

## **POST MODERN SHIFT IN THE PARADIGMS OF DRAMA AND THEATRE: FROM SHAKESPEARE TO STOPPARD**

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### **Abstract**

Drama was introduced to England from Europe by the Romans. Through the Renaissance movement of 15<sup>th</sup> century we got William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe in Drama. Shakespeare and Marlowe, the Elizabethan dramatists followed the rules laid down by Aristotle. In 16<sup>th</sup> century drama was at its peak. It is 402<sup>nd</sup> year of Shakespeare and till date drama has undergone many changes related to theme, plot, character, diction, melody etc. Aristotle mentioned six formative elements for tragedy. During one of the most prolific periods of English-speaking literature, which saw the full flowering of the Romantic Movement in poetry, arts and the rise of the realistic novel as a major literary genre, not a single drama of major significance appeared. It was the period, in fiction, of Austen, the Bronte sisters, Dickens, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Melville, James, Wharton; in poetry, of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning. No other period has been at once so rich in literature and so barren in drama. Adding to the obstacles was the fact that Ibsen hailed from Norway, a country with almost no dramatic tradition of its own. Playwrights like Ben Jonson, John Webster, Oscar Wilde, G.B. Shaw, and John Galsworthy added no new dimension to the play. But the plays of late twentieth century and twenty first century came with twist called Hybridity and other traits of post modern era. The plays of 21<sup>st</sup> century are as simple to imagine or create a story. Unlike poetry drama has no old themes living in the present times, starting from the complex characters to happy endings. Comedy of today is no more arousing only humor; it arises many other emotions along with humor. Playwrights like Henrik Ibsen launched drama of ideas starting a new wave in the field of drama. He is also known as father of modern drama. The 21<sup>st</sup> century Tom Stoppard plays are closely related to Shakespearean characters. The paper will attempt to find out the changes took in the field of drama from Shakespeare to Stoppard.

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Emergence of English drama: Drama in some form is found in almost every society, primitive and civilized, and has served a wide variety of functions in the community. There are, for example, records of a sacred drama in Egypt 2,000 years before the Common Era, and Thespis in

the 6th century BCE in ancient Greece is accorded the distinction of being the first known playwright. Elements of drama such as mime and dance, costume and decor long headed the introduction of words and the literary erudition now associated with a play. Moreover, such basic elements were not outmoded by words, merely enhanced by them. However, it is only when a play's script assumes a disciplinary control over the dramatic experience that the student of drama expands measurable evidence of what was anticipated to constitute the play.

English drama owes its origin from the literature of Romans (In the medieval period), it is a literary composition performed by the actors on stage with facial make up and expressions. The performances were based on old stories of Saint George, Robin Hood and Dragon. The artists had to move from town to town to show their performances, in return they were served with hospitality and money. Their basic theme was Christianity- Christian beliefs, customs, and religious festivals- They were also known as mystery and morality plays. Technically, the "Elizabethan era" lasted only so long as Queen Elizabeth I reigned over England, which was from 1558 to 1603; however, for purposes of this western, Elizabethan Drama also includes the plays written after 1603, during the reigns of both James I (reigned 1603-1625) and Charles I (reigned 1625-1649), all the way to the closing of the theaters in 1642. It may be more accurate to refer to this literature as English Tudor and Renaissance drama, but I do not think any harm will result from considering it all by the name that comes to most people's minds when they think about the plays of this era. (web)

The English Renaissance or Revival of learning conveys drama into ascendancy. Renaissance movement cemented a way to the chief dramatists of the time. William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and John Webster were the distinguished playwrights of the Elizabethan period. Sometimes, performance styles are connected with periods in history (and hence, theatre history) and Elizabethan theatre (or Elizabethan drama) is one of these examples. Historically, Elizabethan theatre refers to plays performed in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Students of theatre, habitually overlook that Shakespeare was not the only playwright all through this time. Shakespeare's contemporaries include, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Heywood and Robert Greene. These and other playwrights also wrote and performed their plays in England during the sovereignty of Elizabeth I. Although Shakespeare was not among the University wits of England, he was second to none of his contemporaries. Shakespearean stage was full of conventions like soliloquies, aside, boys playing female roles, masque, eavesdropping, poetic dialogue, Play within a Play, Stagecraft.

