



THE WAR OF THE INNOCENT AND THE VICTORY OF THE POWER: THE GREAT WAR AND “OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR” BY THEATRE WORKSHOP

Masumların Savaşı ve Gücün Zaferi: Birinci Dünya Savaşı ve Theatre Workshop’un “Oh What A Lovely War”u

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ABSTRACT

The First World War, which many consider to be the most significant milestone in the history of humanity, ushered in a new age and shaped the borders of many brand-new countries. Not only in England but also in many other parts of the world, the war is remembered for its destruction of an oppressed class at the hands of distant yet controlling capitalists. This distinction between the classes constituted the basic theme of the masterpiece by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop; *Oh What a Lovely War*, which ran a new movement and a new approach to the theatre traditions in Britain. The work was incredibly adept in taking the advantages of Brechtian stage techniques while depicting the distance of a ruling class from the realities of the War. Despite the censorship of the English Government, Theatre Workshop caused a stir across the nation and later, the play was staged in the West End and on Broadway, and it received numerous prestigious awards. This study focuses on the class struggle between the soldiers and officers during World War I, the atrocities of the War, the economic and political dimensions of the War and Joan Littlewood’s approach to these issues within the context of *Oh What a Lovely War* by Theatre Workshop.

Key Words: Oh What a Lovely War, Joan Littlewood, Theatre Workshop, World War One, Class Struggle.

ÖZET

Tarihin en önemli mihenk taşlarından biri olarak kabul edilen Birinci Dünya Savaşı yeni bir çağ açmış ve ülkelerin haritalarını yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Savaş, kapitalistlerin elinde bir maşa olan bastırılmış bir sınıfın ölümlerine, acılarına, katliamlarına, üzüntülerine ve gözyaşlarına sebep olurken, yöneten sınıf her daim cephe hattından ve siperlerden uzakta güvende olmuştur. Sınıflar arasındaki bu ayrım, Britanya’daki tiyatro geleneklerine yeni bir akım ve yaklaşım kazandıran Joan Littlewood ve Tiyatro Atölyesi’nin başyapıtı *Oh What a Lovely War*’un temel konusunu

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oluşturmuştur. Eser, yöneten sınıfın savaşın gerçeklerine olan uzaklığını resmederken; Brechtçi sahneleme tekniklerinin faydalarını kullanmakta oldukça ustalık sergilemiştir. İngiltere Hükümeti'nin sansürüne rağmen, Tiyatro Atölyesi büyük bir başarıya imza atmış ve Batı Yakası'nda (Londra) ve Broadway'de sahnelenmiş; dahası, çok farklı saygın ödüller kazanmıştır. Bu çalışma, Birinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında askerler ve subaylar arasındaki sınıf çatışmasına, savaştaki vahşete, savaşın ekonomik ve siyasi boyutlarına ve Joan Littlewood'un bu sorunlara yaklaşımına Tiyatro Atölyesi'nin *Oh What a Lovely War* eseri bağlamında odaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Oh What a Lovely War, Joan Littlewood, Theatre Workshop, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, Sınıf Çatışması.

Contrary to other literary genres, dramatic literature has always played a great political and societal role throughout Europe -particularly in the UK- and these attempts or appeals of dramatic literature have never fallen on deaf ears. Individuals and politicians alike have used theatre as a medium to promote ideas, policies and to make themselves better understood. Moreover, theatre has become a means of revolt for the oppressed classes or otherwise excluded populations, as it can “say the unsayable [and] this capacity is perhaps its most central asset... [because], theatre allows us to enter difficult and dangerous territory, whether emotionally, socially or politically, by virtue of its capacity for narrative, embodiment, symbol and metaphor” (Prentki and Selman, 2000: 101). Of these difficult and dangerous territories, wars and politics are the most common ideas which people generally avoid even thinking about or commenting on.

However, Joan Littlewood has never been one of those, who avoids facing up to dangerous reactions. She was banned by BBC, her every step was followed by MI5, and she had to live under the surveillance of the intelligence departments and police for years, and yet despite all this she defended her actions bravely. The censorship by BBC began in 1941 as a result of the report of MI5 and “lifted ... two years later when MI5 said she had broken off her association with the Communist Party” (Taylor, 2008: 9). The basic reason for these censorships, surveillances, suppressions and oppressions was Littlewood's political identity. She was a theatre director; but, “for Littlewood theatre was not just something that happened on stages, in institutions - it was part and parcel of everyday life and was evident in any imaginative process, public event or spatial encounter” (Holdsworth, 2007: 293). Unsurprisingly, she objected to the order, opposed the sweat shop system, stood up for labour rights, rejected the policies of the governments and instead dreamt of a brotherhood of

peoples. Her basic goal was always to reflect these ideas in her works. Principally, Theatre Workshop became a considerable platform for her to achieve her goals and *Oh What a Lovely War* constituted her high point on this platform. The criticisms towards the politicians and profiteers, the references to the policies of the states during the War, and reactions both to the class distinctions and the death of common soldiers popularised the play and pushed Littlewood over the top.

