



## CONTROVERSIAL EFFECT OF BERTOLT BRECHT'S EPIC THEATRE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH POLITICAL DRAMA AND ITS ILLUSTRATION IN DAVID HARE'S FANSHEN\*

BERTOLT BRECHT'İN EPİK TİYATROSUNUN İNGİLİZ POLİTİK TİYATROSU ÜZERİNE TARTIŞMALI ETKİSİ VE BU ETKİNİN DAVID HARE'İN FANSHEN OYUNUYLA ÖRNEKLEMİ\*\*

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### Abstract

British political drama took its place on contemporary British stage without the boundaries of a certain manifesto but with the political consciousness of a group of leftist playwrights in the late 1960s. It reflected the disillusionment of these playwrights with the Labour Party politics at home and with some worldwide events like the Vietnam War, student riots in Paris, Soviet Russia's interventions in Hungary and in Czechoslovakia. British political dramatists wrote explicitly politically and produced their plays, in the first place, by the help of fringe theatre companies, which were touring and which took theatre to the public. Bertolt Brecht was one of the most important literary influences on the development of British political drama, which was mostly denied by political dramatists. Brecht's impact on British theatre dated back not only to his theatre company Berliner Ensemble's visit to London in 1956 but even before the World War II. British playwrights and directors in 1950s and 1960s got acquainted with Brecht's works both in Britain and in Germany and they helped to introduce Brecht's epic theatre on British stage. This generation of playwrights and directors paved the way for the development of political drama in Britain. Even though political dramatists criticised Bertolt Brecht a lot, he was, in literary terms, one of the greatest influences on political drama. This study will first talk about the development of British political drama and then it will argue to what extent Brecht's epic theatre affected British political playwrights, as illustrated in Fanshen (1975), a play by one of the representative political playwrights, David Hare.

### Öz

İngiliz politik tiyatrosu, edebi bir bildiri olmaksızın, 1960'ların sonlarında, bir grup sol görüşlü oyun yazarının politik farkındalıkla yazdığı oyunlarıyla çağdaş İngiliz sahnesindeki yerini almıştır. Bu tiyatro, söz konusu oyun yazarlarının kendi ülkelerinde İşçi Partisi politikaları, dünyada da Vietnam Savaşı, Paris'teki öğrenci ayaklanmaları, Sovyet Rusya'nun Macaristan'a ve Çekoslovakya'ya müdahalesi gibi olaylar karşısındaki hayal kırıklığını yansıtmaktadır. İngiliz politik tiyatrosu oyun yazarları açık bir şekilde politik oyunlar yazmışlar ve oyunlarını, ilk planda, gezici, tiyatroyu halkın ayağına götüren "fringe" tiyatro kumpanyaları aracılığıyla sergilemişlerdir. Bertolt Brecht, İngiliz politik tiyatrosunun gelişimi üzerinde en önemli etkisi olan isimlerden biridir ama bu gerçek politik tiyatro oyun yazarları tarafından çoğu zaman reddedilmiştir. Brecht'in İngiliz tiyatrosu üzerindeki etkisi, tiyatro kumpanyası Berliner Ensemble'in 1956'da Londra'yı ziyaretinden de önceye, II. Dünya Savaşı öncesine dayanmaktadır. 1950'ler ve 1960'lardaki İngiliz oyun yazarları ve yönetmenleri Brecht'in eserlerini hem İngiltere'de hem de Almanya'da görüp tanıma imkanı bulmuşlar ve İngiliz sahnesine de Brecht'in epik tiyatrosunu tanıtmışlardır. İşte bu oyun yazarlarının ve yönetmenlerinin dönemi İngiltere'de politik tiyatrosunun gelişimine zemin hazırlamıştır. Politik tiyatro oyun yazarları Bertolt Brecht'i çok fazla eleştirseler de, Brecht İngiliz politik tiyatrosu üzerinde edebi anlamda etkisi olan en önemli unsurlardan biridir. Bu çalışma, öncelikle İngiliz politik tiyatrosunun gelişiminden bahsedecek, sonrasında Brecht'in epik tiyatrosunun İngiliz politik tiyatro oyun yazarlarını ne kadar etkilediğini tartışacak ve bu etkiyi önde gelen politik tiyatro oyun yazarlarından biri olan David Hare'in Fanshen (1975) adlı oyunuyla örnekleyecektir.

\* A different version of this study was already produced by the author in her doctorate thesis entitled as "The Evolution of David Hare's Political Drama as Observed in Fanshen, The Secret Rapture and The Absence of War" (2017).

\*\* Bu çalışmanın farklı bir versiyonu yazarın "David Hare'in Politik Tiyatrosu'nun Fanshen (Devrim), The Secret Rapture (Sessiz Ölüm) ve The Absence of War (Savaşın Yokluğunda) Oyunlarında Örneklendiği üzere Evrimi" (2017) başlıklı doktora tezinde yer almaktadır.

