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POPULARISING THEATRE: REDISCOVERY OF POPULAR CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DRAMA

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Dr. Johnson's thesis is that the theatre has to entertain in order to succeed. Therefore, the elements of pleasure, which pleasingly and satisfyingly engage the audience's mind and heart in the process of presentation, are of a paramount significance in dramatic productions. Certainly those productions which contain popular elements have a distinct advantage over the other types of performances.

One common experiment in the recent history of British drama has been a serious attempt to draw upon a number of sources including popular culture and various older traditions ranging from dance, music hall, ballads to folk songs either as total formal structures or at least as cultural reference points. The fact is that from the 1945s onwards, popular elements like music, songs, circus, dance which were, before the World War II, confined to musicals and separated out as inferior forms suitable for the vulgarity of the lower-class, have begun to play a crucial role in dramatic performances even in the case of plays that are not in any sense musical comedies, revues or music dramas. It is readily seen that music, dance and so many other popular traditions have a life of their own in quite a considerable number of contemporary dramatic performances and they are given a status within these productions. What follows is an evaluation of the theatre's popular role and the relevance of popular culture in the context of contemporary British theatre and the examination of the impetus behind the revival of such interest in using these elements for various purposes.

The employment of the popular elements in the mainstream British drama can be ascribed to the long term working relationship of Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood which originally started in

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the 1930s and subsequently reached its maturity in 1945 with the realisation of their most ambitious project known as Theatre Workshop[1]. Moving into the remnants of the older traditions of entertainment in their productions, they principally set out to create a theatre in line with a popular taste and to bring the theatre to the non-theatre going public who could never have dreamed of entering a traditional middle-class theatre, making an ultimate effort to awaken the sensibilities of these people to the relevance of the arts through the rich use of songs, music hall devices, dance, live jazz band and so on.

As committed socialists Littlewood and MacColl enduringly tried to establish close links between the theatre and its audience, redefining drama as an art form which must assume the role of conveying social and political message as well as entertaining the working-class community[2]. In this respect, popular culture provided their political and often socialist oriented performances constant reflux of ideas about the presentation and content which was to set a model for some other dramatists to come. Drawing on older cultural forms as diverse as ballads, folk music and music hall, they certainly popularised dramatic performances and opened up an entirely different tradition with their non-high brow theatrical initiatives, and more importantly, made drama accessible to the working-class audience.

Combining songs, music and dance with the current issues of public concern, the Theatre Workshop's earlier productions like **Johnny Noble**(1945), **Uranium 235**(1946), **The Other Animals**(1947) held a political vitality as well as popular appeal. Musical features became a vital component of these productions, which entertained the working-class audience while at the same time delivering a strong political message about the current social and political issues.

Written in a non-naturalistic manner, incorporating poetry, songs, dancing and music to conform to MacColl's concept of dramatic aesthetic, **Johnny Noble** deals with a love story about young couple from East Yorkshire. The performance was interspersed with songs, which not only entertained the audience but also served to connect the several unconnected episodic scenes

into a perfect unity. The rich use of music and songs in the play as more widely representative of the working-class taste also made it necessary for Theatre Workshop to introduce singers and musicians, which fulfilled the role of remaining in touch with the working-class community, holding the interest with varying strength throughout.

Performed within a year of the Hiroshima bombing, **Uranium 235** dealt mainly with the devastating effects of nuclear arsenal, featuring rather entertaining corps de ballet. The ballet form was efficiently employed in the play in order to show the splitting of atoms to the audience, "a feature not unlike the acrobatics that appeared in the earlier Blue Blouse performances."[3] Music and dancing in the play symbolised contemporary opiates, and indicated how people of atomic age were seduced away from the realities of their precarious existence. The threat of another nuclear disaster was remarkably set in a sharp contrast with the use of traditional folk songs and dancing for the first time in a contemporary dramatic performance. **Uranium 235** was almost first step by Theatre Workshop towards creating a kind of presentation where it became necessary for the actors to continue training as it was for musicians, dancers, and singers particularly as movement and dance were to be so much part of the dramatic performances. In this performance also the players were faced with a series of rapidly changing scenes in which they were called to dance and sing and to focus on the musical side of the show as well as to act.

What is interesting, however, is to see the occasional use of music and songs in otherwise standard dramatic works such as **A Taste of Honey**(1958) by Shelagh Delaney and **The Quare Fellow**(1956) by Brendan Behan, both of which were successfully produced by Theatre Workshop and enthusiastically received by the audience.

