DAVID HARE: ATTACKING THE HUMANIST TRADITION OF SOCIAL DRAMA

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Abstract

The British dramatist rejects the naturalistic attempt to view theatre as a slice of life. Consequently, his plays will be a practical expression of his conviction that theatre must reflect social reality in extreme forms.

This paper aims at analysing Hare's contribution to the thematic and artistic repertoire of a new kind of social drama.

Generally referred to as one of the foremost British playwrights, David Hare belongs to the second new wave of postwar British theatre along with Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, David Edgar, John McGrath and Trevor Griffiths. Arriving on the playwriting scene in 1968, a year often taken to signify the loss of hope for a socialist revolution, Hare was a standard-bearer for the ideologies of the young generation of dramatists politicised by the events of the time.

David Hare laid the bases of his dramatic style and defined the sphere of his concerns during his apprenticeship with the leftwing Portable Theatre, a company co-founded with playwright Tony Bicat which became a leading force in Fringe theatre in the early 1970s. Although he engaged in collaborative work with Howard Brenton, David Edgar and other radical playwrights on anti-capitalist and anti-Establishment scripts (*Lay Bay* - 1971, *England's Ireland* – 1972, and *Brassneck*, co-written with Brenton – 1973), he changed direction away from the blunt activism of the Agitprop movement towards a highly original drama designed to undermine mainstream theatre and provoke its audience. Aware of the fact that Agitprop plays failed to change society and the political system, Hare attempted to find new forms of protest. As a result, he embarked on attacking the humanist tradition of social drama, refashioning the realism of the elder playwrights (such as Osborne and Wesker) from a Marxist perspective.

The theatrical formula issued from his formative experience in the Agitprop was intended as a parody of the archetypal Royal Court play. This is perhaps best typified by his early work where

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he exposes the dubious morality of contemporary capitalism in extended metaphors of despair and disintegration. As C. W. E. Bigsby explicitly states:

The England whose alternative history David Hare has been writing from *Brassneck* to *Plenty* is a country whose energy is spasmodic, nervous, artificial. It is a country in which private despair is the constant. There are no models of an alternative system, no calls for working-class solidarity, only a clear-eyed analysis of moral entropy, the failure of public myths and private values. [1]

His first individual creation, *Slag* (1970), is a scathing satire of radical feminism as well as of a male-dominated world. Set in a private boarding school for girls, it tells the story of three teachers who protest against the traditional womanly roles by abstaining from sex. In *The Great Exhibition* (1972), the author concentrates on the character of Hammett, a middle-class Labour MP, with a view to criticising the 1960s Labour governments. The protagonist, who tries in vain to escape from public corruption, voices the author's profound disillusionment with contemporary politics:

"I went into socialism like other people go into medicine or law. It was a profession. Half out of eloquence, half out of guilt. And as the eloquence got greater so did the guilt". [2]

As a matter of fact, it was the general crisis of belief and lack of confidence amongst leftwing supporters that Hare strongly denounced. In his opinion, the confusion of aims and the continuous fragmentation of the Left in the sixties were counter-productive in fostering political awareness.

Also significant for the dramatist's style is the use of the popular forms for critical purposes. In *Knuckle* (1974), a Raymond Chandler pastiche, the amorality of profit in respectable Guildford is unmasked as sleuth Curly investigates the disappearance of his sister. The simplistic moral frame of Chandler's fiction is an ingenious way of elaborating powerful images of decline: the death of innocence in contemporary society, here symbolized by the vanished girl, and the cynicism of the characters whose values are limited to financial dealing and crude materialism. And in this respect Curly's ultimate conclusion that capitalism itself is the malevolent force speaks for itself.

Hare went on with his theatrical experimentalism in 1975 when he produced two of his major plays, *Teeth 'n' Smiles* and *Fanshion*. Special mention should be made of the fact that in the same year he founded the leftwing Joint Stock Company where he opened up the workshop method

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of playwriting that would enable him to bring new sophistication to his outlook on social realism in theatre.

