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Theatre for Reconciliation: David Hare and David Greig

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Abstract

As a public art form, theatre has long been recognized as a space for the examination and performance of power, protest, intervention, mediation and identity. This paper aims to investigate the relations between the political and the theatrical and to explore the issues of enactment, representation, interrogation and the nature of intervention in two contemporary British plays. Both David Hare and David Greig are occupied and fantasized by The Middle East conflict and thus have produced a number of plays in order to propose exceptional criticism about the prejudices, passions and mutual suspicions. David Hare wrote *Via Dolorosa* in 1998 after his visit to Israel and the Palestinian lands in order to offer enlightenment to audiences about the world's most stubborn conflict and to emphasize theatre's role as a medium for criticism. Similarly, Greig's *Damascus* (2007) is the outcome of his visits to The Middle East in order to train young Arab playwrights, which is an act of ethical practice in itself. Hare's play explores the vulnerability of everyday life in The Middle East and calls for compassion. Similarly, Greig discovers a series of cultural confusions between the English abroad and the Eastern values in order to point to the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab world by revealing the gap between what Westerners think they know about the Middle East and the reality. This paper compares and contrasts the different attitudes towards reflecting the theatre's role for reconciliation and criticism. Both playwrights question and critisize the debate on the Western model of civilisation and its projection across the globe. In their creative and critical modes, both writers accredit the stage as a place for representing the human condition in mythical lands and as a place for change. In a Brechtian sense both playwrights have used the theatre as criticism modelling on the *Lehrstück*.

Keywords: David Hare, David Greig, *Via Dolorosa, Damascus*

Introduction

David Hare wrote *Via Dolorosa* in 1998 after his visit to Israel and the Palestinian lands in order to offer enlightenment to audiences about the world's most stubborn conflict and to emphasize theatre's role as a medium for criticism. Similarly, Greig's *Damascus* (2007) is the outcome of his visits to The Middle East in order to train young Arab playwrights, which is an act of ethical practice in itself. While Hare's play explores the vulnerability of everyday life in The Middle East and calls for compassion, Greig discovers a series of cultural confusions between the English abroad and the Eastern values and thus points to the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab world by revealing the gap between what Westerners think they know about the Middle East and the reality. This paper compares and contrasts the different attitudes towards reflecting the theatre's role as criticism. Both playwrights question and critisize the debate on the Western model of civilisation and its projection across the globe. In their creative and critical modes, both writers accredit the stage as a place for representing the human condition in mythical lands and as a place for change.

In the global imaginary the Middle East is mostly consolidated with "war stories" as both a single geographic and cultural reality. Indeed the selected plays not only highlight Western prejudices of the mainstream media but also offer genuine experience and enlightenment to the tartget audiences. By embracing a Brechtian manner, Hare and Greig are concerned with distance, thinking and reasoning rather than creating a sense of empathy. They want audiences not only engage emotionally in the diegetic scenes that are narrated but also be able to stand outside them to think about them critically and make a judgment on them. Thus this paper first examines *Via Dolorosa* as a medium for enlightenment and as a criticism of extremism and fanaticism in warring nations, the paper then explores *Damascus* in understanding cultural differences and working toward cultural sensitivity. Both plays examine the use of theatre as a tool for educating and a criticism of the target audience's disregard, blindness and negligence.

David Hare's *Via Dlorosa*

Via Dolorosa, a monologue about the Middle East written and performed by David Hare, is the result of the playwright's 1997 visit to Israel and the Palestinian lands. Hare impersonates thirty three people whom he has interviewed both in Israel and Palestine. The play not only aims to express some specific, unpartisan truths about the conflict but also reinforces one's faith in theatre as a means of criticism. Theatricalized monologue

acknowledges the character's "moment of epiphany or intimate revelation". Indeed, one can capture Hare's transition in mental and emotional states as he explores the prejudices, passions and mutual suspicions that lie beneath the never-ending outbreak of violence in the region. Hare has explained that in writing the play he attempted enlightenment and he wanted to explain the roots of some of the powerful feelings which informed the attitudes of those most concerned (Hare 2000). In order to achieve his aim towards enlightenment he has used facts and figures and documentary evidences. He believes that addressing profound problems of geography and religion ought to be adjusted along with correcting inequalities between Israel and Palestine.