Oh What a Lovely War was first presented in 1963 by Theatre Workshop which “was a worker’s theatre project initiated between the wars by Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl” (Rabey, 2003: 40). Nonetheless, the play cannot be assigned a single playwright, for “*Lovely War* was primarily a work of editorship not authorship” (Paget, 1990: 246). The first performance of the play appeared five years before the 1968 Theatres Act, thus it still had a significant chance to be performed seriously in the mainstream theatre community. And this chance was an immense change not only for Theatre Workshop but also for the West End theatre, for the reason that “most obviously, *Oh What a Lovely War* brought a politicized and popular theatre into the mainstream when it transferred from the theatre Royal, Stratford East, London, to the Wyndham’s Theatre on the West End” (Luckhurst, 2006: 312). This transfer was a gigantic success for Littlewood, but what Littlewood achieved cannot be understood without a deep insight into the political conjecture of post-war England and the post-war world. The two world wars, economic crises, the collapse of the Empire, the first steps of the Cold War, nuclear threats, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, construction of the Berlin Wall, decolonization, and the Che Guevara movement shaped a new world order. Now nearly fifty years later, “*Oh What a Lovely War*’s interpretation of World War One as a catastrophic blunder by the ‘old’ European ruling classes had become an orthodoxy, but it was [considerably] new in the 1960s” (Paget, 2004: 398).

Among the numerous reasons for this achievement such as the new staging techniques and the influence of the epic theatre, the prevailing reason was that “this collectivity was so manifest in performance, offering a potent theatrical emblem for another sense of collectivity – that which helped to sustain the ordinary soldier of the First World War (Paget, 1990: 245). In other words, the stories of the common soldiers were conveyed in a very effective touch and Littlewood gained her fundamental end. Actually, the play showed its audience what they or their fathers lived, why and how the common soldiers lost their lives. Besides, “the

play's originality lay in presenting the war from the common soldiers' viewpoint: a revolutionary inversion of class precedence in the 1960s, but since then perhaps the dominant mode (Bond, 2002: 65).

Having surveyed and appreciated the Brechtian Theatre and its doctrines, Littlewood decided to bring a new perspective to British drama and to put into practice with her *Lovely War* the characteristics of epic theatre. These characteristics were the news panels, songs, slides, on the surface detached but in the context attached episodes and unfamiliar staging approaches. In the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century in England, these approaches were classified as unfamiliar, new or unusual.

“Littlewood refused to have actors depicting events from the War through a sustained realistic narrative and instead created a multiple theatrical experience that utilised numerous elements to bring the causes, character and consequences of the War to life. [Instead of]... authentic khaki costumes and sandbags, Littlewood decided on the format of a music hall style pierrot show driven by a Master of Ceremonies who, with a ringmaster's whip, directly addresses the audience, tells jokes and introduces scenes.” (Holdsworth, 2006: 86).

The overture, which opens the play, is followed by a briefing on the newspanel, which was a kind of “ticker-tape machine, like those used on buildings in big cities... to display moving messages picked out in light bulbs. Words tracked steadily from audience -right to- left, enabling spectators to read statistics, location, time and sometimes even mood from this technological actor” (Paget, 2004: 402). While the first words are passing on the panel, the Master of Ceremonies (M.C.) is seen on the stage simultaneously. At the very beginning of the play, the opening statement of the M.C. gives an essential hint about the main theme of the play. He states: “Good. Milords, ladies and gentlemen, may we perform for you the ever-popular War Game!” (OWLW, 1965: 12). This ‘War Game’ expression is further illuminated throughout the subsequent scenes in an attempt to drive home to the audience the realities of World War I. These realities are the poor conditions of the common soldiers, the death of the innocent people, the class struggle, hypocrisy, hierarchy between the officers and soldiers, an upper-class who live in ivory towers and the inexpediency of the War. “The long-held suspicion that the War was ill-conceived and ill-managed by a brutal and incompetent upper-class elite that stayed well away from the danger zones of the front line was by

now widespread and Theatre Workshop gave voice to this view” (Holdsworth, 2006: 80).