Then comes interregnum period, a time during which a throne is vacant between two successive regimes. During the period of interregnum the Puritans bunged English theatres for their individual religious points nevertheless they were reopened in 1660, almost immediately after the Restoration of Monarchy. Launching female characters to the stage was the major attraction for audience. The restoration augmented the new genres in drama such as Heroism and Restoration comedy which dealt with the heroic deeds and the effect of Restoration of the Monarchy. "The Man of Mode" (1676) by George Etherege, "The Country Wife" (1676) by William Wycherley, "Rover" (1677) by Aphra Behn, "All for Love" (1677), "Aurangzeb" (1675) by John Dryden were several known works and artists of this period. Sexual Explicitness was the most important quintessence of the comic plays of Restoration period. This started from 1660 and continued till 1685.

With the arrival of the wondrous eighteenth century, a shift in dramatic vision of the writers was seen. The story of British drama in the 18th century is one of dizzying growth. When

the century began, theatre was largely a metropolitan and aristocratic pastime. New theatres were established while no one could claim that the 18th century was a golden age for playwrights in Britain, unquestionably in comparison with the Continent, it wasn't deprived of talent. Though written at the beginning of the century, George Farquhar's lively, warm-hearted comedies – notably *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) – stayed in the repertoire, as did William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). So-called 'sentimental dramas' also gained in popularity, partly in reaction to criticism from commentators that theatre was inherently immoral. Generally set in a middle-class environment, they showed characters undergoing a series of moral trials on the path to virtue; perhaps the most famous example is Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), which portrays a penniless heroine triumphing against the odds. Eighteenth Century for the field of English drama is known for its new flavor of tragedy and comedy- Domestic tragedy and Sentimental Comedy. Use of burlesque and English Music Hall suppressed the popularity of the ancient drama.

Throughout the 19th century English drama faced a period of bleakness. In fact there were no ground-breaking playwrights awaiting the last quarter of the century, and in general Shakespeare's plays went on being staged, which gave the prospect to the great actors of the period to demonstrate their persona: in fact the Victorian Age was an age of great actors (for example Kean). These performers asked for very high salaries and therefore staging became a very expensive business; but we must say that there were apart from Shakespeare other kinds of performances which were far more popular, and which possessed the approval of a kind of audience, the Victorian one, which was made up of very ordinary people, and who went to the theatre more often than not to enjoy themselves, to be amused, and not to meditate upon problems. So these people asked for a lighter kind of performance, for instance farce (farsa), or melodrama (Italian opera), which wasn't indeed a rational genre and which became popular all over Europe. Yet very significant innovations came in the last section of the century and the two historic playwrights who brought these innovations were Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, who were both Irish. The kind of plays which they performed was fundamentally different, yet they are among the finest playwrights that increasingly existed and in fact their works are still staged nowadays. They both assailed in their plays Victorian Society and its hypocritical values, as well as the celebrated Victorian institutions, in particular marriage. Yet they did it with drastically different kind of plays.

Oscar Wilde, as far as the structure and the contents of his plays, relied upon (*si basò su*) a pre-existing tradition, which was the one of the "Well-made Play": it was a kind of comedy, which came from France, which already had a great season in England during the Restoration period (last part of 17th century). It is a kind of comedy which pursues a precise structurally speaking: introduction, complication (something which breaks the order), climax, denouement (*scioglimento*), conclusion. As far as the contents are concerned, Wilde exploits the typical situations of the well-made play, of the classical comedy: for example mistaken identities (*scambi d'identità*), love, marriage, secret letters, intrigue, children lost and found, people who find out they are brothers only in the end. The fact is that he dealt with these ingredients in an ironical way, to hit the caucus of Victorian society, for instance materialism, hypocrisy and so on. The shop-keeper mentality (*la mentalità da bottegaio*) of Victorians: Wilde doesn't compact with them critically and uses them in inconsistent state of affairs. The 19th century was the age of a truly popular theatre. New theatres opened to gratify a demand for entertainment from the workers who flooded into the major cities as the Industrial Revolution took hold. Melodrama became popular from the 1780s to 1790s and lasted until the early 20th century.