## Introduction

British political drama appeared on contemporary British stage in the late 1960s not as a movement or with a certain kind of manifesto. Hence, literary critics attempted to delineate it either in its historical, political and social context or in its literary milieu. Accordingly, this study will first introduce the advent of British political drama in the face of certain social and political events, domestic and worldwide. Then, it will reveal how the contemporary literary atmosphere helped to shape the themes and the techniques as well as the production process of British political plays. After that, mainly, it will focus on Bertolt Brecht's influence by revealing that his effect on British theatre did not start with Berliner Ensemble's visit in 1956 but dated back to earlier times and that Brecht's contribution to British political drama was not limited only to epic theatre techniques since his theatre represented reaction to the ideology of naturalistic theatre. Besides, it will explore the reasons for British political playwrights' denial of Brechtian influence on their theatre. The first cause is the fact that Brecht inspired them not directly but through a number of domestic figures like John Osborne and John Arden. The second one is Brecht's certain practices in his epic theatre such as authorising the responses of the audience with the help of slogans and rejecting their emotional involvement. However, this study will argue that Brecht's theatre cannot be reduced to these two characteristics especially as far as the later phase of his career is concerned and that political dramatists, albeit criticising, made use of a number of epic theatre techniques in their plays. In order to illustrate Brechtian effect, it will closely analyse *Fanshen* (1975), the "most Brechtian" play by David Hare, one of the forerunning political dramatists (Boon, 2003, p. 5).

### **The Rise of British Political Drama in Historical Context**

British political drama was born in the late 1960s as a widespread theatrical practice among the leftist playwrights who came to write politically in an explicit manner. These playwrights including Howard Brenton, David Hare, Howard Barker, Caryl Churchill, David Edgar set out to bring in social and political change as well as social progress by means of their dramatic works because they were notably unhappy with the present state of the global and the domestic politics. The disillusionment with the student uprisings in Paris, with Soviet politics and with the Vietnam War around the world as well as with Labour Party politics at home urged these leftist playwrights to seek alternative politics and to free themselves from the boundaries of the parliamentary politics. This incitement to write

politically was encouraged by certain developments such as the introduction of liberating acts like the Sexual Offences Act in 1967 and the abolition of the Lord's Chamberlain's Office in 1968. As a result, British political dramatists started to write on politics liberally and had their plays performed both in fringe and mainstream theatres.

Political drama set out with the purpose of bringing forth progress and change in social and political terms by dealing with social and political issues. Political dramatists wanted to achieve a different world by means of theatre, which came to be known as the "theatre of socialist political change" whose "workers . . . consciously place themselves on the side of the working class" (Craig, 1980, p. 30). These dramatists considered theatre a kind of tool for "injustice to be addressed" and a means for "a social system which relieves the ubiquitous suffering of the poor," says one of the political dramatists, Howard Brenton (1995, p. 17). David Hare, another political dramatist, asserts that he started his dramatic career, like many others, "to advance political ends" (2005, p. 140) and to "improve life in [certain] ways" (2011, p. 186). Although some political playwrights like Howard Barker "offer[] no programme for change" (Patterson, 2003, p. 87), they still believe in "the power of theatre to generate excitement and interest far greater than that which might be expected from the few who attend a piece of political theatre" (p. 86). British political dramatists, in accordance with their loss of faith in institutions and with their aims to achieve social advancement, portray British society with its different segments and in different time periods. They draw upon "the guardians" of the institutions in Britain with a critical stance: "politicians are presented as clowns, policemen as role-playing thugs, priests as crooked cartoon cut-outs" (Ansorge, 1975, p. 5).

Political theatre started in the fringe and the forerunning political plays were put on stage in the late 1960s and in the 1970s by fringe theatre companies. These companies were characterised by a number of political concerns such as socialist politics held by the Red Ladder, women's issues and problems demonstrated by the Monstrous Regiment and by the Women's Theatre Group, problems related to ethnicity manifested by the Black Theatre Co-Operative and by the Tara Arts, and gay issues deliberated by the Gay Sweatshop. These groups were mostly touring and they principally aimed to take theatre to the people who had neither the money nor the time to see plays in the cities as well as to raise political consciousness by performing plays in pubs, working places or any place the public met. As for the

techniques, in order to convey their political message as quickly as possible, political dramatists utilised a variety of techniques and forms ranging from agit-prop, epic theatre techniques to naturalist and social realist techniques.

### **British Political Drama in Literary Context: Under the Effect of Bertolt Brecht**

Some literary figures in Britain and in Europe were influential in technical and thematic terms on British political drama. In terms of political and social themes, the most widely recognised effect is Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956), whose forefather Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) was the man who coined the term of "political theatre." Piscator was the theatre director of the trade union educational centre in Germany, Volksbühne, where he worked with the belief that "the main issue" which was to be dealt with in theatre was "[man's] relation to society" and what was represented on stage was to have an effect on social changes (Lewis, 1962, p. 222). According to Brecht, too, it is possible to improve people's mentality through theatre since "it is precisely theatre, art and literature which have to form the 'ideological superstructure' for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age's way of life" (trans. 1992, p. 23). Brecht's impact on British theatre is mostly claimed to have begun with his company Berliner Ensemble's visit to London in 1956. Nonetheless, Brecht was not unknown before the World War II to the British leftist groups (Willett, 1977, p. 15). It was in 1928 when, for the first time, a Brecht play, *The Threepenny Opera*, was reviewed in *The Times* (Jacobs and Ohlsen, 1977, p. 23). Brecht himself also visited London during the war in order to find employment in the film industry. At the time of this visit, he met with the poets W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood at the Group Theatre to share his ideas and plans on "an international association of workers in the theatre" (p. 31). As for to what extent Brecht's theories on theatre were known in Britain, "[they] had been given some exposure, though very slight, in post-war Britain, and had aroused little response" or "antipathy" or "caution" (p. 35). In 1955, after watching Brecht's plays performed by German and Austrian exiles in Britain, Oscar Lewenstein paid a visit to Germany to see Brecht's productions. This visit allowed him to produce *The Threepenny Opera* at the Royal Court Theatre and helped Joan Littlewood's production of *Mother Courage* at the Theatre Workshop in February 1956 (p. 35). Apart from Lewenstein, British directors like George Devine, John Dexter, William (Bill) Gaskill, and Peter Hall had already seen Brecht's productions in Germany before they saw them in Britain. The effect of Brecht's plays reached a peak when the Ensemble came to England and