Of these notions, class struggle and states’ efforts to find a pretext for the War are the two fundamental themes and perhaps the key points of the play. The first-class struggle image is observed before the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. The conflict between the senior and junior army officers is conveyed in the stage direction of the scene as: “Sunday afternoon promenade as in the town of Sarajevo: army officers paying court to the ladies, the junior ones being continually ousted by more senior ones, etc.” (OWLW, 1965: 17). Before the end of the same scene, the lines about the assassination and war are significant enough to be quoted at length to summarize and explain the above mentioned second main theme:

“AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN: Do you know who did it? (*To stallholder.*) Do you know who did it?

STALLHOLDER: No. I never meddle in politics.

...

SERBIAN: I will tell you exactly who did it.

AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN: Yes?

SERBIAN: It was either a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, or a Serb, or a Croat, or a young Czech Liberal, or an Anarchist, or a Syndicalist. In any case it means war.

AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN: You think so?

SERBIAN: Of course. ‘Bang’, says Austria, ‘shoot my nephew, would you? There’s one in the schmackers for you.’ Then in comes Kaiser Willie to help Austria, in comes Russia to help Serbia, and in comes France because they hated Germany since 1871” (OWLW, 1965: 19-20).

These dialogues are interrupted very frequently by the songs throughout the play, further these songs sometimes mean much more than the words. They are all meticulously chosen songs which appeal to the taste of the audience in the East End, because “familiar songs of the 1914-18 period- ‘Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kitbag’, ‘Belgium Put The Kibosh On The Kaiser’, ‘The Ragtime Infantry’- presented a specifically working-class culture (Innes, 2002: 121). Consequently, the implications, satires and messages are delivered very impressively thanks to these songs, which are pertinent to the perceptions of the West End audience. Hence, these make it easier for Littlewood to make herself understood. Another conflict between the senior and junior soldiers is seen

when a sergeant-major enters to teach them rifle drills and bayonet practice. The stage directions in this scene are full of beastly words of the sergeant-major and his considerably rude behaviours are depicted in detail. He swears, continuously goes on tirades and screams. However, these scenes are not very radical when compared with the next ones. Of these, the most eye-catching one is absolutely emphasized when the wounded soldiers arrive at Waterloo. The news panel sums up the scene: 'AUG 25 RETREAT FROM MONS. AUG 30 FIRST BRITISH WOUNDED ARRIVE AT WATERLOO' (OWLW, 1965: 40). And the things do not go as expected or as they should be. "Rather than the flags and the heroes welcome the soldiers expect; their superiors have stranded them without ambulances as they have only arranged transport for officers" (Holdsworth, 2006: 96). This scene, which provokes and surprises the audience, is:

"CORPORAL: Ambulances are ready, sarg. Officers only.

SERGEANT: What about the other ranks?

CORPORAL: No arrangements made for them at the moment" (OWLW, 1965: 40).

When the soldiers are left remediless, the huge class distinction between the soldiers and officers is revealed and seen very sharply. On the other hand, not the army but the lorry drivers help the soldiers and "the sense of working-class solidarity is further underlined when local lorry drivers volunteer to transport the wounded soldiers in their lunch break – a small act that tells a big story about Littlewood and Theatre Workshop's class-based sympathies" (Holdsworth, 2006: 96).

Contrary to the other plays related to wars in the 1960s and before, *Lovely War* "deliberately subverted the standard historical accounts of the war as related from the officer's standpoint: instead it gave a voice to a lower class who were supposed only to be able to speak through irony and humour" (Bond, 2002: 65). This voice is heard following the song 'Belgium Put The Kibosh On The Kaiser' in two sequential scenes when the common soldiers begin to tell what they see in the War and how they perceive it. First, a French soldier and then a German soldier are seen on the stage and their evaluation of the war is reflected as follows:

"FRENCH OFFICER: The battlefield is unbelievable; heaps of corpses, French and German, lying everywhere, rifles in hand ... The guns recoil at each shot; night is falling and they look like old men sticking out their tongues and spitting fire. The rain has started, shells are bursting and screaming; artillery fire is the worst. I lay all night listening to the wounded groaning. The cannonading goes on; whenever it stops

we hear the wounded crying from all over the woods. Two or three men go mad every day.

