

Does Labour know what England and the other countries o..

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I went to see the National Theatre production of 'Dear England' at a cinema in Cambridge yesterday, and it has been hard to think about much else since then.

Superficially the play is about the England football team's progression under Gareth Southgate, and that does set the scene. I should add that almost no knowledge of or interest in football is required to enjoy the play: my wife fits that bill and insisted I see it, having already seen it once with one of our sons.

The play is staggeringly good. I am not sure I have ever bought a text during the interval of a production before. If this does not become a GCSE set text very soon, then the examiners of English literature will have failed the young people of today.

Why so? That's very hard to summarise because there was so much that was so good about it. The performances are amazingly good; if awards do not follow, that would be a travesty of justice.

The production is also brilliant, as is the stage management (and along the way, I was a director of a theatre school once upon a time and got to know a bit about such things).

But, that said, it is the writing by James Methuen that really stands out here, although Gareth Southgate's [own contribution should not be ignored](#).

That text explores the questions that Southgate has asked of his team, with the help of Dr Pippa Grange, a sports psychologist who worked with Southgate, the team and staff from 2017 to 2019 and of whom the [Guardian reported](#):

Grange studied sports psychology at Loughborough and spent 20 years working in Australian sport. She started work at the FA in January and is embedded with the squad in Repino, where her task is to work on building the psychological resistance of the players. She tends not to work directly with the playing staff, but instead speaks with Southgate and his coaches to identify their aims. She has encouraged the players to be more open and to share personal stories, even via the media, to help shed inhibitions.

Her role is central to the play, in which she is played by Gina McKee, who deservedly shares the limelight with Joseph Fiennes, who plays Southgate.

There are so many issues raised by the play it is very hard to know where to start. But McKee has, perhaps, the most telling line when she says that England cannot win because they do not know how to lose. There were many ways to interpret that, but the most important and the most developed was that unless you can play without fear you cannot win, and England always played with the fear of losing. That is very apparent in (although the play does not say it) the awful 'Football's coming home' song that featured in 1996, when Southgate missed the penalty that sent England out of that tournament.

Fear pervaded English football, as it pervades English life. It is embedded in English hierarchical thinking that exists to transmit the fear of leaders who have no idea what they are doing to all those who work for them. And what that destroys are four things.

One is trust, because you cannot trust anyone if they will blame you if things go wrong.

Another is any sense of joy because fear and joy cannot co-exist. As was pointed out by the physio at the start of the play, there was no joy in playing for England when Southgate arrived.

The third is hope. You can't hope for anything when you live in perpetual fear of failure.

And, fourth, if there is no hope, there is an absence of something else, which is a plan, because you do not expect to have the opportunity to deliver it.

In itself, that analysis was the most incredibly powerful analysis of the failure of British management in all its forms.

The play is also none-too-kind to Tory politicians wanting to free-ride off football. In the process, it makes a mockery of the suggestion that football and politics should not mix, as now personified by rows about the role of Gary Lineker. That claim is impossible: football is life, and life is politics. The two must always meet. But I got the greatest sense that it was Labour who need to see this play the most.

They are petrified by the fear of losing.

They trust no one and expel members on the slightest pretext, meaning that there is neither hope nor trust within the party.

And because they do not know how to lose, as the treatment of those who supported Corbyn proves, Labour do not know how to win, and nor do they have any plan, as is all too readily apparent.

Importantly, there is another question amongst the many that the play addresses to which it is clear Labour has no answer. Southgate, after some years of working with them, asks his team what the cross of St George means to them. He asks, what is England?

The team provides their answer in their own way: see the play to find out what (I do seriously mean that).

But does Labour know what England is?

Or Scotland?

Or Wales?

Or Northern Ireland?

And unless it does, can it understand what the UK is, or is not?

And if it cannot answer those rather basic political questions, does it have a political philosophy or a right to govern?

And if, simply because the other team are not going to turn up, Labour wins this time, what chance have they of governing without answers to almost any of the questions they will need to face, not least because they are too frightened to face them?

The play, in my opinion, left the audience with a choice, which was the one Southgate was searching for the answer to and which Grange helped him find. That is to choose between hope and fear.

Neoliberal capitalism is premised on the fear of failing: the need for failure is built within it. Hope went out of the window when it arrived.

But, as I often say here, I live in hope. We have the choice to do so. It might be the only choice we have available to us that makes a lot of sense, but it's the one we have to make.

But, and I stress this as the play does; this is not a personal decision to be made in isolation. It is one we need to make collectively. That is what the politics of the left should make possible. But Labour is not doing that, so we know firstly that it is not of the left and, secondly, that it is failing us as a result.