Hare contextualizes the emotional elements that ground this tragic situation and uses his art as a means of criticism of various kinds. He is critical of the Western blindness of the Middle-Eastern issues but he is more accusatory of the fanatical Zionists and the corruption of the Arafat regime. Through his characters' utterances he raises fascinating moral questions about whether both nations are "mature enough", "courageous enough" to internalize the idea of equality" (Hare 1998, 6). Via Dolorosa bears "infinite suggestiveness" and demonstrates whether the critical power of art and language may contribute to reduce the miseries in Israel and Palestine. He criticizes the conflicting views, but in the end finds the miserable inflexibility of the situation summed up by both sides. Hare dramatises politicians, playwrights, poets, intellectuals, and bureaucrats on both sides so that the audiences get a broad view of the Israeli-Palestinian faith and politics. His aim is to clarify rather than to persuade. As a privileged British playwright, he was determined to bear witness to the hopes and beliefs of the people he met in Israel and Palestine. To a certain degree, however, the play portrays Hare as the proud, glorious and honoured British writer who gives himself every right to try to soften the problems of Zionism by uttering "Israel is effectively a religious state…Won't it one day have to become a modern country, multicultural, like any other?" (Hare 1998, 6).

Every moment of Hare's visit appears to be a kind of awakening for him. The playwright visualises "the piles of rotting garbage, the half finished houses, the filth and the desolation" on his way to Gaza (Hare 1998, 16). A Palestinian poet attacks on Western descriptions of the subordinate. The play is rich in portraying places which explore the harsh differences between a prospering Israel and the poor Palestinian lands. Via Dolorosa is a street name in Jerusalem, which Hare uses as a metaphor to represent a divided nation, an entire region, a personal experience. It is "a way of sorrow" (Watson 2000, 485). From his accounts, it is obvious that Israel is a dangerous place which has come to define Jewishness in terms of land rather than ideas, things rather than people. Crossing from Israel into Yasser Arafat's little bit of Palestine is like going straight from California to Bangladesh. "An unholy big brown storm of pure dirt" greets his arrival in the Gaza strip, while one Jewish settlement inside Palestinian territory proves more like the luxurious suburbia of California's Bel Air than the American wild west of his imagining (Hare 1998, 27). Hare discovers a matching sense of internal criticism in his trip to Gaza, where at dusk "time steps back 60 years" (Hare 1998, 27). A Palestinian politician who has resigned in protest at Arafat's "notorious corruption" (Hare 1998, 24) has declared that Palestinians' most urgent task is to reform themselves: "It's far more important than negotiation with Israel. You can't get anywhere if you live in a society without principles" (Hare 1998, 27). Some characters reveal Israel as a vicious, narrow-minded, militarist state. The great Palestinian historian, Albert Aghazerin tells Hare that "There are three Israels now. The Hedonistic Israel of Tel Aviv. The austere Israel of Jerusalem. And the mad Israel of Hebron which wants only vengeance and blood" (Hare 1998, 31). As one would expect, Hare's sympathies seem to lie with the liberal Jews and the persecuted Palestinians but, he is often at his best when trying to understand those he instinctively disapproves of, such as the deeply religious Orthodox Jews settling on the West Bank. The most important section of the play comes at the end: the epilogue. Hare returns to Britain and faces his own, personal Via Dolorosa. As his taxi drives past Buckingham Palace, Hare weaves together brilliant memories from the trip with the London landscape. He contrasts the passion and vitality of Israel and Palestine with the exhausted familiarity of Britain, as he turns down "Leafy street after leafy street, with sleeping houses, sleeping bodies, sleeping hearts." (Hare 1998, 34). Hare displays the emotional irrationality of the discussion, on both sides. Interesting, perhaps, but it casts the question: "to what end?" Hare's conclusions resonate in the audience's ears: "Are we where we live, or are we what we think? What matters? Stones or ideas?" (Hare 1998, 35). He sketches vividly how Jews and Arabs have come to be locked in an eternal clash as "the settlers, those religious Jews have turned their whole lives into an act of political disobedience by establishing Jewish townships on hitherto Arab land" (Hare 1998, 5). Nicol Borieau argues that Hare "gives us theatre in the raw, theatre without fiction, but much more 'In-Yer-Face'" (Borieau 2003, 35). The author makes his audience feel uncomfortable and guilty as he is. And the one phrase that re-echoes through them is Hare's question: What is the way forward? When he returns to the comfort of his Hampstead home, one feels he is both relieved and yet arid by his encounters with people living in a political crucible. Hare wants his work to endure the possibility that theatre can function as a means for criticism at not only the conflicts and bloodshed between Israel and Palestine but all the nations that are directly or indirectly related to the issue, and the divided and polarised peoples in the world. The play is about the problems between the communities and within the communities. Hare is shocked to see that the divisions

within the societies are as profound as the divisions between the societies. He believes that enacting the play would be false.