this effect was at first mostly in terms of technique. As most of the British audience did not know German, the reviews were generally “on acting techniques, stage design, and general production methods” (p. 39). This was one of the reasons why Brecht’s first influence was observed on the directors before the playwrights.

British political dramatists borrowed from Brecht’s theatre both its political content along with the intent to transform the society and also its techniques which are not realistic and which force the audience to respond to the play’s performance in an intellectual manner. What Brecht opposed to in conventional German theatre of his time was naturalism and Brecht’s epic theatre was born in opposition to naturalistic theatre. It is his challenge against naturalistic theatre that primarily characterised his drama and influenced British political drama. Although British political dramatists made use of naturalist techniques in their plays from time to time, the most distinctive feature of British political drama is its “working against the naturalized ‘objectivity’ of theatrical realism” (Worthen, 1992, p. 146).

The first reaction to naturalism in theatre appeared when the performative aspect of theatre was recognised in the early twentieth century by a number of theatre practitioners and theoreticians. They attempted to reform the understanding of theatre, which was reduced to a state of purely “textual art” as a result of the realistic approach (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 20). Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, and Erwin Piscator’s innovations in theatre were all for the purpose of activating the audience and making them react intellectually to the play. These dramatists attempted to “overcome,” by means of certain theatrical devices employed on stage, “[t]he passivity of the audience in the bourgeois theatre” (p. 136). To begin with, in Russia, Meyerhold used rotating scenery and semi-acrobatic actors, and exposed the bare brick wall at the back of the stage, all in order to attack the bourgeois theatre in the name of the industrial proletariat. Stage machinery, which was used in order to arouse the audience’s attention and to encourage their intellectual response, “was . . . closely identified with the Russian Revolution” (Willett, 1968, p. 110). As for the innovations in Germany, Reinhardt was considered one of the most important directors of the pre-war German theatre with 136 plays he directed “[b]etween 1905 and 1933” (Brockett, 1977, p. 508). In these plays, he abstained from committing himself to naturalist staging techniques (Pilikian, 2017) and he experimented with techniques as well as “production styles and theatre architecture” which he harmoniously united with the language of the play (Brockett, 1977, p. 508). Similarly, Piscator, the leading figure of the

documentary theatre, shattered the realistic illusion created on the stage by employing such technical methods as “[s]hort, rapid scenes” and “placards, signs, graphs, and posters point[ing] out what was happening on the stage” (Lewis, 1962, p. 223). His production of *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1928), an adaptation of Jaroslav Hašek’s novel, is “a landmark in theatre history” (p. 222) because of these innovative stage techniques. Brecht, who was influenced by Piscator during their twelve collaboration, believes that “the real front-line battles were fought out mainly by Piscator, whose Theater am Nollendorfplatz was based on Marxist principles, and by [Brecht himself] at his [Brecht’s] Theater am Schiffbauerdamm” (trans. 1992, p. 65). They fought this war successfully with the help of the techniques they employed; as Brecht states, “[they] introduced music and film and turned everything top to bottom, [they] made comedy out of what had originally been tragic, and vice versa. [They] had [their] characters bursting into song at the most uncalled-for moments. In short [they] thoroughly muddled up people’s idea of the drama” (p. 65).

Those technical novelties in theatre that appeared through the works of Meyerhold, Reinhardt and Piscator were introduced to British theatre primarily by Brecht. That is why the stage design which is not naturalistic and which calls the audience to take part in the performance in an intellectual manner was known in Britain by the name of “Brecht” or “Brechtian.” Brecht believes that “[w]e need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself” (trans. 1992, p. 190). Here, Brecht introduces the two basic principles of epic theatre: one is the use of historical setting while analysing the man’s condition and the other one is the call for the audience to approach the historical representation intellectually. These two crucial principles of Brecht’s epic theatre were introduced to British political dramatists, as it is claimed by W. B. Worthen, by means of John Osborne (1929-1994)’s *The Entertainer* (1957) and they became the characterising features of British political drama. *The Entertainer* explores “the function of class in British imperial expansion,” which is held up as an example by political dramatists as observed in their plays set in a historical setting, especially that of the World War II (Worthen, 1992, p. 157). Osborne’s play also draws the audience “into a more urgent and actual relation to the stage” by making “use of popular music hall in a ‘straight’ play” (p. 157). Hence, the representation of the social condition in its historical context and the intellectual

participation of the audience by means of certain techniques were inherited by the British political dramatists through *The Entertainer*.