Although **A Taste of Honey** deals with rather serious issues and portrays depressing themes of the post-war period they are counterbalanced with songs, knockabout farces and some other comic features which on occasions take the form of those comedy routines, traditional in music hall and variety shows. The stage

directions in the script refer to music and the jazz band, which is obviously versatile and quite entertaining from the view-point of the audience. Before audience even see any of the characters on the stage, they hear music - the jazz trio is actually written in the cast.

The most important innovation in the play is undoubtedly the presence of live music throughout the performance; to the delight of the audience, characters come on to the stage to the accompaniment of the jazz band, and quite often they dance on and off stage and sing and seem to do whatever intent on entertaining the audience in a manner of music hall. The protagonist Helen, for instance, comments from time to time on events and addresses directly to the audience in the style of music hall entertainer:

> (*Looking at the aspidistra)*: That's nice, isn't it? Puts me in mind of my first job, in a tatty little pub down Whit Lane. I thought it was wonderful... You know, playing the piano and all that; a real get-together at the weekends. Everybody stands up and giving a song. I used to bring the house down with this one. (*Sings*)
> I'd give the song birds to the wild wood
> I'd give the sunset to the blind
> And to the old folks I'd give the memory
> of the baby upon their knee.
> (*To orchestra*): Come on, wamp it in with me.[4]

No doubt this sort of jokes and episodes which mainly correspond to traditional music hall routines, sometimes puzzled the audience but always entertained as well as educated. These elements also took the play out of its four wall and rattled it in the face of the audience and more importantly gave it anti-illusionistic, non-naturalistic dimension. If music and the on-stage band were to be cut out, the play would turn out to be a grim naturalistic piece.

Likewise, **The Quare Fellow** contains rich music and incidental songs. The play opens with a sardonic song sung by an invisible prisoner who is in the punishment cell, which, in fact, gives human voice to stage set's image of solitary confinement:

> A hungry feeling came o'er me stealing
> And the mice were squealing in my prison cell,
> And that old triangle

> Went jingle jangle
> Along the banks of the Royal Canal.[5]

Although, as one drama critic suggests, songs like these sound rather incompatible with the seriousness of the events presented in the play[6], they fulfil an important role of entertaining the audience and, at the same time, parodying those who remain indifferent to man's inhumanity to man. Through these songs, Behan exposes the clichÈs and false attitudes which society adopts and hints at the ludicrous horrors of society's unthinking acceptance of judicial system as it is. These joyous, incidental songs have a great value, for they provide an effective contrast between the human suffering and the taking of human lives inside the prison cells and the public indifference to this kind of inhumanity outside the prison.

Apart from these incidental songs there are also a few snatches of songs in **The Quare Fellow**, sung by the young prisoners, which generalise on the passage of time inside the prison and allude to the approaching executions of the prisoners. The most typical of these songs is: "Only one more cell inspection/ We go out next Saturday/ Only one more cell inspection/ And we go far, far away."[7] These songs are justifiably as important as the whole action of the play.[8] They tell stories about murderers, comment on the capital punishment, generalise the passage of time, and also draw the audience into the experience of reality while entertaining them. When the play was premiered in 1956 it proved to be an effective performance both as an entertainment and as information. People who had never attended a music hall performance before, **The Quare Fellow** certainly offered a refreshing change and enjoyment.

With Oh What a Lovely War(1963), Littlewood once again returned to the music hall Edwardian heyday to provide an image of robust proletarian culture. This time, however, unlike the earlier Theatre Workshop productions she used authentic folk songs, mimes, dance, humour and many other popular elements predominantly for satirical purposes.

Littlewood opens her anti-war, anti-militaristic play with a pierrot show of the Edwardian time, intended mainly to link the

present performance with the past. The Master of Ceremonies, ironically costumed as pierrot, introduces the show directly to the audience in the music hall style:

> Good evening, all... Welcome to our little pierrot show; 'The Merry Roosters'. You've just witnessed our opening number. We've got songs for you, a few battles and some jokes. I've got the whip to crack in case you don't laugh. (To the pierrots) Are you ready?[9]