David Greig's *Damascus*

Like Hare, the Scottish theatre-maker Greig uses the theatre as a forum for public debate and portrays self-awareness and criticism of prejudices. *Damascus* is an intelligent take on the Middle East seen through the eyes of an English language teacher disoriented in the Syrian capital. Greig experiences and explores the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab world. While the playwright seizes the mystery of "the other" in the world's oldest inhabited city, Damascus becomes a mythical place rooted in a contemporary reality. Despite the fact that the play is mostly a comedy of cultural confusion, it explores relationships between illusion and truth, fiction and fact. Through its Western and Arabic characters, the play analyzes preconceptions and stereotypes that Western and Mid-Eastern people have for each other. In that sense the play proposes a challenge to customary Western perceptions of the Mid-Easterners. In a multicultural setting where East and West meet, the characters and the audiences perceive each other's similarities and differences in a global/transnational context.

Like David Hare, Greig has felt an urge to write the play following his trips to the Middle East. Eventually, Western audiences together with the main character in the play have come to realize that Arab countries are not always ruled by fundamentalist values and that Western nations are not always superlative. Thus the play is unique in terms of staging the world of the Arab intellectual on one hand and the Western presumptions on the other.

The play takes place in the foyer of a small hotel in Damascus. Suggesting an international atmosphere, the setting reflects the explosive situation in the neighbouring countries through the ever-present television images in the background in order to show the never-ending violence and the incessant tension which has always threatened the stability in the Middle East. Similar to *Via Dolorosa*, *Damascus* is the result of Greig's own experiences in the Middle East as part of the International Play Development Project. Although the play is not autobiographical, the main character stands for his author in depicting the issues related to democracy, morality, human rights and fundamentalism. On one hand the play observes a series of irony about language, translation and culture in English Language Teaching text-books, on the other hand it introduces controversies related to cultural divisions and educational censorship. He expresses that he feels very "connected" to the Middle East but he avoids writing about the political situation directly. Instead he wants to "hear stories from young Arabs" (Jackson 2009). The play's main character, Paul, a Scottish TEFL course-book writer is on a short business trip in Damascus in order to sell his textbook to a Syrian college. While Paul tries to sell an image of multicultural Britain, to his surprise, he encounters a lively, intricate and progressive Arab culture. As a comedy-drama the play deals with the universal themes of romance, culture and politics as Paul's flight back home is postponed due to a terrorist bomb at Beirut Airport. The story is told in flashbacks by Elena, the ever-present Ukrainian pianist, as she observes and comments on the hotel guests. Her narratives have a chorus-like effect providing the audience with the necessary information. Overall the play exemplifies assumptions that people of different nationalities have for each other: Elena's first impressions of Paul characterize a typical English man which is seen through the outsider's eyes: "The suit was not pressed. The shirt was not completely clean. There was hesitation. The body language spoke of distraction and weakness" (Greig 2007, 14). Similarly, as an outsider in the region, Paul simplifies the conflicts in the Middle East as "the Gaza thing" broadly. Contrarily, Elena distinguishes herself from the East-West clash altogether: "The English are terrible negotiators. That is why they so often end up in wars. Scottish, English, it is the same thing. I don't care what you think. I am from the Ukraine" (Greig 2007, 14). The playwright attempts to demolish the Western prejudices against the East: Instead of the Syrian Desert, Paul finds snow in Damascus. What is more, Damascus is depicted as a culturally prosperous city, not a warzone. In addition to undoing the clichés and preconceptions in a multicultural milieu, the play draws attention to another cross-cultural issue: the impracticalities in TEFL industry. Paul advertises his publisher's English course-book, Middleton Road, as a completely integrated English language learning system which is a comprehensive introduction to spoken and written English as well as a working knowledge of contemporary British culture. Paul's nonstop instructive explanations about the "user-friendly" book are disassociated and disturbed by regular "Beats". However, the problem for Muna and the Syrian Education Department is not the English language itself but the British culture that is exposed in the course-book. Cultural issues in the book are certainly objectionable and inappropriate in Arab culture. While matters related to cultural misconceptions are revealed, and negotiations are adjusted, Muna and Paul are accompanied by Wasim, the Dean from the Syrian Education Department. It is ironical that Wasim does not know any English and yet he is the person in charge who will make the final decision about the English course-books that should be studied at schools in the country. As Wasim does not speak or understand any English, Muna translates his utterances to