The first drama in Britain to be labeled a melodrama was Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* in 1802. Melodrama consisted of short scenes intermingled with tuneful supplement and was exemplified by simple morality, good and evil characters and overblown acting style. Characters in melodrama were stereotypical - there was always a villain, a wronged maiden and a hero. The emotions of the actors were played out in the music and accompanied by dramatic montage. Because of these musical intermissions melodrama was not well thought-out a 'play' and thus dodged the cartel of the out-and-out theatres predetermined in the Licensing Act. Melodrama became identical with spectacle and remained popular until the early 20th century. Charles Kean's *The Corsican Brothers* was a hit with Queen Victoria in 1856. William Terriss presented successful melodramas at the Adelphi Theatre between 1885 and 1887 including Seymour Hicks's *One of the Best* which George Bernard Shaw declared was *One of the Worst*. Terriss himself came to a melodramatic end - he was assassinated at the stage door of his theatre in 1897. From the middle of the 19th century the theatre began to take on a new propriety and draw in more middle class audience. They were fascinated by the historical exactness and consideration to feature that was becoming all the time more influential in stage design.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century musical burlesque and comic operas struggled with the plays written by Shakespeare. In 1890s the Edwardian comedies were established in the country. Since Victorian Age was an age of trade and Industrialization drama in addition took the trade and did good business because of the upgrading in hauling. The value of drama increased with the business. The late Victorian era witnessed *Oscar Wilde* (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), *William Gilbert* (*The Magic Mirror: A Round of Tales for Young and Old; The Wizard of the Mountain*) leading dramatist of the Victorian era.

The twentieth century was an age of transformation when political, sexual, social and artistic doctrine commenced to be subjected, ensuing in a twine of nudge in Western philosophical thinking that came to be defined as postmodernism. However, this was preceded by its opposite concept - that of modernism (sometimes referred to as modernity), which began during the Renaissance, reached its peak during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and continued into the early part of the twentieth century. The early part of the twentieth century was a time of huge transformation in the theatre, when conventional rules were challenged and many new forms of theatre were developed. It is critical to have down pat that while some writers and practitioners had a burning desire to change their artistic world, others simply continued to produce well-crafted light entertainment. There was (and still is) an audience for both. In tune with the lucid arrangement of modernism, the well made play proved not only to be pertinently named, but also very apposite as a means by which playwrights such as J B Priestley, Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan could find ways not only to entertain large mainstream (and mainly conservative) audiences, but also to inform and move them. As J B Priestley conveyed through *An Inspector Calls* (1946):

‘We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are all responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.’(35)

The downfall of modernist certainties started to be reflected dramatically in what critic Martin Esslin termed *The Theatre of the Absurd*. This was the title of his book written in 1961 about the work of a various playwrights who wrote for the stage in the 1950s and 1960s. The term was taken from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus, who defined the human situation as fundamentally pointless and absurd. Absurdist drama was stalwartly predisposed by the harrowing experiences and the horrors of the Second World War. Universal truths and values

became unhinged and life was seen as self-doubting and pointless. From 1945, the hazard of nuclear obliteration also seems to have been an imperative aspect in the growth of the new theatre, as was the desertion of the religious dimension from contemporary life. Absurdism honestly dissented against conventional theatre and was occasionally called ‘anti-theatre’ because its form was dreamlike and irrational, without conventional plot or conflict.

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish writer and novelist who spent much of his adult life in Paris. He can be measured as one of the major writers of Absurd theatre. Beckett’s work is noticeable for lack of movement or plot. Many of Beckett’s plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961) scrutinize the worthlessness of life itself. His decrepit characters time and again occupy unproductive landscapes where they thrash about to make sense of their lives but many of Beckett’s plays also include great humour within the bleakest of settings. *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is the story of two vagabonds waiting for a man called Godot whom they don’t know. The stage is utterly bare except for a tree and a mound. The dialogue is as meager as the set and achieves a poetic truthfulness. The first performance was a total disaster, but probably no single play had more influence on British drama in the twentieth century. Of the same stream was Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) General theme of Ionesco’s plays, such as *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Chairs* (1952) and *Rhinoceros* (1960), is the incapability of man to communicate with man. His plays attribute uncanny themes, such the inhabitants of a small, provincial French town who turn into rhinoceroses.

The post modern era gave importance to all the artists who were given to writing; Jean Genet (1910-1986) is a fine instance for my statement. A great admirer of Antonin Artaud, Genet wrote about social problems and subject matter often considered too contentious in his time, in plays such as *The Thief’s Journal* (1949), *Deathwatch* (1954), *The Balcony* (1956) and *The Screens* (1961).