Pierrot show, used throughout the performance as a frame, was originally an Italian form, translated into British seaside entertainment, and one of the most popular national holiday pastimes during the Edwardian period. The employment of all purpose uniform pierrot costume conveys social role and status. Also to this costume are added hats, tin helmets and belts, each of which stands for various figures such as capitalists, ordinary soldiers and generals, focusing on the wider thematic significance. This sort of costuming is part of commedia dell' arte conventions, particularly employed to bring the metaphor of the pierrot show full circle, "by reminding the audience that there were points of manifest intersection between the play-world and real-world."[10] In such a serious context also pierrots who represent various personalities are parodying the attitudes of important political and military figures as well. The commedia dellí arte form of the show also provides an effective contrast with the trench warfare and indiscriminate killing in the battlefield. While the newspanel on the stage gives the casualty statistics of the Great War, pierrots ironically continue to entertain the audience with dance and the authentic popular songs of the period like 'Oh What a Lovely War', 'Row, Row, Row', I'll Make a Man of You', 'Belgium Put Kibosh on the Keiser'. In fact, what is shown on the stage is obviously a mockery of what has actually been happening on the front-line soldiers.

However, the genuine impact of the play comes from those humorous songs put in an ironic context. For instance, the seductive music hall women singers go through the routines of 'We don't want to lose you', a song with which the women of Britain encourage their men to enlist in the army to go to war. However,

the bitter irony is that while with fragmentary songs and dance the singers convey that life at home continues with all its jingoism, another newspanel on the stage shows how many have got killed and how many others wounded. All these songs and dance ironically reflect how behind any miscalculation and military blunder lay a lethal kind of patriotism.

Central to the show is contrasting jingoism and the sentimentality expressed in the grim but nonetheless humorous songs composed by the front-line soldiers themselves. The songs like 'I donít want to be a soldier', 'If you want the old battalion', 'Heilige nacht', 'Christmas day in Cookhouse', all illustrate human responses to the situation portrayed in the show, providing an ironic tension between what is being said on the stage and what is actually taking place in the battlefield. And it is also from these songs that one can "get a full picture of an over-civilised society forced to cope with instinct of brutality it had almost rationalised out of existence."[11]

It is interesting to see that shortly after its production in Theatre Royal, Stratford East, **Oh What a Lovely War** was transferred to the West End, arousing the public attention, curiosity and admiration. On this occasion, the West End theatre audience saw the revival opening of music hall with this lavish variety show in Edwardian setting. It is rather astonishing that the impresarios even in the West End were quick to realise the possibilities of the lively performance in the music hall style.

Oh What a Lovely War had an extraordinary impact on the regional documentaries that were to emerge in the late sixties and the seventies. Allen Cullen's **The Stirrings in Sheffield on Saturday Night**(1966), Alan Platter's **Close the Coalhouse Door**(1968), Peter Cheeseman's **The Knotty**(1966) consolidated Littlewood's methods of using popular traditions in a satirical context. Thus authentic folk ballads, dance and several music hall devices were established as features common to the genre, providing some source of entertainment mostly with ironic effect, while keeping the ordinary local audience informed of their regional history.

Of these documentaries **The Knotty** is the most popular local documentary in which songs, music hall sketches and the comedy gags are combined into serious social themes. Music, dance ballads used throughout the piece often make ironic comment on the exploitation of the working-class by the capitalist manufacturers who constructed railway lines to various parts of the country by paying meagre amount for the land of ordinary local people. Also the employment of the ballad singer narrator in the play is also reminiscent of Littlewood's use of Master of Ceremonies in **Oh What a Lovely War**.[12] In each case, the figure identifies himself as a teller of the story. The presence of the narrator in the play also evokes in full measure the oral tradition of the story telling which was both a source of entertainment and a means of presentation of the values of a particular community by passing onto its communal history from one generation to the next. It is a joyous occasion using a familiar music hall techniques of local entertainers in documentaries like **The Knotty**, satirising and blaming those in power who ignore the problems of the underprivileged community.

In order to reveal the social essence of a given situation, another post-war dramatist John Osborne employs the parody of the traditional form of popular entertainment in **The Entertainer**(1958). Written after a year of Suez fiasco, it is a remarkable play in which Osborne uses music hall as a genuine dramatic symbol. In a rather sardonic way, the image of Britain in the post-war period is likened to the debased state of popular culture. Thus, social and political decadence is parodied in the play using the music hall both as a frame for action and as an image of Britain in decline. The songs like 'Why Should I Care' and dance traditions enable Osborne to employ parody in an emblematic presentation of his theme. Archie, the son of an old music hall entertainer, is trying to keep his show going, but what Osborne calls "truly a folk art"[13] has been reduced to 'Rock'n' Roll New'd Look'. In his juxtaposition of failed artist with the declining art of the music hall, Osborne also ironically comments on the depreciated state of post-war British society.