It was not only through John Osborne but also by virtue of John Arden's plays, Brecht's epic theatre techniques came to be widely used and preferred in the political plays of the 1970s. Arden, like Osborne, was among the previous generation of socially conscious playwrights and he was known to be "the English disciple of Brecht" (Bull, 1984, p. 112). For John Bull, Arden's influence on the development of political drama is indisputable, specifically on one of the initiative political plays, *England's Ireland*, which was written collaboratively by Tony Bicat, Brian Clark, Howard Brenton, Francis Fuchs, David Hare and Snoo Wilson and produced by Shoot Theatre Company. Bull states that from *England's Ireland* on, "political theatre [started to] mov[e] ever closer to versions of the epic" (p. 113). This fact was exemplified in the plays by other political dramatists like David Edgar and Edward Bond:

Bond had already produced *Narrow Road to the Deep North* in 1969, a parable play owing much to Brecht's 'Lehrstück'; and he followed this with a series of plays using an epic format: *Lear* (1971), *Bingo* (1973), *The Fool* (1975), *The Bundle and The Woman* (1978). Even David Edgar, a writer whose early work was entirely in an agit-prop vein, . . . [started to employ] surrealism and naturalism being played one against the other (p. 113).

Other than Bond and Edgar, Griffiths, Brenton and Hare also experimented with epic possibilities in their works of the 1970s. They made use of historical setting as their theatrical ancestor Brecht did for the purpose of "seeking in the past both a starting-point for debate and a way of reanalysing history" (Bull, 1984, p. 115). Moreover, by writing historical drama, political dramatists – who mostly subscribed to leftist ideology – could produce "a left-wing history that would offer, in terms of perspective and/or subject matter, an alternative to the establishment version of the past" (Peacock, 1991, p. 79). Griffiths is a political dramatist who makes use of history in his plays; for instance, his *Occupations* (1970) examines "the widespread factory occupations that took place throughout Italy in September 1920" (p. 80) and his *The Party* (1973) examines the Paris events in 1968 by contrasting the ideology behind these events with that of the English intellectuals. Brenton makes use of a historical character in his *The Churchill Play* (1974) in order to explore the present state of Britain. David Edgar rewrites "*Rome and Juliet* set in Northern Ireland" in his *Death Story* (1972) while Hare employs the 1940s' Chinese

setting in his Brechtian play *Fanshen* (1975) (Itzin, 1986, p. 143). Hare also provides a panoramic view of Britain after the World War II to the 1960s in *Plenty*. As these political dramatists transferred to the mainstream venues, so did the epic features of their plays not only in playwriting but also in staging. David Hare, for instance, directed his own play *Plenty* at the National Theatre, which was an indication of the fact that epic was welcomed at the National. Moreover, mostly under the effect of epic staging techniques, minimal and less luxurious settings started to be favoured on big stages of the 1970s. For most of the directors, “[s]mall was beautiful and big was now bad. . . . there was an accelerating skepticism about large-scale theatrical institutions: something fed by the proliferation of studio spaces and independent companies” (Billington, 2007, p. 238).

Even though political dramatists employed epic theatre staging techniques and discussed political themes to bring forth social progress, they mostly tended to deny Brecht’s impact on the development of British political drama. In fact, for political dramatists in general, a playwright should not assert his/her existence as a “god-like” figure, which is, for them, what Brecht does in his plays. David Hare, one of the political dramatists, rises his voice against Brecht’s provision of mottoes, slogans or his giving the reader/audience “the god-like feeling that the questions have been answered before the play has begun” (Hare, 1991, p. 29). As Hare believes in the power of the performance itself and expects the reader/audience’s intellectual as well as emotional involvement, he does not approve of Brecht’s directing the audience’s reception of the performance. Brecht, by means of the alienation technique, does not let the audience engage with the performance in emotional terms. Hare “find[s] unattractive” the way Brecht approaches his audience and his material since the latter is “determin[ed] not to be caught out in any kind of humanist stance, not to wear your heart on your sleeve, not to show passion, not to show feeling, rarely to show love, rarely to write about the heart” (Hare, 2011, p. 185).

Hare, however, while criticising Brecht’s dramatic theories and practices, omits an important detail related to Brecht’s career. When the later phase of Brecht’s career is analysed, it is possible to see how he allows the audience to be moved emotionally other than intellectually. Taking into consideration different stages of Brecht’s career, it can be said that, first of all, Brecht collaborated with different writers in *Lehrstücke* plays in the 1920s and 1930s in line with his ideas revealed in the theoretical article “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre.” These



plays are extremely didactic just as Brecht proclaimed in the first phase of his career (Esslin, 1974, p. 133). It is obvious in these early examples of Brecht's dramatic practice that there is a kind of denouncement "of our world, but there is no sign that they ever inspired anybody to want to change it" (Willett, 1968, p. 176). During the exile years he experienced first in Scandinavia and then in the United States through the 1930s and 1940s, Brecht wrote his widely recognised plays including *Life of Galileo Galilei* (1937-1939), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1940), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1943-1945). These are among the plays through which Brecht is known in Britain and by means of which he affected the British playwrights. The theoretical work he committed to paper following these works is notable especially in comparison to his ideas at the beginning of his career. In "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1947-1948), Brecht avoids being propagandistic or forcing the audience to side with a certain political view as he admits that "the 'theatre' set-up's broadest function [is] to give pleasure. It is the noblest function that we have found for 'theatre'" (trans. 1992, p. 180). Furthermore, in this short work, Brecht defines the theatre "as a place of entertainment, as is proper in an aesthetic discussion" and invites his audience and himself, too, "to discover which type of entertainment suits [them] best" 21 (p. 180). He wants to leave the reception of theatrical performance to the audience without his own intervention, a fact which Hare does not take into consideration while criticising Brecht.

