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HOWARD BRENTON'S *THIRTEENTH NIGHT*: A CONTEMPORARY PATH TO TYRANNY AND DICTATORSHIP¹

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Abstract

Howard Brenton's fantasy play, Thirteenth Night, is the movement of Shakespeare's Macbeth in a not so distant future left wing totalitarian Britain for a Socialist government. It is generally considered as a feedback of tiptoeing oppression and constriction of socialism. In the opening part, Jack Beaty, the communist visionary, is hit over the head and dreams of another world in which he himself can guide individuals to rebel against degenerate types of government and reliance on American cash through his communist talks. His socialist utopia quickly degenerates into a Stalinist dictatorship. His dictatorship is unbearable, yet this last discourse demands that the gathering of people considers what reasonable options there are if socialism is really to grab hold and make due in Britain. As his dream turns to nightmare, Beaty slides into further murder and eventual madness before himself being killed in a second coup d'etat.

Keywords: *Thirteenth Night, Dictatorship, Tranny, Macbeth, Dream Play.*

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HOWARD BRENTON'S *THIRTEENTH NIGHT*: A CONTEMPORARY PATH TO TYRANNY AND DICTATORSHIP

Thirteenth Night, which was first performed in 1981 at the Warehouse, London, is labelled by Richard Boon as a "warning play" for the leftist people of the Britain concerning the dangers of Stalinism. (Boon, 1986) Stalinism can shortly be defined as the political and economic system of the Soviet Union between 1934 and 1953, under the rule of Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Stalinism has been considered almost equal to totalitarianism, or a tyrannical regime that fights political dissent through violence, terror, imprisonment, and killings. (Stalinism, 2014) Command economy, an extensive use of propaganda to establish a personality cult around an absolute dictator, and the use of the secret police to maintain social submission are the general characteristics of it. (Stalinism, 2014)

In the Preface of *Thirteenth Night* Jack Beaty, a young and fervent English Marxist is thumped oblivious in a street fight with fascists and dreams of assuming control over the English government, freeing it from the covetous, aggressive Americans. ..., however true they may be to the experience of socialist countries elsewhere in the world. Brenton's point was to challenge a contemporary left divided by bitter disputes over the authenticity of its socialist programmes to face the great issue of its past: the threat of Stalinism. (Boon, 1991, s. 217)

BEATY. Comrades. After decades of dereliction. Of the working class on right-wing adventures at the ballot-box. Of the Labor Movement misled, split, done down by petit-bourgeois politicians, messing their pants with fear at what real socialist policies what mean to them. Personally. To their cosy little world, the cat's cradle of how Government right or centre or left has always worked in this country. The secret deal. In the leather armchairs of London Clubs, over bone china in the House of Commons tea-room, everyone with their tongue in the right ear and everyone with a seat on the board of a City bank being kept warm. (Brenton, 1996, s. 103)

Beaty is of the opinion that that all of the previous governments neglected most people in the society and especially the working class. Now it is their turn to show them what real socialist policies are, to get rid of the capitalist conventions of the so-called civilized West, and to be the leader of the Third World. He and his fellow socialist friends are the members of the cabinet of PM Bill Dunn, the head of the local party. One of his best friends and fellow socialist Murgatroyd becomes Minister of Energy, Ross is the head of the security services, and Feast is the Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, in the course of time he begins to think that Bill Dunn, the prime minister of the first socialist cabinet of the Britain, is not able to follow socialist policies as they longed for. He is not the only one who is not satisfied with the present policies of the government and there are demonstrations in the streets against the government and especially American influence in the country. Many shop windows are smashed, cars are turned over and demonstrators go into armed conflict with the security forces so that they can take the control of American Embassy.

DUNN. Jack Beaty is hero of the night, all right.

MURGATROYD. Save us from heroes of the night.

MURGATROYD. Politics is about power.

DUNN. Don't end up quoting Lenin at each other, not at this hour o' night. That would really be 'bloody end'. I can handle Jack Beaty. An idealist is Jack.

MURGATROYD. And like all idealists, a menace. They get too many people singing looney tunes.

MURGATROYD. The mob up there tonight, baying at the American Embassy, that's not pressure, working-class pressure for social justice. That's just – steam. Come the dawn, a bit of damp on the pavement. (Brenton, 1996, s. 106)

DUNN.... Well it's too bloody late, it may just be too bloody late. The country's all but stripped bare.

MURGATROYD. Twelve have been killed. There may be more. The first floor of the American Embassy is blazing.

DUNN. Ross! Get in here!

How many of the twelve are policemen?