In the sixties and seventies, in order to exhibit the political and social essence of contemporary life, political playwrights tended to employ folk culture with which their theatrically unsophisticated audiences were thought to be familiar, with a view to making theatre property of the working-class. It seemed obvious that the form should be popular and traditional one, which would involve the use of old songs, dance and even discussion in which the audience could easily participate. Socialist dramatists like Arnold Wesker believed that once the working-class were offered a genuine theatre linked to their popular taste, they would certainly respond and come to the theatre to see the performances,[14] and ultimately theatre would become a resource centre for the community and the community as a resource centre for the theatre.[15]

Wesker's attempt to set up Centre 42 in 1962 was the result of his desire to bring the theatre and the working-class closer together, using folk singers and folk music, in order to convey socialist message and to awaken the sensibilities of the working-class community to the relevance of political and social events seriously affecting them. In a sense he took over the attempts where Littlewood left off, and believed that he could give the working-class an "insight into an aspect of life which they may not have had before"[16] by offering a genuine art in line with their popular taste.

Among the theatrical activities of Centre 42 was the production of **The Nottingham Captain**, a musical play, which had two distinct scores composed for it. The text of **The Nottingham Captain** was by Wesker but the piece was scored in the classical manner by Wilfred Josephs and as a jazz opera by David Lee. It was played in both versions in performances. Many of the people involved were amateurs but technical crew were all borrowed from the British Broadcasting Corporation, high class professionals. Described as "moral with music,"[17] **The Nottingham Captain** is a melodrama in which songs are sporadically used as a background to the spoken text. Telling the story of the Luddite rising of 1817 in a documentary style, the play is an example of politically committed art that Centre 42 originally

intended to offer the working-class community. While giving the audience some lessons about the contemporary reality referring to a bitter historical episode, the show also entertained by making use of a small orchestra and music. According to the reviewers of the show, the musical sections and the spoken text did not clash but rather seemed to be just complement to each other.[18]

The idea of the use of musicians, singers and traditional songs in Centre 42 presentations was by no means intended to provide opposition to pop music; it was simply a matter of making working class people aware of richness and variety of folk traditions and also attracting them to theatre by offering them an entertainment with music, dance and songs from which they got maximum enjoyment, with the perspective of delivering an ideological message. When the montage of sound, music and song came together, the effect was mind-blowing. As Clive Barker, the Festivals Organiser for Centre 42, suggests, presentations like **The Nottingham Captain** were not only intended as an aesthetic experience in working-class and folk traditions, but also intended to show how modern technology could be used by working people to "create their own art forms and also through the use of actuality, to reveal the power of poetic and emotional experience locked in the vernacular language, waiting to be released."[19]

Dramatists in the early seventies, committed to creating revolutionary, socialist culture tended to make reference to the popular forms of entertainment in their performances not only for providing pleasure but also for didactic purposes as well. In their individual works, popular culture came to be an integral part of the presentation, and played a crucial role in terms of conveying the political message to both local and urban working-class audience.

In this context John McGrath can be given as the best example of the political writer who combines the elements of older forms of entertainment with the socialist ideology of communality and solidarity. In fact he traces a heritage for his 7:84 company through Littlewood, Brecht to the Blue Blouses Theatre Group of post-revolutionary Russia. The link is their use of popular folk traditions, combined with a firm political message, placing strong emphasis on music, dance and cabaret style of presentation. In **The**

Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, first produced in 1973 by the 7:84 Company, McGrath gives a visual presentation of an alternative history out of the straightforward dramatisation of stories based on documentary materials and ceilidh format, a rural folk form of entertainment of the Scottish Highlands. The popularity of the show mainly comes from its use of this old traditional form, which is rather direct and articulate in terms of delivering the socialist message to the local audience. In his foreword to the published text, McGrath argues that this popular tradition is still relevant to the culture of audiences in British communities and it may therefore provide a source of effective form to use in radical and propagandist practice:

> One truly popular form of entertainment in the Highlands, past and present, is the ceilidh. This is usually a gathering at which all, or most of the present, with or without the aid of whisky, sing a song, tell a story play an instrument, have a good blether and occasionally end up dancing until the next morning. In the past these gatherings have also had their political side...and the stories of the Highland history and oppression had been passed on... Ceilidh parties also go from place to place to entertain and be entertained and very popular.[20]

