

Howard Brenton's Transmutation from Political Theatre to Absurd Theatre

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Abstract- *Of all the contemporary dramatists, Howard Brenton is surely the most prolific, marked by breadth and variety, his plays mainly tackling moments of great political upheavals of the time. Many of his plays are turned out at speed as quick responses to events in public life. Brenton, as a man of political conviction, exposes contemporary consciousness. The theatre serves as a platform for his political revolt expressive of disillusionment at the failure of socialism. Following the trend of Brechtian Epic Theatre, Brenton used the basic principles in matters of setting, characterization, empathy and dramatic structure and the techniques of socialist realism creating a fable with characters capable of change showing the light of dawn in the darkest night. He evolved a large-scale 'epic' theatre dealing in complex political issues, an attempt to constitute a British Epic theatre. Since 1965, Brenton committed himself to a career as a playwright with his first play Ladder of Fools till the recent play Drawing the Line (2013), he has widely moved through different phases of his career as a political dramatist with the portrayal of England in terms of a violent political landscape. But of late, there is transmutation from political theatre to absurd theatre. In his recent play Drawing the Line Brenton faces an epic task himself in distilling the turmoil of India-Pakistan partition into two hours on stage. He makes the audience realize the absurdity of decisions made by the intelligent principled political leaders that end up in tumultuous violence and conflicting demands.*

Keywords- *Political Theatre; Absurd Theatre.*

Theatre is an attempt at the realization of truth. In the case of political theatre, it is truth about power. When one labels a play as political theatre, he or she means that it is the theatrical experience aimed at influencing the people politically, to promote views about specific socio-political-historical events which may be used as spring boards to initiate the audience into political consciousness. Needless to say, politics has become the common place of theatre as social context. The dramatists are either 'committed' to political ideologies which mean their political views enter into the art or politically 'committed' dramatists who utilise theatre effect the change of consciousness enabling the audience to participate more fully in the lives of their fellow human beings. The 'committed' artist becomes 'aesthetic' by creating art form to support his political ideologies and 'conscious' artist becomes 'political' promoting political problems of the past and critical insight into tasks of the present and future.

There is no such thing as a simple unchanging text. For example, the production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (8 May) was generally considered to be a turning point in British contemporary theatre reviewed as a play of extraordinary importance (*Financial Times*, 10 May 1956). Thirty three years later in a 1989 production of *Look Back in Anger* at the Lyric Theatre, London, one reviewer John

Peter in *The Sunday Times* (13 August 1989) wrote as Osborne was approaching his sixtieth birthday

...it was about time we got him right a view which resulted in a sub-editor's headline which announced that John Peter....reveals what the play is really about what-that turned out to be a judgement that 'the play is not about angry young man on the left or right of British politics but that it is'...a verdict of a young writer on an ageing civilization.

John Peter did not review the performance of a production on a particular night but reviewed 'the writer' through time. Howard Brenton reinforces the same position that his plays are not self-enclosed political plays but a starting point for future activity, not simply plays of topicality about the 'present' movement but for the future generation to find new political atmosphere of the times.

Howard Brenton has always been an essentially practical writer, right from the late sixties his apprenticeship on the Fringe till the present, writing apprentice plays, stage plays, films, collaborations, adaptations, non-dramatic writing. His early plays- with the group of the theatrical avant garde mainly with the common themes of homosexuality, transvestism and religious mania- chart out a decaying society ripe for break down.

When Brenton became a full-time professional playwright, he found out that May 1968 destroyed the notion of personal freedom and anarchist political action and a generation dreaming of a beautiful utopia was desperate by the crushing of the French dissidents' rebellion. This is said to have politicized a generation of British playwrights notably David Hare, David Edgar and Howard Brenton. "Politically I had no ideas. I was very immature" (Qtd, in John Russell Taylor, 24). Howard Brenton found out theatre does teach something about the way people act in public. The Portable Theatre with its touring circuit with the house-style and with the theatrical practitioners in a spirit of experimentation and exploration made the audience transform into a guilty awareness of darken reality. Hence the anarchic and antagonistic theatre acquires a political effect. When the public life- the election of the theatre administration, the disenchantment with Wilsonian socialism of the sixties and entry into the common market created feelings of despair, the relationship between the individual and society was analogous to that of the spectator and the events to the screen.