MURGATROYD. Three. Two uniformed, one Special Branch in the crowd. (Brenton, 1996, s. 107)

Beaty's speech in the central Hall, Westminster provokes the people and awakens him from his dream and he begins to question his government's commitment to its socialist politics. He advocates 'a politics to end politics'. He is in pursuit of a new form of democracy in which Britain is free from the need for American money and Britain has alliance with the countries in the Third World. With Third World, he means the countries that are under the influence of neither USA nor USSR (United Soviet Socialist Republics. Unexpectedly even for himself, "the audience takes him at his word: it burns out on the streets, attacks and burns down the American embassy and kills the Ambassador" (Boon R. , 1991, s. 224). Unintentionally he starts a mass movement leading to the demands of a new form of real and egalitarian socialism. Gaze, his mistress, states this reality as 'they talked of politics to end politics. The power of the streets. I felt a terrible, secret joy. My love, I heard your voice in what they said.' (Brenton, 1996, s. 117)

All these events make Beaty the leading character of the government and he turns out to be the hero for especially young socialist taking part in the demonstrations in the country. It is very apparent that Bill DUNN is dissatisfied with Beaty's position as a possible leader for the people on the streets:

BEATY. We all need dogs these days, comrade. If you value your life, guard it like an off-licence.

JOAN. They'll come into the streets for you, Jack Beaty.

FEAST. ... When you can't bend the real world into Paradise, you want to smash it. For you it's all or nothing. The Garden of Eden or a planet of dust.

ROSE. The road from Evil to Good is worse than Evil. (Brenton, 1996, s. 111)

Anarchy is dominant on the streets and everyone even the leaders of the socialist party have to protect them from the dangers coming from the demonstrators. The people on the streets come to the streets for specially to support Beaty. He becomes the hope for the people on the streets. This can be considered as the beginning point of Beaty's transformation from a young Marxist member of the socialist government to a tyrant and a dictator. Especially with the encouragement of his "political wife" Jenny GAZE he decides to murder Bill DUNN and become the leader of the party and the government. This situation can be regarded as the modern version of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Jenny Gaze turns out to be Lady Macbeth. Just like King Macbeth, Beaty is among the leading figures of the party and the country and it is strongly likely that he will be the future head of the government.

Beaty's mistress Gaze functions as his subconscious and manoeuvres him to the point of murdering Bill Dunn. She portrays the relation between Britain and USA as a rape scene in which USA rapes Britain in return for the loan the government takes from the USA. The USA has the money and power and thus they are forced to tolerate its rape and this is a shame for all the people in the country. The one that will change the situation and will rescue British people from this shameful situation is doomed to be the undisputed leader of the country. As Boon states (1991) her only political weapon is her sexuality, and her political investigation is communicated in savagely sexual terms:

GAZE. ... What is the special relationship of Britain to America? Rape, I think. Unreported out of shame. My country is a woman in a dark park. America whispers 'Scream and it'll be worse'. And down she lays. And he stuffs the lot up her TV tubes. 'Thank you' whimpers Britannia, through clenched teeth. (Brenton, 1996, s. 118)

(GAZE tries to convince BEATY that it is necessary to kill the Prime Minister DUNN for the sake of the country. BEATY believes that they can vote him down but GAZE insists that Socialist party would never win again.)

Gaze tries to convince him that it is his fate to be the leader of the country and govern it, and the only way to realize this is to kill the prime minister. Beaty says that they can vote him down and change the prime minister through democratic general elections but Gaze makes him believe that it is not possible for socialist party to win the elections again. That is why the only solution to the problem is to murder Bill DUNN and take the control of the government and the country. They have taken the control of the country by means of democracy but and it is highly unlikely that they can win an election again.

BEATY. If we can't, we have no right to be government.

GAZE. Socialists have every right to be the government.

BEATY. Majority vote or no?

GAZE. You believe in a vanguard in power or you don't. Political power is political power. Got by the farce of a General Election or other means.

BEATY. I see corpses when you talk like that. Strung on the wire of camps, stretching for miles. We can't betray an elected Socialist Government.

GAZE. It's betrayed itself. Its leader has lifted a telephone and sold us to America.

BEATY. So what do you suggest? Tomorrow in my home I take the Prime Minister into the toilet and knife him. (Brenton, 1996, s. 119)

Like every dictator or the head of totalitarian regime, Beaty needs the help of security forces to provide him with the means to seize control of government and country. Without security or military forces who supports him he can never reach his aim. That's why all the dictators first is in need of receiving the support of security agencies including secret services and that of the military ones.

ROSS. Do you know how vast the security system of this country is? how deep is lines it lies, in the landscape, in the streets, waiting? Telephone lines, TV and radio masts, the Cornish Cliffs to the Norfolk Broads, to the Clyde to the northern Isles - linking secret operations rooms in odd buildings in the suburbs, in market towns, on the top floors of office blocks in the city centers? And do you know how many men and women in the police, the Special Branch, the intelligence Services, the civil Defence, drill, week in week out, to work those rooms? (Brenton, 1996, s. 120)

Ross, the head of the current security services, becomes the one, as Boon (1991) states, who holds 'the dagger' before Beaty's eyes. He is so powerful in the country that he can control almost everything in the country because he watches over everyone he wants as a rolling eye camera on the wall and he uses it for both his own personal benefit and that of the leader or the leaders he supports.