The form of the play invites the audience to participate in singing, pantomime style involvement and finally dancing. The play starts with a song; the audience can all join in, and by special request the name of the song is 'These are my Mountains'. Having led the audience in the singing, M.C. makes an announcement direct to the audience in the style of music hall entertainer: "Later on we are going to have a few songs like that - if you know the words, join in - then we are going to have a dance, and in between we will be telling a story. It is a story that has beginning, a middle but yet no end."[21]

It is significant to note how skilfully ceilidh form is used in the show in order to tell the story of the people of the Highlands. No doubt ceilidh is an important participatory event for the transmission and reinforcement of Gaelic culture. Ceilidh form is also one of the fundamental authenticating elements in the

performance. The obvious local appeal of the play comes from this ceilidh format through which the continuing exploitation of the Highlands culturally, politically and economically alongside the wider significance of the history of this exploitation are effectively revealed to the Highlands community. Music and songs, sung in Gaelic, which had been forbidden for so long, undoubtedly went to the root of suppressed popular feeling of local audience.

What is so remarkable about these songs is that they are always a direct attack on the ruling class and on the present-day exploiters of the Highlands, and frequently these songs amount to a call on the local community to take action against their exploiters. The songs contain a strong warning to the local audience that they should not let such cultural and economic exploitation happen again. The following song is among many others which incites the audience to take action against capitalism:

Remember that you are a people and fight for your rights---
There are riches under the hills where you grew up.
There is iron and coal there grey lead and gold there---
There is richness in the land under your feet.[22]

Communal singing, dancing and fiddle playing in the show also become an expression of the ideological identity of local community, an authentic celebration, a shared celebration of collectivism, egalitarianism, solidarity and a will to self-determination, as demanded by socialism. The dance which concludes the show turns into a vigorous celebration of ideological solidarity between the company and local community, "a carnivalesque confirmation of identity."[23] In a sense McGrath injects his socialist ideology into mass populist forms in this play.

Where Osborne uses music hall as an explicit symbol for social decadence, his contemporary John Arden integrates music hall techniques in the action and uses them as a crucial means of commenting metaphorically on the realities of contemporary history, which also shows a deep, genuine affinity with Brechtian concepts. On occasions Arden also refers to dance, routines, sentimental and sometimes satiric songs, comic monologues, direct address to the audience or pantomime gags, which are all inserted into plots, concerning the issues of immediate topical interest for the audience.

Generally the focus on the analysis of social problems is underlined by the frequent use of folk songs and other folk traditions.

Critics like John Russell Taylor concede that songs play a crucial part in Arden's plays. These songs are there in his works not solely because they contribute to the analysis of a given situation but also they keep the audience constantly aware that they are in a theatre or in the front of a television screen and are watching just a play.[24] Through these folk songs also the relationship between the real and the artificial is explored on many levels, but often in an anti-illusionistic, playful style. The use of ballad singer presenting episodes as illustrative material and the overwhelming presence of ballads that prefaces almost every scene of his plays can also be taken as a typical of Brechtian anti-illusionistic devices. Therefore almost all of his works including those written in collaboration with Margaretta D'Arcy share a multiple inspiration in ballad songs.

Theatrical success of Arden's plays can therefore in large part be attributed to the aesthetic factors associated with the circumstances of their productions. The most significance of these is the availability of the indigenous forms of public performance. Actors, musicians, pipers come onto a platform which is erected on whatever the stage or space already exists. Music is used in his plays not just to punctuate illusion and accompany the action but also to provide a strong rhythm for certain pieces of action. Sharing with Brecht, Arden employs all the resources of actors; for instance, **The Workhouse Donkey**(1963) has a striptease, a piper is included in the cast list in **Armstrongís Last Goodnight**(1964) and it also contains a lovely country dance to the bag pipes. **Sergeant Musgrave Dance**(1959) has a clog dance.