In *Teeth 'n' Smiles,* Hare catches an exact moment in the history of rock music (9 June 1969), but his obvious intention is to display a satirical commentary on the state of modern British nation. The rock band that plays a gig at the May Ball of Jesus College in Cambridge is the mouthpiece of the author's anti-Establishment position. Inch, the roadie, Maggie, the lead singer, and the other members of the group seem to be engaged in a class-based aggression that makes them behave outrageously. For instance, Maggie gets drunk, insults her audience, and finally sets fire to a marquee while her partners steal the college silver. But, in spite of their profound hatred of the respectable bourgeoisie, they do not rebel against the existing political system. On the contrary, they have internalized not only the pragmatic tenets of capitalism, but also its vices ignoring the symptoms of their own decadence. Although the writer's view of the present is apocalyptic, he challenges the audience to ponder on the performance. According to him, the process of changing consciousness begins with the play where "greed and selfishness and cruelty stand exposed in a white neon light". [3]

Besides the deliberately grotesque situations, Hare proves an astonishing command of the resources of language, as his verbal games and vivid dialogues reveal. Moreover, the use of different linguistic registers is a permanent source of ironic humour. The loose syntax of the working-class youth makes a contrast with the cultivated speech of the privileged middle-class embodied by Arthur and Anson, respectively the songwriter of the band and the medical student representing the university. As a former Cambridge graduate, Arthur does not miss the opportunity to turn the language of Cambridge into a vehicle for mockery, taking great delight in describing the place as an "airless, lightless, dayless, nightless time-lock" or the people who inhabit it as "rich complacent self-loving self-regarding self-righteous phoney half-baked politically immature neurotic evil-minded little shits" [4].

In fact, Arthur's biting picture of the university he attended conveys Hare's own attitude as he was the product of the same academic system. In the light of this treatment, *Teeth 'n' Smiles* is autobiographical standing for a lucid examination of the author's youth. At the same time, Cambridge is the image of a wider world that Hare explicitly condemns. As a setting of affluent society, the symbolic Café de Paris reaffirms his viewpoint in much the same way as the metaphor in the final song where the Titanic becomes the epitome of a sinking Britain.

In search for an alternative social system, Hare moves away from the British scene to revolutionary China in *Fanshen*. The play – which is an adaptation of William Hinton's book about the life of a Chinese village between 1945 and 1949 – dramatizes how the villagers achieve "fanshion", literally meaning "to turn the body". At one level of interpretation, the word "fanshen"

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refers to the peasants' adjustment to the transition from private to public ownership through a process of collective self-criticism. On the other hand, it is related to a traditional Chinese metaphor whose meaning is transparent:

> The peasant with a hoe, bowed over by the weight of three symbolic mountains on his back (war, landowners and bureaucracy), only has to change his physical posture to free himself. [5]

Apart from illustrating the dramatist's skill at subordinating ideas to tangible images in a parable structure, this metaphor serves as a call for political change.

The play also marked a shift to a more inventive use of theatricality which helped him gain an insight into collective psychology. In his opinion, the mimetic representation of naturalistic theatre and the performance as a slice of life are out of the question. Rejecting theatrical illusion, his concept of authenticity pleads for characterization by social attitude and not for individualized traits of character; and the structuring of scenes has to express a thematic content instead of following the internal logic of the action.

Fanshen demonstrates Hare's artistic creed in an extreme theatrical form. He combines Documentary (a hallmark of Joint Stock's work) with Agitprop in order to show that the creation of a new political system is not a matter of power dealing, but, contrariwise, it is a concern with observing principles and human rights. Therefore, the dialogue does not benefit from the same linguistic richness and verbal irony as in *Teeth 'n' Smiles* and the dramatic conflict lies in ideological tensions.