In the wake of a massive political crisis in the seventies-terminal break down in Ulster, terrorist activity and crippling industrialists conflict in the mainland, the failure of Post-war Labour governments to effect genuine radical social change, the industrial unrest represented by the miners' strike of 1972- Brenton became increasingly politically alive in his profession writing plays as quick responses to events in public life and political world. He wrote *The Churchill Play*, *Magnificence*, *Weapons of Happiness*, the working of 'socialist' theatre irrevocably and inevitably for human advance the possibility of a better new world. They are deliberately written as 'history plays' for now with declared ambition of changing the world, influencing opinion and entering fights over political issues. Though Brenton didn't aim to transform the National into a socialist platform, his commitment as a political playwright was to make his voice heard on the large as well as small stages.

Writing a political play is rather like drumming on the pipes in a small room in the hope that the rest of the housing estate can hear you or at least pick up something that you are saying. (Tariq Ali and Howard Brenton, 14)

A Fart for Europe was written with David Edgar in 1973 about the Nation's entry to the common market ; *A Short Sharp Knock* with Tony Howard in 1980 about the election in Thatcher administration.

Though Brenton felt no aesthetic ideas are unalloyed with ideas about society, though he may say, 'no, I'm not political it means that he is running a theatre which is highly contentious in the way it's put together and its ramifications. The play *Sore Throats* in August 1979 marked an abrupt change of Brenton abandoning his usual violent political radicalism. By eighties, he tried to formulate the British epic theatre. Brenton was fascinated by Bertolt Brecht, the most ambiguous and perpetually

fascinating theoretician who formulated epic theatre and whose Marxist theatrical concepts precipitated social change. In certain crucial areas- in matters of setting, characterization, empathy and dramatic structure, his basic principles are identical to those of Brecht. Following Brecht, he used a dialectic world view and the technique of socialist realism creating a fable with characters capable of change which can show the light of dawn in the darkest night. He evolved a large scale 'epic' theatre dealing in complex political issues with *England's Ireland* and *The Romans in Britain* politically concerned with the contemporary Irish problem, the nature of the British presence in Ireland. Though they are not political plays, Brenton projects the deeper concern of what happens when an alien culture is brutally imposed on an indigenous one. In *The Romans in Britain*, Brenton constructs a picture of Britain in a state of cultural flux even before the arrival of the Romans, a culture ill-prepared to face the threat of the Romans. Brenton recreates the Dark Ages Britain to signify that history itself is shifting, fluid, not to be trusted. As Michael X.Zelenak, an American critic notes

history is fluid, something ad too, something 'in the making', a continuous present tense, or more properly, a perpetual conditional mood. This is not 'how it had to be'. This is not even 'how it was' but 'how we choose it to be'. If gaps exist, we are forced to fill them in. History is ours for the writing. (Theatre, 55)

The play's central attack, on nationalism and on the notion of a unifying cultural heritage, came at the time when Thatcher was seeking to make 'Britain' 'Great' again. Brenton asserts that Ireland's troubles are a crime committed by England rather than a tragedy.

In *Thirteenth Eight* and *The Genius* Brenton sought to respond to a rapidly changing political world. The crushing election victory of 1983 by the Labour Party which has riven by internecine rivalry between the old-guard centre-right and the radical left, responded by electing a stop-gap leader Michael Foot who couldn't hold together the competing pressure groups. Senior right wing leaders defected to form the SDP in March 1981. Brenton was the first on the theatrical left to respond to the changed political circumstance with *A Short Sharp Knock* in collaboration with Tony Howard, a savage and satirical attack on a new Tony Government. Mrs. Thatcher is characterized as a vicious, nanny, pushed around in a wheelchair by a wimpish Geoffrey Howe and protected by chain-saw wielding henchman. Sir Keith Joseph is frankly mad trying to saw his own hands off and nail his hand to the floor. The big issues of the early days of Thatcherism unemployment, trade-union reform, race riots in the inner cities, the nuclear issue- echo. Brenton's concern about the disillusionment and alienation of the left. The underlying vision of political radicalism represents that Brenton was beginning to think of a third face in political life.

John Peter, the theatre critic of the *Sunday Times*, in May 1988, announced the impending death of political theatre

in Britain. When the dramatists view the contemporary state of left-wing politics, there was no right wing public theatre. The political dramatists had lost their way and surrendered to failure and inevitable impotence with agonized conscience and self-regarding disillusionment. Brenton was the most prominent victim of this crisis. For economic, the large scale, wide-ranging social issues anatomizing the nation's decline could not be taken up by the dramatists due to the advent and continuing domination of Thatcherism. Hence Brenton's work in the later eighties was characterised by a move towards smaller, more 'private' plays. In collaboration with David Hare, he wrote *Pravda*, a big, rumbustious, grandiloquent play challenging the nature of society in Thatcher's Britain- a kind of morality play about the transformation of British society to an enterprise culture.

The Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican Theatre in London, the political theatre in London, the large political theatre with technical sources attracted Brenton in the nineties. He wrote *Moscow Gold* beginning with the pageant depicting the 1917 Revolution but concentrating on the history of the Gorbachev years and other East European leaders including even the ghost of Lenin. But the play concerns the ordinary private life of the Kermlin cleaner Zoya and her family. Brenton saluted the 'uniqueness' of Soviet make history and the strength of its people. Events in Eastern Europe provide a powerful model and awareness of historical lessons of socialism to Brenton. Brenton continues to believe in the power of the theatre to make significant contribution to political life, to, 'knock on the pipes' of society and culture.

It has to be accepted that Brenton's political consciousness and commitment to theatre as an art form make his theatre veritably contemporary where the actor, playwright and audience participate in the theatrical experience. His play *Berlin Bertie*, written after the unification of Germany, reveals that Brenton is moving towards a theatre where human existence is the prime concern and human predicament is his special focus. Though political atmosphere forms the backdrop, like Beckett and his Absurd Theatre, he has returned to the roots of theatre which led into the labyrinths of living tensions that have developed the spiritually impoverished contemporary man for the first time, Brenton focuses on women characters- Alice, Rose and Joanne, the action set in the domestic surroundings of a lower middle-class living room. The scene falls on a religious day, Good Friday, the day of crucifixion of Christ, April 13th, 1990 and ends on April 15th, 1990, the Resurrection of Christ. The play deals with the union of West and East Germany after 45 years of struggle. From unified Germany, Rosa brought her sister Alice, a present, a bit of war, a lump of concrete with coloured aerosol marks on it which is the image to signify her separation from her married life but a way to cement her relations with her sister in England.

Brenton's recent theatre credits include-*Haiww: The Arrest of Ai Weiwei*, *Never So Good* *Danton's Death*, *Anne Boleyn* and *Drawing the Line* much recently with the

premiere show on 3rd December 2013. Brenton's plays tackle moments of great political upheaval and during, his visit to India in 2009, Brenton was inspired to write about the pictures of the pressures of the time in -*Drawing the Line* the partition of India in 1947. When Brenton journeyed around Kerala through shopkeeper in Cochin, he gathered the information that his family had fled from Kashmir in 1947 at the time of partition. When he returned to England, he ruminated over how the border was drawn. He felt that the end of the British Empire and the birth of India and Pakistan and the terrible human consequences of the creation of the border between them was due to the high ideals of Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah and the maneuvering diplomacy of Lord Mountbatten to terminate his adulterous wife Edwina's affair with Nehru. As a humanist, Brenton was shock to see that what was cynically termed by Lord Mountbatten, the hundred thousand deaths as 'an acceptable level of violence' was done by Cyril John Radcliffe, a British lawyer and Law Lord who was sent by the Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee. The work was assigned to a man who knew nothing about India and who ignorant of mathematics and cartography. He was hurried to complete the job within six weeks and lengthy negotiations about a border had broken down in 1946. After British withdrawal, there was a chaotic and dangerous situation with terrible consequences- a million people died as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and people of other faith separated and refugees fled both ways over Radcliffe's border. Afterwards Radcliffe refused to accept his fee for the dangerous whirlpool of political intrigue. The eminent lawyer burnt all the papers about the drawing the border in his garden and throughout his long career he never spoke a word about his experience in India.

As the play is about political subject and the political play is always defined as an art including moral fair play and aesthetic equilibrium, the dramatist sees the division of India as a farce drenched in blood. He wonders at two characters – the lawyer, decent liberal man confident in his sense of 'fairness' and the other, leader of the Muslim League and the founder of Pakistan, Jinnah, a formidable deep thinker, the lion of a leader of who had a noble 'mission' of open, Islamic democracy. The principled lawyer is enmeshed in a series of escalating conflicts- political one between Nehru's congress party and Jinnah's Muslim League and the other marital one between the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten and his wife Edwina. Brenton brought public figures to the stage because only those political leaders caused the expectations of the public to swing uneasily between hope and fear.

It is clear that Brenton as a political analyst and political issues of the moment. As the writer progresses through time, he is more concerned about the gradual disintegration and despairing disillusionment of human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to any occurrence, no matter however it is illogical. He makes his political theatre transform into an absurdist theatre asking his viewers to draw his own conclusions. Brenton focuses

tightly on one British man, whose absurdity of the action, the division of the borderline has inflamed religious and political tensions, making the viewer acutely aware of the impact on millions of individuals.

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