Folk ballads, both spoken and sung, play a vital role in Arden's plays largely as a commentary on both social and political issues. From the folk songs and ballads he has acquired much of the direct use to **Happy Heavens**(1960) in order to indicate that "the British always were an 'extraordinarily passionate people, as violent as they are amorous, and quite astonishingly hostile to good government and order'."[25] Similarly in **Armstrong's Last**

Goodnight, songs are placed in a context of wider political considerations. In this particular piece Arden links a historical event which is recorded in the form of a folk ballad of Johnny Armstrong with recent political events in Africa to produce a political lesson. Thus, issues raised by a recent incident in the African Congo are in a way "transferred to the world of the Scottish ballad, itself rich in metaphor to become a political parable in which the 'civilised' is measured against the 'primitive'."[26]

The sung ballads in **The Waters of Babylon** create fact out of fiction. The author's general attitudes to the ethics of contemporary society are conveyed through songs. All the issues of public concern are suddenly crystallised in these songs. For instance, the legacies of war, which are shown as one of the foundations of the modern British society and which represent a mere bitterness[27] are demonstrated in these songs and spoken ballads. Paulís feeling of hatred towards Russia, as reflected in his desire to blow up the visiting Russian delegation, Henry Ginger's vituperations against fascism find expression in these songs. With these songs also Arden cleverly suggests that there is a source for the protagonist Krank's guilt, and fear of retribution which motivates his extreme behaviour as one of the participants in a German concentration camp as a guard. His songs in a way cast a kind of romantic historical glow over the concentration camp:

> The drove me down the door
> And set fire to my roof,
> And they pulled away the pillars of the wall;
> I stood in the street
> With the rain upon my feet;
> While my house so majestical
> Did fall -
> Oh did fall.[28]

It appears that the music hall vitality of Arden's play serves to charge the performance with tremendous energy. Collective dancing and songs on the stage also reflect that the final judgement should not be upon one man but the whole society, which is absolutely the case in **Sergeant Musgrave Dance**, where the deserted soldiers, having been disarmed and dressed, perform a

clog dance to celebrate the re-establishment of law and order, happily forgetful and ignorant of cruelty and barbarity that have been happening around them.

New alternative theatre groups, which proliferated in the aftermath of the abolition of the censorship in the theatre, and socialist playwrights like Caryl Churchill also tended to draw exclusively upon popular traditions for their style mainly to increase the social and artistic accessibility of their performances. In Churchill's plays like **Vinegar Tom**(1976) written for Monstrous Regiment, the feminist-socialist theatre company, and **Cloud Nine**(1978), written for Joint Stock Theatre Group, music and songs are employed not just for decoration but for drawing parallel between the events in the past and the contemporary reality. Empowering the audience to look at the society and their own relationships with patriarchal capitalist institutions, songs give Churchill's plays an ongoing life in the present, making comments on the evens in the past and inviting the audience to subject the existing realities to scrutiny or to reformulate them.

Set historically in the seventeenth century, **Vinegar Tom** is composed of twenty different episodes separated out by songs which interrupt and punctuate the story relating past persecution of women to present-day oppression. Alternations on the historical scenes with contemporary songs in a way set up a pattern of comparison and contrast between the past and present. The presence of singers in contemporary dress also ironically shows the persistence and the continuity of misogynist attitudes of contemporary society as it was in the seventeenth century.

Vinegar Tom contains not only the songs which ironically comment on ideology upon which oppression of woman is founded, but also the play has music hall devices of Edwardian period, which keep the spectator at some intellectual distance from the characters. For instance, the playing of the roles of Kramer and Sprenger by women as Edwardian music hall gents in top hats and tails with several jokes and male impersonation is an authentic speciality of the old entertainment culture. The music hall characters also sharpen the cynicism of the play in their description of feminine sex as creatures of 'insatiable malice', 'carnal desire',

'impassinable', 'feeble in body', 'weak memories'[29] It is even suggested that the presence of music hall form "reinforces the point that this ideology of gender has become, over the centuries, so ingrained that comedy acts traditionally play upon the familiarity of these stereotypes for their humour."[30]

Similar strategies are also apparent in **Cloud Nine** where cast sing a song called 'Cloud Nine', celebrating the liberation of women from the expectations of sexual role playing , and in **Floorshow**(1978), a Monstrous Regiment cabaret presentation. There is no doubt that many other political and gender-conscious playwrights like Churchill have picked up most directly on the potential of music, songs and other forms of popular traditions ranging from the music hall to the contemporary pop music often in an experimental fashion, partly either to make a commentary on the most striking social or political issues or partly to create a theatre opposed to the values of the conventional middle-class drama.

It can be suggested that as a result of the gradual hardening of the left wing politics in the late seventies and the eighties dramatic performances tended to make more propagandist use of music and songs. The 1976 Belt and Braces production of **England Expects** can be given as an example to those types of plays which dig out music that is related to social and political facts. **England Expects** is blatantly didactic and arrogantly entertaining, in which a socialist "message is summarised in the songs."[31] The theory of surplus values is presented in the style of Spike Jones, with the refrain from workers, 'We cannot make your profits if we don't have new machines'. The production also involved the parody of the Tory Government's economic policy and profit-minded capitalist investment through collectively performed music and dance.