### **David Hare's *Fanshen* (1975) as an Example of Epic Theatre**

*Fanshen* is known to be, both in technical and in thematic terms, David Hare's "most Brechtian" play although Hare makes his own contributions to epic and reveals his own political concerns specifically related to Britain in the play (Boon, 2003, p. 5). It was received by a number of critics and scholars both as a text and in relation to how it was put on stage. Michael Billington and Robert Cushman are among the pioneer critics who reviewed *Fanshen* as a stage production in their newspaper articles, "Fanshen" and "Bertolt out-Brechted," respectively, in which they sought to define Brechtian traces in the play. Richard Boon, Carol Homden, Judy Lee Oliva and Joan Fitzpatrick Dean published works examining particularly David Hare's dramatic career, respectively, *About Hare: The Playwright and the Work*, *The Plays of David Hare*, *David Hare: Theatricalizing Politics*, and *David Hare*. In these works, they are observed to have reserved special space for the discussion of what makes *Fanshen* a Brechtian project.

Some authoritative figures delving into the historical development of contemporary British drama also contributed a lot to the literary criticism of *Fanshen* as an example of epic play. John Bull and Michael Billington, for instance, assay the principal features of *Fanshen*, both in thematic and technical terms, while introducing the theatre of the 1970s in *New British Political Dramatists* and in *State of the Nation*, respectively. Michael Patterson also explores the evolution of British drama as well as of political drama and discusses *Fanshen* under the title, “Brecht revisited: David Hare's *Fanshen* (1975)” in his *Strategies of Political Theatre*. D. Keith Peacock is more interested in the advancement of “historical drama” on contemporary stage of Britain and scrutinises the playwrights writing “alternative histories” in his *Radical Stages*. Accordingly, Peacock analyses Hare’s *Fanshen* as a piece of historical drama, which he considers an epic feature. Chris Megson and Richard Allan Cave talk about the plays and playwrights of the 1970s in *Modern British Playwriting* and in *New British Drama in Performance*, respectively. Both present David Hare as a significant representative of political drama and provide a technical and thematic analysis of *Fanshen* as an epic theatre example.

In addition to the works of British drama historians, *Fanshen* is also handled as an epic play in many scholarly articles. Janelle Reinelt’s “*Fanshen*: Hare and Brecht” and her book *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre* reveals and puts peculiar emphasis on the affinity between Hare’s *Fanshen* and Brecht’s epic theatre productions. In a similar fashion, Bert Cardullo foregrounds the Brechtian features of *Fanshen*, which are not compatible with the conventional works of Western drama in the article “*Fanshen*, Western Drama, and David Hare's Oeuvre.” Cardullo maintains his studies on the ties between *Fanshen* and Brecht in his “Brecht and *Fanshen*” and provides a detailed analysis of epic inspirations in the play. Diana Presada also spotlights Hare’s being unconventional in *Fanshen* and asserts that Hare uses epic theatre techniques for the sake of objectivity (2013, p. 399).

Finlay Donesky and Robert Scott Fraser have works specially on Hare but their perspectives while dealing with the works are not like those of the aforementioned authors in that they do not concentrate on Brechtian characteristics of Hare’s plays. Donesky is concerned with the morals and historicity of *Fanshen* in his *David Hare: Moral and Historical Perspectives*. As for Fraser, he is more interested in the interrelation in *Fanshen* between the private selves and the historical figures in his book, *A Politic Theatre: The Drama of David Hare*. Similarly, David McDonald, in his article “Unspeakable Justice: David Hare’s

*Fanshen*,” explores the representation of justice, rather than epic theatre, in *Fanshen* by means of two terms, “identification” and “difference” (1992, p. 131). Fateme Abdous and Nahid Ahmadian, in their “A Sociological Study,” makes use of Herbert Blumer’s terms “symbolic interactionism” and “collective action” in order to provide a sociological reading of *Fanshen* (2016, p. 30). Fatemeh Abdous, in another article, this time in collaboration with Fazel Asadi Amjad, handles *Fanshen* within the perception of “historical-political playwriting” and by using Hannah Arendt’s “political views on action and public and private realms” (2020, p. 61).

Some other authors prefer to deal with *Fanshen* by using a more thematic approach. James Gindin, for example, in his article “Freedom and Form in David Hare’s Drama,” concentrates on the themes related to society, politics, economy and justice as presented in *Fanshen*. In an alike fashion, Jurg van Ginkel makes a thematic analysis of *Fanshen* along with Hare’s other works while he is tracing “[t]he evolution of David Hare’s [w]ork from 1975 to 1993” in his master’s thesis (2006, p. 1). Again with a thematic approach, Özlem Özmen, in her article “Turning over Feudalism with Communism and the Process of Remaking Society in David Hare’s *Fanshen*,” draws attention to Hare’s representation of the peasants’ revolution in *Fanshen* as a means to underline the need for the working class in Britain to be educated (2016 p. 415). Likewise, So-Im Kim puts emphasis, in “The Criticism of Political Communist Leadership in *Fanshen*,” on the problems with communist leadership as implied in the play (2020, p. 1269). Aside from the thematic points of view provided by the abovementioned authors, Roger Marheine suggests a different perspective in reading *Fanshen* in “Socialism before ‘Market Socialism’” and seeks the ways to make use of the play as a pedagogical tool to present “Chinese liberationist thinking” to his students (2007, p. 413).