DUNN. Not that you've not got your electronic eye on all of us already, eh, Ross?

Nothing from ROSS.

But I want reports on him, round the clock. First thing every morning, last thing every night. Who he phones, who he meets, where he scratches himself. Then - we'll get tonight's little holiday back to earth. Back into 'politics we know, eh, gentlemen? ...

(Angrily) I am sick of being a leader who believes in no more leadership. (Brenton, 1996, s. 108)

When Beaty murders Dunn with a fire-axe Special Branch body guards wouldn't move though they see everything happening in front of them because their head, Ross orders them to do so.

BEATY. His Special Branch bodyguard - wouldn't move! All Ross's creatures. They were ready for the fire, with masks. But they stood and stared. For me to do this.

GAZE So.

BEATY.... Went in and cut him to bits, didn't I. See?

He opens his coat. He holds an axe. His shirt, arms and hands are covered with blood. He laughs.

Up to now I thought the deadliest political weapons was the telephone. (Brenton, 1996, s. 128)

Now Beaty is the head of the government and the leader of the party but he is a dictator. To support this it is very necessary to give some definitions and characteristics of “dictatorship”. Defining dictatorship, for Jennifer Gandhi, should be simple: “it is obviously the opposite of democracy” (Gandhi, 2008, s. 3). Dictatorships are defined as administrations in which rulers gain control by the methods other than democratic elections. The dictators may have the power by an overthrow, a royal residence putsch, or an upheaval. They may take control themselves or be introduced by military or remote forces. The basic qualification is that they do not consent to control by a “focused battle for individuals votes” (Schumpeter, 1976). As Jack Beaty is not an elected leader of the party or the head of the government, he can be considered as a dictator rather than a democratic leader though he believes that he committed the murder as a means for the dictatorship of the proletariat. He is of the opinion that he is doomed to kill the prime minister to give an end to the sufferings of the working class and the beginning of the age of real and egalitarian socialism.

BEATY. Your dead stand behind you, Jack Beaty. In a lavatory mirror.

Our age began. They divided up the fields. The peasants lost their rights. The human spirit invented Manchester. Or something invented Manchester. The families drifted from the land. The working class found itself born, into a cramped, filthy with cotton machines. The floor the streets of a slum with an open drain. The industrial revolution. Concentration camp in slow motion, decades long. And for basic dignity, against the cruelty of history and the sufferings of daily life – the inmates of the nineteenth century invented Socialism. (Brenton, 1996, s. 126 - 127)

In reality he is now the only ruler of the country who can control the country alone. He has turned out to be a dictator who truly has the authority to make decisions about the regime’s institutional features and its policies. On the other side, “under democracies, identifying the effective head of government is usually straightforward: prime ministers lead parliamentary regimes, whereas presidents are at the helm in presidential systems” (Schumpeter, 1976, s. 16).

Beaty, the new leader of the party and government is obliged to create a ‘personality cult’ or a ‘cult of personality to stiffen his position as a leader. ‘Personality cult’ is “a situation in which a public figure such as a political leader is deliberately presented to the people of a country as a great person who should be admired and loved” (Personality cult, 2017). All the state resources and the government agencies are used to create a consistent picture of Beaty’s perfection. As Brooker expresses “many of the dictatorships’ ideologies have included a ‘personality cult’ glorifying a particular dictator, while the Nazi Führerprinzip (leader principle) and Peronist Conductor (leader) doctrine have justified dictatorial rule by any appropriate leader figure” (Brooker, 1995, s. 9).

In a short period of time, the governance system turns out to be a case of party or military rule in which Jack Beaty who originally was simply a member of the party or the military transforms it into his own personal rule. “The original principal-member relationship not only came to an end but also may even have been reversed, with the formerly ruling organization now becoming the agent of the personal ruler” (Brooker, 1995, s. 10).

Like most of the dictators “Beaty sees at once the chance to change history and the price he may have to pay in doing so” (Boon R. , 1991). The price is the isolation of him from other members of the party with whom he shared socialist ideals for years. His murder of Dunn with a fire-axe not only kills his fellow prime minister but also his own humanity. As he took the control of the country illegally and betraying one of his best friends, he can never trust anyone around him. If he could betray his best friend, everyone around him could easily do the same thing. His increasing state of isolation not only means his self-destruction but also means the destruction of the country which has been turned into a polis state. He starts to have the members of the cabinets like Murgatroyd and Feast who have always been with him and supported him for the ideal of creating a real socialist government arrested or he sends them into exile.