In order to give the audience an objective perspective on the events, Hare resorts to the Brechtian effect of distancing based on anti-illusionistic staging methods. There are no protagonists, individualism being rejected in favour of the evolving consciousness of the community. Seven men and two women play a variety of parts by changing facial expression and tone of voice, or by handling simple props. The actors not only introduce the figures they incarnate, but also specify the source from which the material is taken. Moreover, placard-slogans that punctuate the action and banners bearing texts that outline the main points of the scenes seem to appeal less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. The empty space of the stage, the absence of lighting changes as well as the episodic structure where exposition is succeeded by example are similar to the unconventional concepts and devices of epic theatre. This skilful minimalism draws the audience's attention to the fact that they watch a theatrical demonstration and not a naturalistic reproduction of life. Accordingly, the play is highly intellectual, demanding the audience to reflect upon the questions raised by the performance.

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Hare's subsequent plays reveal a more complex and refined theatrical language, while retaining the patterns developed in *Fanshen*. In *Plenty* and *Licking Hitler* (both written in 1978), he employs documented facts as a means of thematic structuring. He also introduces the character of a female idealist whose utopian potential provides the moral standard by which society is severely judged.

The heroine of *Plenty* is Susan Traherne, a secret agent in France during the Second World War, who searches for a sense of involvement and comradeship, but whose ideals fall apart in the ensuing peace – a fact that brings her to the verge of insanity. Although the play encompasses a wide range of issues (commerce, art, family, sex, drugs, the Third World, spiritual poverty in contrast with material opulence, British foreign policy, Suez and its aftermath), Hare's commitment to offer a critique of the British nation is clear. Together with *Licking Hitler*, *Plenty* concentrates earlier themes in an elaborate form that testifies to a complete maturation of his theatrical experience.

The playwright is not only concerned with the morality of public life, but also with the manner in which the past shapes the present. As the structuring of the play follows Susan's mind process of recall and her psychological disintegration, the time-scheme of the dramatic events is disjointed. The play opens in 1962 with Susan deciding to leave her husband, before the story flashes back to 1943 as Susan makes contact with an English agent, and then slowly forward to 1962. The final scene jumps back to the war, namely to the happiness and plenty of 1946 when victory seemed to herald a new epoch**.** This unchronological progress emphasizes the contrasts between the barren present and the sense of hope developed through collective struggle in the past. Even if the passage of time is recorded with objectivity and full attention to details in order to recreate the changing of fashion in idioms and clothes, the ordering of the scenes is highly subjective. The scenes seem to rise out from the heroine's unconscious translating her increasingly critical awareness of the present into the concreteness of the dramatic language. Thus accurate verisimilitude intertwines with a journey through time and into the interior within an ingenious dramatic composition.

Susan Traherne is one of Hare's quintessentially enigmatic characters. On the one hand, she is an idealist who refuses the hypocrisy of society and its resistance to change. That is why she desperately needs to feel that she is moving on. On the other hand, Susan is driven mad by the fact that she is the only sane person in a mad society. As Hare's intention is to attack the narrowness of Marxist agitprop theatre by conceiving a type of drama that asks complex questions rather than giving easy answers, the play does not solve the mystery. We do not know whether Susan's breakdown is caused by mental instability or by the failure of her utopian principles. Beyond her challenging ambiguity, she distinguishes herself as a magnificent complex character, announcing

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the long gallery of impressive female figures that will appear in his later plays, of which *Secret Rapture* (1989), *Skylight* (1995) and *Amy's view* (1997) are the most significant examples.

A playwright of substance and audacity, David Hare has produced a variety of plays where he tackles compelling subjects and ideas by resorting to unconventional theatrical formulae and techniques. Whether he is seen as a leftist or as an independent-minded writer, what is utterly consistent in his new form of realism is his belief that theatre can change life for the better. As he points out, "the theatre is the best court of justice society has" [5] and a writer's duty is to interpret the world in which he lives.

Notes

1. Bigsby, C.W.E., (1981) in *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies*, *Contemporary English Drama*. p. 65
2. Hare, D. (1972) *The Great Exhibition*, London, p. 26
3. Hare, D. (1974) *Knuckle*, London, 1974, pp. 39-40
4. Hare, D. (1975) *Teeth 'n' Smiles*, London, pp. 21-22
5. Innes, C. (1992) *Modern English Drama 1890-1990*, Cambridge University Press, p. 194
6. Hare, D. (1981) *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, ed. Trussler, London, p. 118

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