From Absurdism, post war drama went to kitchen-sink. Kitchen Sink is a term given to a particular type of drama, emphasizing principally on the struggles of the urban working class. It is a British Cultural Movement that developed in the late 1950s. Within society there was commotion of another kind in Britain as Rock and Roll arrived from America during the 1950s. Meanwhile, the working sect became more eloquent and the ‘angry young man’ commenced to build a momentous mark on the theatre of the time.

John Osborne (1929-1995) is credited with being the inventor of the new style of British theatre that came to be called ‘kitchen sink drama’; plays that were set in everyday working class life and dealt with the anger felt by people whose lives were controlled by those in power. The central character of Osborne’s play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), is a working class man called Jimmy Porter, who believes that his life and relationships are failures because of the failing society in which he lives: There aren’t any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come and we all get killed off it won’t be in aid of the old fashioned grand design. It’ll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you(25) Osborne wrote a number of plays which were performed at the Royal Court and the National Theatre, This theatre was known for its commitment to new and nontraditional drama, such as *The Entertainer* (1957)

Harold Pinter Harold Pinter (1930-2008) described the meaning of his plays as being ‘the weasel beneath the cocktail cabinet’. Many of his plays use a small cast of everyday characters and day-to-day events which become metaphors for the hopelessness of existence. His early work, such as *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1965) fitted both the absurdist and kitchen-sink styles of drama, but all

his plays have an underlying sense of menace and are often very disturbing. Theatre critic Harold Hobson wrote of his work: Mr Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster. One sunny afternoon ... a hydrogen bomb may explode ... Mr Pinter's [threat] is of the subtler sort. It breathes in the air. It cannot be seen, but it enters the room every time the door is opened. There is something in your past – it does not matter what- which will catch up with you. (The Guardian) Pinter is the inventor of a device called the 'Pinter Pause', where actors use a premeditated silence to fabricate tension in a scene. Pinter also wrote radio drama and screenplays for the cinema, being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005.

A post-war generation authors and playwrights referred to as the 'angry young men' came to prominence in the 1950s, reflecting the tensions in British society. They were known as 'new wave' playwrights. As the playwright and critic Bernard Kops wrote in 1956: We write about the problems of the world today because we live in the world of today. We write about the young because we are young. We write about Council flats and the H-bomb and racial discrimination because these things concern us and concern the young people of our country, so that if and when they come to the theatre, they will see that it is not divorced from reality, that it is for them and they will feel at home.(19-20)

Some of the playwrights who brought visible shift in the writing and staging techniques of drama and theater:

Arnold Wesker: Many of Arnold Wesker's plays are semi-autobiographical and are set in London's East End, where Wesker was brought up. As well as *The Kitchen* (1957) and *Chips with Everything* (1962), Wesker wrote *The Roots Trilogy: Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958); *Roots* (1959); *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960). This recounts the political history of Britain from 1936 to 1960 through the eyes of a Jewish working class family in the East End of London. Although Wesker continues to write plays, the first five of his plays are regarded as his most significant.

Joe Orton: The career of Joe Orton (1933 -1967) was short, lasting from 1964 until his death. After an unsuccessful acting career, he began to write in the late 1950s, encouraged by his lover and partner Kenneth Halliwell. Orton's black comedies shocked, outraged and amused audiences. The adjective 'Ortonesque' is sometimes used to refer to similar styles of work. Orton's three full-length plays, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (1964), *Loot* (1965), and *What the Butler Saw*, were outrageous black comedies about moral corruption, violence, and sexual greed. He also wrote four one-act plays during these years, including *Funeral Games* (1968). All of Orton's plays present situations where the innocent suffer and the guilty thrive; the forces of order are corrupt whilst violence and cruelty are never far from the surface. Harold Pinter's eulogy at Orton's funeral, concluded: 'He was a bloody marvelous writer.' (The Sunday Magazine)

Theatre in the sixties and beyond was based on Protest, politics and **pop culture**. The end of the 1960s was a **watershed**; a time of violent change with protests (mainly carried out by young people). It was also the time of the so-called 'sexual revolution' when women took control of their sexual lives and the **feminist** movement gathered force. Fashion reflected the new freedoms with the mini skirt and ethnic clothes, whilst long hair was worn as a mark of rebel. 1968 saw the end of censorship in the theatre, which allowed topics like religion, politics and sex to be freely discussed. In 1967, the British Parliament's adoption of the Sexual Offences Act, which **decriminalized** homosexual acts in England and Wales, meant that homosexuality could be acknowledged and nudity on stage became legal. As soon as the censorship law was repealed,

two significant musical shows, *Hair* (1968) and *Oh! Calcutta!* (1970), took advantage of the new stage freedom with notorious scenes of full frontal nudity.