The French officer goes off. A German officer is discovered on the opposite side of the stage, reading a letter.

GERMAN OFFICER: Nothing more terrible could be imagined; we advanced much too fast. The men are desperately tired. I feel great pity for many of the civilian population, who have lost everything, but they hate us ...” (OWLW, 1965: 27).

The last scene of the Act I, which is generally referred to as ‘Christmas in the trench’, is the most essential evidence which confirms that actually there is no war between the common soldiers. They are in the front lines, they are slaughtered, they suffer, and they are unappreciated. Though neither a German soldier nor an English one has a problem with one another and though they do not want to be on the battlefield, they are forced to be soldiers by the ruling class, whose gluttonousness, greediness and ambitions come before everything. In this portrait, “as the men share greetings, gifts, drinks and songs, it becomes abundantly clear that all these men are stranded in a trench on the Western Front during Christmas and that they have far more in common than that which divides them” (Holdsworth, 2006: 97). The scene ends with the song of the Master of Ceremonies, which shows the solidarity of the working class, and the second act begins with the most popular song of the play, Oh It’s a Lovely War.

The second act concentrates on the economic dimensions of the War and the prospering process of the ruling class, who rises upon the shoulders of the working class thanks to the War. The opening scene of the act “emphasises the economic and political ramifications of war through a cartoonish, agit-prop style representation of arms manufacturers from Britain, France, Germany and America, alongside a Swiss banker, joined for a grouse shoot in the Scottish Highlands” (Holdsworth, 2006: 98). The excerpt quoted below has a significant role to have an insight into the ‘big play’ of the profiteers who see the War as a lucrative trade and a way to hit the goldmine.

“FRANCE: What have your exports to Europe in the last three years amounted to? Ten and a half billion dollars.

AMERICA: Yeah, but all we’re getting paid in now is your beautifully engraved paper money. That’s what we’re worried about.

SWITZERLAND: What are you going to do with all that paper money if the Germans win?

BRITAIN: It's no use being the biggest creditor in the world if no one can pay you.

AMERICA: If the U.S. enters the war, that might just finish it.

GERMANY: Now, now, that's very dangerous talk.

BRITAIN: I say, no need to lose your rag.

AMERICA: All right, all right, so long as peace doesn't break out. What about that peace scare in France, Count? Caused a flutter on Wall Street, I can tell you. Have you scotched it?" (OWLW, 1965: 60).

After the grouse shoot, they begin to count their dead birds, and they are proud of their success. The intentional meaning in this 'grouse shoot' metaphor is to say that the soldiers in the trenches are killed like these birds and the more birds/soldiers are killed, the more munitions will be needed and naturally the War will be more profitable. Moreover, they never want the end of the War, for peace is the end of the world according to them. "They voice their fears that a peaceful resolution will damage their profits, share prices and the world's stock markets" (Holdsworth, 2006: 100). And Littlewood stresses these economic abuses very accomplishedly throughout the Act II. The fear of peace of the profiteers is observed as follows:

"GHILLIE: How do you think the war's progressing, sir?

BRITAIN: Oh, not too badly - everything's under control.

GHILLIE: Do you think we'll have peace by Christmas?

AMERICA: Peace?

GERMANY: Peace? Where did he get that story?

FRANCE: War to the finish.

SWITZERLAND: You must understand, my dear fellow, that war is a political and economic necessity" (OWLW, 1965: 61).

Though the second act begins with the economic dimension of the war, the class issue mentioned above is also reoccurring in the second part. The class distinction is felt not only between the soldiers and officers but also between the officers at different ranks. Among the numerous examples of this distinction between the officers, the most remarkable one is observed in a conversation between an officer and Haig. When the officer and Haig begins to talk about John French, a detail in the last sentence is extremely interesting:

"HAIG: It's a flaw in his character, you know, his weakness for the fair sex. Loses all sense of decency.

SECOND OFFICER. Really, sir!

HAIG: Yes, well, he had to borrow two thousand pounds from me at Aldershot over a woman.

SECOND OFFICER: Good God, sir!

HAIG: And he was Commander of my Cavalry brigade at the time.

SECOND OFFICER: Damn bad show, sir, borrowing from a subordinate” (OWLW, 1965: 72).