David Hare’s *Fanshen*, which he wrote for the Joint Stock theatre company after a process of workshop, is one of the most important plays that exemplify the epic theatre tools he employed. Nevertheless, in his interview with Georg Gaston, Hare repudiates this claim (1993, p. 219). He does not accept the Brechtian character of the play asserting “that Brecht was more interested in describing the rottenness of the old society than he was in showing the beauty of the new” and that he himself in *Fanshen* has drawn an optimistic portrait of a newly established society (Hare, 1993, p. 219). However, Hare’s ideas can be “contradict[ed]” (p. 219) as will be seen in the analysis of his play and as Brecht does not represent pure rottenness or violence in his plays. For instance, “*Caucasian Chalk Circle* does not

show the violence in prerevolutionary Russia, nor does *Mother Courage* portray the carnage of the Thirty Years' War. Brechtian narratives always begin with the social condition to be examined," just as Hare's narrative does in *Fanshen* (Reinelt, 1994a, p. 116-117). Moreover, in a theatre company - the Joint Stock - which makes use of Brechtian aesthetics and which employs a working method similar to that of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, it is almost impossible for its playwright to avoid Brecht (Boon, 2003, p. 5). What Hare achieves in *Fanshen* is truly his own "unique" style: still, it is "related to the Brechtian project, intentionally or not" (Reinelt, 1994b, s. 127). Although Hare claims that neither his play nor his style is Brechtian, he, as a political dramatist, borrows a lot from Brechtian aesthetics and writes a play with a number of characteristics of Brecht's epic theatre.

*Fanshen* gives an account of the land reform achieved with the initiation of the Communist Party members and with the undisputable contribution of the peasants in China in the years between 1945 and 1949 (Peacock, 1991, p. 102). *Fanshen* lays bare many changes that happened in people's lives in Long Bow, through which illustrates Hare's approach to the idea of change and revolution. The play comprises of two acts with seven sections in Act I and five sections in Act II, in which the sections are also divided into small parts. The sections in the play function as episodes in Brecht's epic theatre, "in that no effort is made to relate one scene to another" and between the scenes, the "[t]ransitions are fluid but specific" (Oliva, 1990, p. 54). Both the sections and the parts mostly "ha[ve] a central action that illustrates some new lesson or event central to the struggle to fanshen in Long Bow" (Reinelt, 1994a, p. 116) and these actions are generally summarised in the slogans. Hence, it can be stated that each one of the scenes in *Fanshen* have "gestic" character just like the scenes in Brecht's epic theatre (Homden, 1995, p. 42). Besides the social gest, Hare makes use of another epic theatre element in *Fanshen*, historisation, just as he does in many of his plays (Reinelt, 1994b, p. 138). By means of a historical setting, Hare allows "the [reader/]audience to think historically" and to approach the events intellectually (p. 138).

In *Fanshen*, the social roles the characters represent are more in the foreground while their names or individual identities are less important than the general state and development of the society. As the play puts more emphasis on the communal sense and experience of the revolution, it leaves less place for the psychological development of the individuals. This "emphasis" of the play "on man as a social rather than a psychological creature" is another characteristic of epic

theatre borrowed from Brecht (Dean, 1990, p. 32). Most of the characters in *Fanshen* are not developed and some are Communist Party representatives or landlords while some others are peasants. Hare categorises the characters in *Fanshen* in his early notes to the play and puts them into certain groups which demonstrate their social function such as “cadres,” “work team,” “officials,” “struggle group,” “poor peasants,” and “landlords, struggle objects etc.” (Hare, n.d., n.p.).

Just as the characters are treated as social beings rather than as individuals, actors, too, during the performance of the play, are given the responsibility to convey the social message rather than to purely act their role. Since it is the social argument of the play that is to be foregrounded, the actors of the Joint Stock are expected to put a distance between themselves and the roles they play. Hence, the actors, “under the direction of William Gaskill and Max Stafford-Clark, present and clarify arguments” without “characteris[ing]” (Cushman, 1975, p. 26), which is in line with what Brecht proposes for epic performances (trans. 1992, p. 136). Moreover, again as in epic theatre, the actors of *Fanshen* are given more than one role and *Fanshen* is performed “with about nine actors taking the thirty or so parts” (Hare, 1986, p. 5). This technical aspect of the play strengthens one of its thematic arguments, which is related to “change” (Oliva, 1990, p. 54). As Judy Lee Oliva asserts, “[n]ot only are the villagers in Long Bow continually asked to reappraise their roles in the transition from feudalism to communism, so too are the actors required to ‘change’” (p. 54).