Improvisation and work shopping became the working method of many theatre companies and the 1970s saw the growth of small fringe or collaborative companies:

- Joint Stock (1974-1989) was founded in London by David Hare, Max Stafford-Clark and David Aukin. Its aim was to present new plays by using workshops for writers to gather material, which then inspired the writing of new plays. These were then rehearsed and produced by the company. This is sometimes referred to as the 'Joint Stock Method'
- General Will Theatre Company (early 1970s) was co-founded by David Edgar (b. 1948) in Bradford. It specialized in plays that were political commentaries, using the techniques of music hall and burlesque for comic effect. General Will came to a halt when the only gay member of the company took exception to the heterosexual slant of the material and went on strike in mid-performance
- Portable Theatre Company (early 1970s), founded by playwright David Hare, was dedicated to performing 'short, nasty little plays' that were politically significant. It was in this troupe that Hare wrote his first play, because someone had failed to deliver a script to be performed. Hare went on to become a significant political playwright whose works continue to shock and challenge modern audiences.

Later twentieth century plays and playwrights

Edward Bond, describes himself as a writer of 'Rational Theatre', which he sees as an opposition to the theatre of the absurd. For Bond, theatre is a means of analysing society. His plays do not address the individual situations of characters, but are works that examine the world in terms of how society is dominated by **capitalism**. Bond said of his work: I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners (45) He calls his dramatic method 'the Aggro technique' and his work has much in common with that of **Bertolt Brecht**. In Bond's play *Saved* (1965) a baby in a pram is stoned to death by a group of young men. The play was initially banned, receiving its first public performance in Britain only after the abolition of censorship in 1968. Bond wrote: the stoning to death of a baby ... is an understatement ... a negligible atrocity. Compared to the emotional deprivation of most of our children, its consequences are insignificant.

Sir David Hare: David Hare's play, *Via Dolorosa* (1998), dramatises conversations he had with Palestinians and Israelis during a visit to the Middle East. Hare's work, like that of David Edgar, originates from **agit-prop** theatre. His plays also address the state of the nation, reporting the reality of current political issues through the voices of those (characters) involved, such as his trilogy of plays about major British institutions *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991) and *The Absence of War* (1993). David Edgar began writing as a journalist and his plays reflect his own desire to be 'a secretary for the times through which I am living'. (picture) Like many of his contemporaries. Sir Tom Stoppard born in 1937 is a Czech-born British playwright who has produced work for theatre, television, radio and the cinema. Stage plays include *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), *Travesties* (1974), *Arcadia* (1993) and *The Coast of Utopia* (2002). He also co-wrote the screenplays for *Brazil* and *Shakespeare in Love*.

Stoppard's theatre work takes its inspiration from literary and philosophical sources and is therefore very different from other writers of his generation, although his early plays do show elements of absurdism. Stoppard's plays have been described as 'plays of ideas', that examine

philosophical concepts and make them entertaining through clever use of wordplay and jokes. He has been a key playwright of the National Theatre and is one of the most internationally performed dramatists of his generation. Alan Ayckbourn It is frequently claimed that Sir Alan Ayckbourn (b 1939) is the most performed living English playwright, having written and produced more than seventy full-length plays. Between 1972 and 2009 he was the artistic director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough.

Ayckbourn's characters are familiar and comically human, their language commonplace and each play focuses on the theme of some kind of moral choice. Major successes include: The Norman Conquests trilogy (1973), Absurd Person Singular (1975), Bedroom Farce (1975), *Just Between Ourselves*(1976), A Chorus of Disapproval (1984), Woman in Mind (1985), A Small Family Business (1987), Man Of The Moment (1988), House & Garden (1999), Private Fears in Public Places (2004).

After studying the history of drama and the present of drama I can conclude that traits of ancient drama are not followed. Change in concept, themes, character delineation, stagecraft, clothes all have changed from top to toe. The Greek conception followed by Shakespeare and Marlowe is not considered as a traditional value. The theatre at its best in the post modern era is engrossed with the representation of domestic problems. The shift noticed in the paradigm is supporting the absurdity of the time society and its people.

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