It is not hard to find the reason for the considerable success of some particular contemporary productions which employ the popular forms of entertainment that can be expanded into equal, if not superior, status with other essential elements of dramatic art. Certainly these productions have benefited from the features of popular culture. As David Edgar has pointed out, those contemporary dramatic performances have achieved most when they have drawn successfully on popular culture and folk traditions

used in clubs, in pubs in the kind of places where working-class community go to be entertained.[32] Yet this is not to say that those performances which have drawn the images and reference points from older traditions are imitating the past or trying to create a new fashion to revive an essentially British forms as new enduring branch of entertainment.

The extensive reference to these forms is largely the result of an effort to win back the non-theatre going public to the theatre. The elements drawn from popular culture such as variety shows, commedia dellí arte, burlesque and vaudeville have put the ordinary working-class audience into direct contact with the theatre itself. The characteristics of variety, music, satire, physical action, stylised movements, simplicity and rather non-elaborateness of the presentations are the features that are greatly enjoyed by the audience. For many theatre groups, touring and alternative theatre companies for which popularity has the most straightforward of definition of searching out new local audiences who would never have dreamed of entering traditional theatre, these elements have provided fresh source of reference points.

Stimulus to much use of popular culture in the contemporary productions can also be seen as an endeavour by the playwrights and theatre companies to survive the competition from other ready-made popular entertainment forms. In fact, popular appeal was more readily available to public through the expansion of television and cinema. Under the different pressures of cinema and television, which after the World War II began to provide a direct cultural alternative to theatrical performances, creating within it all kinds of difficulties and ambiguities, it became necessary for the dramatists to make a lot of arrangements in order to sustain public appeal. As a result, a large number of the contemporary stage plays have tended to move away from traditional concerns of plot and characterisation to a greater embracing of visual effects and popular appeal. In this way text has become subordinate to context which also led to a new role for the audience from passive, if critical spectators of the proscenium style, to active agents in a social process. The search for renewal as a result of the pressures of other mass media, has been dominated by an intense exploration of

the relationship between the production and the reception of the theatre by public.

It is significant to see that fourth wall middle-class conventions in the theatre have been made obsolete with the introduction of these popular elements. Songs, music, dancing have all provided most of these performances an anti-illusionistic and distancing device which has a similar effect to Brechtian 'Alienation', interrupting dialogue and intruding episodes. The use of these populist elements and music hall overtones have rendered the opportunity for the audience to participate directly in the action, which was in a way a total challenge to the notion that the theatre solely belonged to the middle-class.

One other important outcome of the employment of these popular elements is that theatrical performances have become more collaborative, which have directly involved actors, musicians, dancers, singers and even the audience. Drawing a large number of the audience into creative process or at least keeping them awake, these performances have encouraged communality and solidarity and also strengthened the community spirit. The incorporation of all these traditional elements into dramatic presentations has certainly offered a new theatrical dimension, capable of popularising drama of political and social content. These performances have also proved that truth is conveyed not only through the dialogue but it can also be told through the artificiality such as music, dance and songs that a healthy imagination would accept and enjoy.

NOTES

[1] See Howard Goorney and Ewan MacColl, (eds.), **Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop,** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), Introduction.

[2] Howard Goorney, **The Theatre Workshop Story,** (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), pp.41-42.

[3] Keith Peacock, **Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama**, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), p.39.

[4] Shelagh Delaney, **A Taste of Honey**, (London: Methuen, 1982), pp.12-13.

[5] Brendan Behan, **The Quare Fellow**, in John P. Harrington (ed.), **Modern Irish Drama** (London, 1991), 256. Other reference to the play is from this source.

[6] Colin MacInnes, ìThe Writings of Brendan Behan," in Harrington (ed.), **Modern Irish Drama,** p.519.

[7] Behan, **The Quare Fellow**, p.261.

[8] D.E.S. Maxwell, "**The Quare Fellow**", in Harrington (ed.), **Modern Irish Drama** p.528.

[9] The Theatre Workshop, **Oh What a Lovely War**, (London : Methuen, 1986), p.12.

[10] Derek Paget, "Oh What a Lovely War: Text and Their Context", **New Theatre Quarterly**, Vol, VI, No, 23, (August, 1990), p.259.