Another important characteristic of the play which is in line with Brecht’s theatre reveals itself with the stage directions given throughout the play, especially immediately before the play starts: “*There are no sets, and no lighting cues. It should be performed using authentic props and costumes. At one end of the acting area is a small raised platform on which scenes are played. The rest of the acting area thrusts forward into the audience*” (Hare, 1986, p. 5). As Janelle Reinelt states, such kind of a stage direction “calls for an epic aesthetic in design: no sets, no elaborate lighting, authentic props, and costumes” (1994a, p. 115). Furthermore, the fact that the stage should thrust forward into the audience “reflects the reach for analytic democracy in the play’s content,” which indicates how there is a harmonious relationship between the techniques and the themes of the play (Megson, 2012, p. 131).

Besides these epic elements, the documentary character of the play which claims that this “is an accurate historical record” (Hare, 1986, p. 5) and which makes one of the actors show Hinton’s book as a hard copy document for proof is also a feature of epic theatre. The footnote for the speech of the actor that introduces the book says that “[t]he actor should give publisher and current price” (p. 7). Another actor explains to the reader/audience the meaning of “fanshen,” tells what happens in the book and emphasises the fact that “[m]any of the characters [who have witnessed this revolution in China] are still alive” (p. 7). On the one hand, the play claims to be a truthful account of real-life events. On the other hand, by presenting Hinton’s book, the reader/audience is reminded that this is a play adapted from a book and not more than a re-presentation of the events narrated in it. Hence, in spite of Hare’s opposing views related to Brecht’s alienation techniques, he, like Brecht, alienates his audience from the illusion of the performance.

Another example of Hare’s use of Brechtian alienation can be found in the initial part of the play where the characters introduce themselves without action by directly addressing the audience. To introduce themselves, each of these characters talks about their possessions and working conditions, which give many clues about the peasants’ lives in a Chinese village in 1946 under the rule of the landlords. While one peasant has “no land,” the other one has only “one acre” or “half an acre” (Hare, 1986, p. 5-6). From these declarations, it can be deduced that, other than the two opposing parties of landlords and peasants, there are classes even among the peasants themselves. They are classified according to a hierarchical order determined by possession and there are even ones who live on only as “hired labourers” or “beggars” (p. 6). In fact, it is because the economy of the village is based on agriculture that the classes in Long Bow are established in accordance with how much land the peasants have. The living conditions of the peasants in a class-based society revealed at the beginning of the play prepares the reader/audience for the revolution that will take place against the rule of the landlords.

Another technique that makes *Fanshen* Brechtian is its use of simultaneous action on stage between different characters. It is an element that strengthens the democratic nature of the play, which lies both in its production process and in the messages it strives to give. By means of this technique, different characters’ “multifarious reactions” to the same issues are revealed and at the same time, “the

chaotic and confused environment” they live in is illustrated (Oliva, 1990, p. 55). Furthermore, by giving voice to different characters’ opinions, “the dialectic [in the play] is made concrete,” which is another characteristic that makes the play an example of Brechtian epic (Homden, 1995, p. 40).

In addition, *Fanshen* makes use of slogans which have the function of the slogans in Brecht’s theatre in that Hare, like Brecht, “uses [them] to explain and advance dramatic action and to heighten the political nuance” (Oliva, 1990, p. 54). The slogans in the play either introduce or summarise a section or a part by briefly giving the subject matter or signify certain statements which have been underlined through the action. These statements are especially related to the communist system the peasants are about to establish and to the communist ideology they adopt. As implied in the slogans, Hare reveals that people can change both the political administrations and their own living conditions. However, he does not let the play idealise either the changes or the communist revolution which lies at the root of these changes (Homden, 1995, p. 40). In fact, “it could have been easy for [Hare] to present an idealised, didactic picture of the society of Long Bow; but this he resolutely avoids” (Cave, 1988, p. 190). Accordingly, Hare employs a satirical approach in the play towards the principles put down by the Party for the distributions, towards the cadres that introduce and implement the changes in the village and towards the peasants who benefit from fanshen. What Hare aims to underline by means of his critical representations is to show that not any one of the changes introduced in the name of the revolution is enough on its own although he implies, at the same time, that these changes contribute to the progress of the revolution.

Hare supports his criticism of the changes by means of the cyclical structure of the play, a technique which makes the Brechtian dialectic in *Fanshen* remarkably “dynamic” (Cave, 1988, p. 189). Whenever a problem appears with the previous system, a new change is introduced and it is called fanshen, which gains different meanings every time it is employed. At this point, what Hare aims to emphasise is that “[t]he fanshen is not the result of a single change but a continuous process of definition and redefinition” (Homden, 1995, p. 40). It is conveyed in the play that there should be continuous struggle for revolution to be achieved although every struggle undertaken by different people seems to be repetitive. In other words, the movement requires a continuous “remaking,” constant reformation and struggle after which the ideal state may be achieved (Cave, 1988, p. 189; Billington, 1975, p.

12). However, it does not mean that the playwright is displeased with the changes taking place in Long Bow. Although Hare does not glorify a socialist revolution in *Fanshen*, he seems to be content to be portraying a society which shattered hierarchy by means of a socialist revolution.

### Conclusion

As clearly observed in the analysis of *Fanshen*, even though David Hare insistently rejects Brecht's impact on his drama, he makes use of a number of Brechtian elements, in his own way, during the course of writing and producing *Fanshen*. Bertolt Brecht is one of the key literary influences not only on Hare but also on the other political dramatists. Political dramatists were exposed to Brecht's epic theatre maybe not directly but through the works by a number of British playwrights like John Osborne and John Arden or directors such as George Devine, John Dexter, William (Bill) Gaskill, and Peter Hall. Hence, in addition to the political events and political consciousness of a group of leftist intelligentsias, what led to the birth of political drama in the late 1960s was the literary atmosphere created by these playwrights and directors in the previous decade who came to know and employ epic theatre elements on British stage.