Paul. In an unfriendly manner, he speaks in French to tell Paul that his grandfather killed an English soldier in Jerusalem during the British Mandate and he mimes shooting at Paul. However, struggling with his own language skills Paul feels uncomfortable as he cannot speak French properly. Because of its inappropriateness, Wasim remarks that The Ministry of Education will never let them teach Middleton Road series. However, Muna takes the issue more seriously; she insists that the students need decent textbooks not the old Russian system books that they use at schools presently. Contrary to what Wasim asks her to tell Paul, she confidently denotes to Paul that the Dean wants him to update the English-language learning systems they use at the Institute. Unaware of Wasim's malicious opinions, Paul agrees to help Muna and negotiate on the changes. Wasim's escapist fantasies are juxtaposed to Paul and Muna's business dialogues. As Wasim speaks in Arabic, Paul does not understand him thus he is dependent on Muna's fabricated translations which mainly provide humorous moments. She emphasizes the fact that they have a free education system of a very high quality and that the Arab world wants to ensure that they have young people who are able to make their way in a globalized marketplace. She declares that learning English "means independence of mind" but it must be "combined with a strong respect for Arabic values" (Greig 2007, 25). For British audiences and readers the play becomes an opportunity to correct their clichéd views of the Arab world. Especially TEFL course-book writers intend to be sympathetic to cultural differences from a very banal point of view. However, the actuality may be somewhat intricate and quite the opposite, as it is clear in Muna's expressions, which indicate that imposing assumptions is unacceptable and that objectifying and illustrating "the other" is a more complicated issue than the Middleton Road's instructors have imagined. The discrepancy between the tolerant liberal political correctness of his textbook and many of his actions serves to satirize Western blindness and hypocrisy. Muna as a "partly feminist, partly orthodox Muslim" (Greig 2007) reveals impacts related to political progression in the country and how democratization is prevented or controlled by not only political regimes in the country but also by external power. She finds it even more inequitable when British come to Damascus to tell them how to live. Paul confesses that "It must be annoying. Having a … me – come here and – Blabbering on about truth – You're right. It's just language" (Greig 2007, 53). Contrarily, Wasim believes that freedom of speech is only a rhetoric which is coined by Western democracies. He maintains in Arabic that "There is no such thing as freedom of speech. What you are defending is simply your English power to describe the status quo in whatever way you like" (Greig 2007, 66). He accuses Anglo-Saxon idealism of bringing blood to the Middle East. He rages at Paul "You make your own accommodations with your regime and I will make my accommodations with mine" (Greig 2007, 66). However, Muna hesitates to translate Wasim's accounts exactly and she acts as a catalyst; she briefly tells Paul that the Dean is not keen to accept Middleton Road. Still, the play metaphorically reveals the deception in bureaucracy where mostly the truth is veiled under rhetoric, which Wasim supports as "tactic". Overall Paul's visit to Damascus has been an experience of enlightenment for him. Undeniably, Greig has helped Arab writers to realize that they need to find their own voice instead of being defined through western eyes' (McMillan 2009). He also displays through Paul a realistic perspective on how Scotland or the West in general relates to the Middle East. UK audiences see the play as a self-criticism directed against the well-intentioned unsuccessful Westerner abroad. While the play hopes to challenge received Western notions about people from the Arabic world, it also asks how far the whole western model of civilization – with its alluring dreams of freedom and self-fulfillment – can and should be extended across the globe. Philip Fisher observes that the playwright uses "wit and subtlety to explore an alien culture, as seen through the eyes of an ignorant outsider who gets too involved" (Fisher 2007). Similarly, for the Arab critic Sakhr Al-Makhadhi the play really means to "poke fun at the disorientation of the Brit abroad. But some Damascenes in the audience saw it as mocking their culture" (Al-Makhadhi 2009). Although the play has a comic mood especially when staging cultural confusions, it actually explores the ways how "language can fail" people. (Gardner 2007).

The characters' utterances destroy the supposed prejudices about the Middle East. Eventually, Paul has come to realize that Damascus is a progressive city, which severely opposes fundamentalism. At times he feels dislocated, uprooted and alienated but most of the time he considers himself as a superior Westerner. Certainly, while Greig has experiences of the foreign, through Paul he attempts to criticize and ridicule colonial narratives for their efforts to civilize foreign lands. Paul fails to impose his ideas in adapting any changes to Middleton Road. The city of Damascus has become mazelike in both physical and mental senses. He is also being mocked by the Dean which shows that Paul as a Westerner cannot experience an authentic sense of belonging in the Middle East. The play is about linguistic, cultural and political differences and the difficulty of arriving at a place of mutual understanding between West and East. While Greig challenges any cultural stereotypes, it is innovative in a way that a Western playwright embodies the Arab intellectual and their views of Western and Eastern values.

Conclusion

In a Brechtian sense both playwrights have used the theatre as criticism modelling on the Lehrstück (lesson or learning play) and have broken the fourth wall. Both plays are a means of enlightenment, education and contact zones for the playwrights, Western audiences and the Middle East. The plays attempt to give voice to a Middle Eastern community in the Bakhtinian sense in that it proposes a decentralized polyphony of the Middle Eastern world as opposed to centralized monological discourses. Indeed, at the end of both plays, the main character's presumptions about the Middle East change.

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A short bio-note on the author

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