[11] Charles Marowitz, "Littlewood Pays Dividend", in Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne And Owen Hale, (eds.), **The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of New Drama,** (London: Methuen, 1965), p.231.

[12] Peacock, **Radical Stages**, p.37.

[13] Colin Chambers and Mike Prior, **Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Post-war British Drama,** (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1987), p.78.

[14] W.J. Weatherby, "Up the Workers", **The Times** 29.7. 1961.

[15] Marianne A. Stenbaek, "Pragmatic Anarchy: The Early Experimental Plays of John Arden, 1958 to 1963", in Jonathan Wike, (ed.), **John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy,** (London: 1995), p.32.

[16] Arnold Wesker, "Let Battle Commence", in Marowitz, et al., (eds.), **The Encore Reader**, p.96

[17] "The Operatic Settings of a Libretto by Wesker", **The Times**, 27.8.1962.

[18] See the preceding note.

[19] From a personal correspondence with Clive Barker, January 1997.

[20] John McGrath, **The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil,** (London: Methuen, 1981), p.x.

[21] Ibid., p.2.

[22] Ibid., p.73.

[23] Baz Kershaw, **Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention,** (London: Routledge, 1992), p.163.

[24] John Russell Taylor, **Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama,** (London: Methuen, 1988), p.89.

[25] Benedict Nightingale, **Fifty Modern British Plays,** (London: Heinemann, 1982), p.330.

[26] Peacock, **Radical Stages**, pp.51-52.

[27] Frances Gray, **John Arden**, Macmillan Modern Dramatists Series, (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982)p.35.

28 John Arden, **The Waters of Babylon,** in **John Arden, Three Plays,** (London: Penguin Books, 1967)p.41.

29 Caryl Churchill, **Vinegar Tom,** in **Churchill, Plays: One,** (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.176-177.

30 Amelia Howe Kritzer, **The Plays Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment,** (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.91.

31 Catherine Itzin, **Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968**, (London: Methuen, 1986), p.203.

32 David Edgar, "Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-1978", **Theatre Quarterly,** Vol, VIII, No 32, (Winter, 1979), 29.

AHLAT'DA BASTON USTALIĞI ve ÜRETİMİ

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GİRİŞ

Doğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nin Yukarı Murat-Van Bölümü'nde yer alan Ahlat, Bitlis'in bir ilçe merkezidir. İl merkezine olan uzaklığı karayolu ile 65 km ve Van'a olan uzaklığın ise 172 km. kadardır. Yerleşme, Van Gölü'nün kuzeybatı kıyısında farklı yükseltilerde uzanan göl taraçaları üzerinde kurulmuştur. Ahlat'a ait mahalleler göl kıyısından itibaren başlamakta ve 1850 m. yükseltisine kadar ulaşmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, yerleşmeyi oluşturan onbir mahalleden sekizi, yükseltisi 1720 m. olan göl taraçası üzerinde ve doğu-batı doğrultusunda gelişmiştir. İlçe merkezinde 1990 genel nüfus sayımı sonuçlarına göre 16 742'ye ulaşan bir nüfus kitlesi yaşıyordu (Harita 1, Fotoğraf 1).

Ahlat, geçmişte çok önemli bir kent yerleşmesi iken, çeşitli tarihî ve doğal faktörlerden etkilenerek, zamanla sönükleşmiş ve günümüze, ancak bir kasaba yerleşmesi olarak ulaşabilmiştir. Yerleşmenin eski önemini koruyamamış olmasına karşın, günümüzde sürdürülen bazı el sanatları geçmişteki kültürel zenginliğin izlerini taşımaktadır. Gerçekten, oluşması için uzun bir zaman süreci geçiren ve belli bir estetik anlayışını yansıtan baston ustalığı, halıcılık ve taş işçiliği gibi çeşitli el sanatları, karşılaşılan zorluklara rağmen, giderek gelişmektedir.

Söz konusu edilen el sanatlarının içinde en fazla önem taşıyanı ise, baston ustalığı ve üretimidir. İncelik ve ustalık gerektiren bu uğraşı, geçmişte olduğu gibi, günümüzde de yoğunlaşan bir biçimde sürdürülmekte ve Ahlat'ın ekonomisine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Ahlat'da baston yapımının başlaması ve belli bir aşama katedilmesine neden olan, çeşitli faktörler vardır. Bununla birlikte,

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