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### Summary

British political drama was initiated by the politically oriented works of a group of leftist playwrights who happened to write in the face of certain political events, domestic and worldwide, in the late 1960s. Both in thematic and in technical terms, British political dramatists borrowed a lot from Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, a fact they mostly tended to deny. This study reveals Brechtian influence on the themes and the techniques as well as on the production process of British political plays and explores Brechtian epic elements represented in *Fanshen* (1975), a play by one of the forerunning political dramatists, David Hare.

British political dramatists borrowed from Brecht's theatre both its political content and the intent to transform the society. They were also inspired by his techniques which are not realistic and which force the audience to respond to the play's performance in an intellectual manner. Although Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, and Erwin Piscator innovated many theatrical devices as a reaction to naturalism on stage, those technical novelties were introduced to British theatre primarily by Brecht. That is why the stage design which is not naturalistic and which calls for the audience's intellectual participation was known in Britain as "Brechtian."

Brecht introduces the two basic principles of epic theatre: one is the use of historical setting while analysing the man's condition and the other one is the call for the audience to approach the historical representation intellectually (trans. 1992, p. 190). These two crucial principles of Brecht's epic theatre were introduced to British political dramatists, as it is claimed by W. B. Worthen, by means of John Osborne (1929-1994)'s *The Entertainer* (1957) and they became the characterising features of British political drama. In addition to Osborne, Arden was also among the previous generation of socially conscious playwrights and he was known to be "the English disciple of Brecht" (Bull, 1984, p. 112). By virtue of John Arden's plays, Brecht's epic theatre techniques came to be widely used and preferred in the political plays of the 1970s.

Even though political dramatists employed epic theatre staging techniques and discussed political themes to bring forth social progress, they mostly tended to deny Brecht's impact on the development of British political drama. In fact, for political dramatists in general, a playwright should not assert his/her existence as a "god-like" figure, which is, for them, what Brecht does in his plays by providing mottoes and slogans. Moreover, they oppose to the fact that Brecht, by means of the alienation technique, does not let the audience engage with the performance in emotional terms. However, if the later phase of Brecht's career is analysed, it is possible to see how he allows the audience to be moved emotionally other than intellectually. In his theoretical work "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht avoids being propagandistic and he admits that "the 'theatre' set-up's broadest function [is] to give pleasure" (trans. 1992, p. 180).

*Fanshen* (1975) by David Hare, a leading political dramatist, is a significant political play in which epic theatre elements are used. It is known to be, both in technical and in thematic terms, Hare's "most Brechtian" play (Boon, 2003, p. 5). Moreover, in a theatre company - the Joint Stock - which makes use of Brechtian aesthetics and which employs a working method similar to that of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, it is almost impossible for its playwright to avoid Brecht (p. 5)

*Fanshen* has twelve sections in total. The sections in the play function as episodes in Brecht's epic theatre, "in that no effort is made to relate one scene to another" and between the scenes, the "[t]ransitions are fluid but specific" (Oliva, 1990, p. 54). Both the sections and the parts mostly "ha[ve] a central action" (Reinelt, 1994a, p. 116) and these actions are generally summarised in the slogans. Hence, it can be stated that each one of the scenes in *Fanshen* have "gestic" character (Homden, 1995, p. 42). Besides the social gest, Hare makes use of another epic theatre element in *Fanshen*, historisation (Reinelt, 1994b, p. 138). By means of a historical setting, Hare allows "the [reader/]audience to think historically" and to approach the events intellectually (p. 138).

In *Fanshen*, the social roles the characters represent are more in the foreground than their names or individual identities are. This "emphasis" of the play "on man as a social rather than a psychological creature" is another characteristic of epic theatre borrowed from Brecht (Dean, 1990, p. 32). Since it is the social argument of the play that is to be foregrounded, the actors of the Joint Stock are expected to put a distance between themselves and the roles they play. Hence, the actors "present and clarify arguments" without "characteris[ing]" (Cushman, 1975, p. 26), which is in line with what Brecht proposes for epic performances (trans. 1992, p. 136). Moreover, again as in epic theatre, the actors of *Fanshen* are given more than one role and *Fanshen* is performed "with about nine actors taking the thirty or so parts" (Hare, 1986, p. 5).

Hare makes use of Brechtian alienation in the initial part of the play where the characters introduce themselves without action by directly addressing the audience and by telling that this "is an accurate historical record" (Hare, 1986, p. 5). Another technique that makes *Fanshen* Brechtian is its use of simultaneous action on stage between different characters. In addition, the play makes use of slogans which have the function of the slogans in Brecht's theatre in that Hare, like Brecht, "uses [them] to explain and advance dramatic action and to heighten the political nuance" (Oliva, 1990, p. 54).

In conclusion, even though David Hare insisently rejects Brecht's impact on his drama, he makes use of a number of Brechtian elements in *Fanshen*. Bertolt Brecht is one of the key literary influences not only on Hare but also on the other political dramatists. Besides the political events in the late 1960s, what led to the birth of political drama was the literary atmosphere under the effect of Brecht.