from the National Theatre that gathered voices from 9 to 97 year old, to record their views on the state of their country as well as their opinion on leaving or remaining. This material was then transposed by Duffy and Norris. As the personification of Great Britain, Britannia recites poems written by Duffy on the country and its meaning to the people.

**Speaker 1 (female)**

I sing your thousand musics. I speak your diverse poetries.

I am your vital quarrels with yourselves,  
your turbulence, your truculence, rage and fear,  
your pride, your independence, your despair.

I know your house. Your children. Know your ancestors.

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We are far more united...

We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.

Let's hear the votes.

**Author:**

Deliberately, the people's voices are extremely diverse, form and structure being provided by letting people speak through the medium of theatre, to a listening, and paying audience. Listening is a pervading concept throughout the play: Repeating the word „Listen“, Britannia is unheeded, in a reversal of people's feeling that Westminster did not listen to them. At the beginning of each show, the audience was asked to turn off their mobiles and then to respect the 'Silence loosening/within the sacrament of listening'.

The reactions to the show have been diverse. The play has been accused of using hindsight and stereotypes, but it has also been praised for the differentiated views it puts forward, focusing on voicing the people's concerns. *My Country; a Work in Progress* is a play on the people's Brexit, not Westminster's. The people are the protagonist, and they are listened to. The Poet Laureate has woven her poetry brilliantly into the people's voices, faithful to her motto: to provide the music of being human to call into question what needs to be questioned.