Towards the end of the play, slides come to be used more frequently, because the slides are as significant as the actors and actresses. As an indispensable feature of the documentary theatre, they give the details and the realities of the war very successfully. And sometimes just a photograph tells such a long story that it is nearly impossible to convey the intended messages without it. And “the common soldiers, so often the subjects of these slides, [are] important mute ‘actors’ in the ... production. Archive photographs marked the trace of real human beings who lived through (and died in) the war represented on stage (Paget, 2004: 410). Despite the fact that all slides are chosen particularly and each of them plays a great role in the play, one of these real photographs writes a long poem about the unnoticed face of the war: *Slide 46: Two captured Germans between two Tommies. One of the Germans is being given a drink of water by one of the Tommies.*

The play continues with the similar figures, themes and motifs which are represented by slides, songs and by the news panel. The scene during which a runner informs Haig and the British General that seventy per cent casualty is recorded; the commanders do not care about the casualty rate and command to attack more heavily. Thereupon, the soldiers settle down for the night very near to the no man’s land so that they can attack more heavily. As they are just near the no man’s land, they hear the soldiers’ voices between the trenches. Some of these are soldiers who are about to die, some of them are wounded and some wait to be rescued from the barbed wires. Two common soldiers who can not stand this moaning, talk to each other:

“SECOND SOLDIER: Can you hear those poor wounded bleeders moaning in no-man’s-land?

THIRD SOLDIER: Sounds like a cattle market” (OWLW, 1965: 88-89).

Young innocent people die, lose their organs, though they do not want to wear khaki, they are forced to be in the army, they are very depressed, most of them go through traumas. However, the greediness of Haig and the officers never comes to an end. The comment of Haig on a casualty report reflects his point of view towards the common soldiers

clearly. A part of his comments is heard as: “First reports from the clearing station state that our casualties are only some sixty thousand: mostly slight. The wounded are very cheery indeed” (OWLW, 1965: 99).

The song, *Oh What a Lovely War*, rings the curtain up, and finishes the play as well. But before the closing song, two points are significant enough to be handled as the last, but not least, words. First, when pierrots are seen on the stage as German, French and British generals, they begin to debate if/when the war will end. This debate points that that the War will never end, because the date goes up and up insistently. Second, “immediately after this [debate], a group of pierrots as French soldiers mutiny as they are ordered to advance into the trenches, proclaiming they are ‘like lambs to the slaughter’ they advance baaing towards the audience before a burst of gun-fire causes their collapse” (Holdsworth, 2006: 107). This final conversation of the play, before the songs, is as follows:

“FRENCH SOLDIER: We think it is stupid to go into the trenches again.

FRENCH OFFICER: You don’t think – you obey. If you refuse, you will be shot!

FRENCH SOLDIER: Very well. We follow you – like lambs to the slaughter” (OWLW, 1965: 105).

Consequently, “in this collectively devised piece, Joan Littlewood with her left-wing Theatre Workshop members created one of the most powerful commentaries on the First World War” (Patterson, 2005: 301). As a voice of the working class, Littlewood called attention to the common soldiers who died in the front lines while the politicians and officers were secure, far away from the trenches and removed from the battlefield. The war killed ten million people, wounded twenty-one million people not only physically but also mentally, and at the end of the war, seven million people were missing. Unfortunately, as is said in the scene during which the letter from Bernard Shaw is read, all these people were “sacrificed to the blunders of boobies, the cupidity of capitalists, the ambition of conquerors, the lusts and lies and rancours of bloodthirsts that love war” (OWLW, 1965: 83). And Littlewood’s success lies in reflecting these disasters, slaughters and massacres so vividly and realistically, thanks to her fellows. She was able to succeed only with the assistance of her fellows. Littlewood was constantly aware of the fact that “theatre-making is a collaborative process that relies not on the vision of one person but the creative engagement of many: performers, designers, technicians, playwrights, producers and the people who make the event of theatre possible: theatre managers, box office staff and cleaners” (Holdsworth, 2006:

2). She enlightened the communities, stimulated the senses and offered an insight into the past. Forty-five years after the end of the war, the play could be very effective. Moreover, “the effect on the audience in particular was unique: although the events of World War I were burlesqued and presented with apparent flippancy (of which the title is an example), the audiences reacted with the feeling that such a war must never happen again” (Kosok, 2007: 223). Despite the numerous works produced about World War I, despite the poets writing only about this war and despite a canon of plays related to this war, “*Oh What a Lovely War* appeared to be, quite literally, the last word on World War I, and it was left to some provincial theatres to discover, in their productions, new aspects of the War” (Kosok, 2007: 208).

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