FEAST. Sorry you were a young man who believed in Socialism. And forgot it when you were older.

Sorry you were a minister in a Socialist government – and became a hatched man.

Sorry you nailed up lips with threats or promises. Silenced Party Branches.

Sorry your skull grew thick. Your mind blocked. The hard head of a hard man, behind the political throne of a hard man.

When they took the control of the country, BEATY orders ROSS to take all of them under arrest.

ROSS. Gentlemen you are under arrest. (Brenton, 1996, s. 132)

In the second half of the play, Beaty tries once more to have the support of Feast and offers him to be the Minister of the Foreign affairs and uphold the so-called rights of the socialists against states of America. However, as he was transformed into a dictator and betrayed the principles of socialism Feast refuses his offer and prefers to be in prison rather than betraying his ideals. As a leader full of with ego and because of the personality cult he himself created, he has him killed. If someone does not with him, he must be a betrayer of his leader and socialist ideals. The absolute power he has poisons him day by day and turns him into a figure like Oliver Cromwell and everyone is aware of this but him.

FEAST. Christ! You really think you are Oliver Cromwell! One more reluctant axe man.

BEATY. (*low*) What do you mean?

FEAST. All the country knows you killed Bill Dunn with a fire-axe, from a glass panel in the corridor of the Grand Hotel. Well, the whole of Brixton Gaol knows. As the saying goes, if you want to know the truth about a country, go to its prisons. Terror bleeds truth, even through prison walls. (Brenton, 1996, s. 136)

Towards the end of the play, Beaty feels that the people who once supported him and made him the leader of the country are not satisfied with the situation and they are prepared for new mass demonstrations against him. Nonetheless, he does not want to accept the reality and tries to convince the people and the members of his cabinet that the people still support him through state-supported media and the security forces he redesigned for his own sake. Beaty who cannot confess himself that he could not reach his ideals and change the country into a real and egalitarian socialist state but turned it into a real dictatorship has subverted everything.

BEATY. ...

See, people demonstrate their support for my government. Every weekend. Stream of banners. TV. Gymnastics displays at Earls Court. Don't you see TV in Brixton? Category 'A' criminal like you?

They have even taken to putting flowers on the spot in that car-park, where you and I met those three women. Carnations.

FEAST. Funeral flower, isn't it, the carnation?

FEAST. Ross's policemen put flowers in the car-park, every morning. No one else. Admit it. Your regime's a mockery. Oh, parliament still meets, the TV news still comes on, but it's all sham. Mockery. You've subverted everything, admit it, admit it. (Brenton, 1996, s. 136)

Everywhere he is and goes is full of with voices expressing that he is the murderer of the former prime minister and he makes everything possible to put those who are speaking about his deeds into silence. Feast verbalizes the situation of the people who oppose to Beaty as "send two men from the Special Unit. Heavies! Let them catch him by the side of a field. Behind a hedge. Let them burry him, up in the little wood. Reward them – cash from 'B' fund. And let them have accidents a few months from now" (Brenton, 1996, s. 140). If you are obliged to use illegal means to control the society, it means that you have to cover your illegal deeds with other illegal ones. As Boon expresses "as his dream turns to nightmare, Beaty slides into further murder and eventual madness before himself being killed in the second *coup d'état*" (Boon R. , 1991, s. 217).

Gaze's investigation of the purposes behind Beaty's disappointment is very similar to that of Brenton. They both imagine the entire world in the state of his own brain and they both turn their regimes into a solipsism. However, Beaty cannot manage the weight of the deeds he committed though Caesar can:

I am so desperate. Lines go out of my hands for miles, into factories, streets, kitchens, bedrooms. Well – into police stations ...

Suddenly I understood why dictators have themselves carved in stone, in every corner of a country. Utterly fixed.

He clamps his hands on his knees.

It's because they're terrified to move their hands. (Brenton, Brenton: Plays 2, 1996)

In conclusion, *Thirteenth Night* asks the question 'how can you sustain a revolution without becoming the thing you seek to destroy' (Brenton, A Crazy Optimism, 1982). The play is principally focused on examining why Jack Beaty cannot achieve to set up his socialist ideal world and turns into an 'English Stalin', however it likewise starts to recommend where elective methods for proceeding may lie. At the exact instant of his last punishment, Brenton has Beaty viably re-open the play's verbal confrontation. According to Bost (1982), "In Brenton's *Thirteenth Night*, protagonist Jack Beaty believes that a free and independent Britain can only be realized through violence and, if necessary, killing". His dictatorship is unbearable, yet this last discourse demands that the gathering of people considers what reasonable options there are if socialism is really to grab hold and make due in Britain.

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