

Drama as a Tool for Social Reform: with Reference to Henrik Ibsen

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to stress the major importance of drama in our life. That it is not just a source of entertainment that could be replaced. Illustrating its history the researcher shows how deeply rooted in our lives it goes. This is established through the application of the descriptive surveying method. Synopses of Ibsen's work as a pioneer in using drama to inflict social reform are provided. We conclude with the new progressive branching of the use of drama for different purposes.

Keywords: *drama tool social theatre Ibsen TfSC*

1. Introduction

The distinctive appearance of a script, with its stage directions, character parts, and divisions into acts and scenes, identifies drama as a unique form of literature. A play is written to be performed in front of an audience by actors [characters] presenting the story through dialogue and action. The term theater comes from the Greek word *theasthai*, which means 'to view' or 'to see.'

Dramatic works differ from other prose works in a number of other ways as well. Unlike novels and short stories, plays do not have narrators to tell the audience what a character is thinking or what happened in the past. The audience knows only what the characters reveal. Drama develops primarily by means of dialogue. The plot and the action of drama unfold on the stage as the characters interact. Playwrights employ various techniques to compensate for the absence of a narrator; monologue, soliloquy, and asides. These dramatic techniques give the audience insight into the characters motives and attitudes. In addition, makeup, costumes, scenery, and lighting enhance a dramatic performance, as do actors' and directors' interpretations of dialogue and stage directions.

Aristotle defines drama as the "mimesis of life on stage before a given audience" i.e. imitation of the real world in art and literature. Playwrights all over and as early as the existence use their writings to portray the ills and misgivings inherent in their society.

They open the door for discussion which arouses curiosity to explore new ways leading to progressive change.

2. Aim of the Paper

This paper aims at establishing the major importance of drama in our life. That it is not just a source of entertainment that could be replaced. Illustrating its history the researcher shows how deep-rooted into our lives it goes. Next, synopses of Ibsen's work as a pioneer in using drama to inflict social reform are provided. Also, the progressive branching of the use of drama for different purposes is presented.

3. Methodology

The qualitative research methods conducted on drama by this researcher laid the base of this paper. Although the pre-mentioned qualitative research targeted Ibsen, in particular, the basic reading went far beyond drawing out this paper.

This Longitudinal Trend Survey came through prolonged observation and the expanded collection of data over an extended period of time.

Trend surveys, as we know, are employed by researchers to understand the shift or transformation in the thought process of respondents over a period of time. In this survey, our respondent is 'Drama'. A once over is administered to exhibit how it changed through time.

4. Background

Looking back, one finds that drama has been indispensable ever since the Lord's creation; [‘Habil’ Abel burial] when ‘Qabil’ Cain mirrored the Raven's action to conceal his brother's remains. The first dramatic act directed by the Mighty Preserver:

Then Allah sent a raven, Who scratched the ground, To show him how to hide
The naked body of his brother. “Woe is me!” said he; “Was I not even
able To be as this raven, And to hide the naked body Of my brother?” Then
he became Full of regrets- (The Holy Quran, 1410, p. 292) [sic]

It was a lesson well taught. Hence, we see we learn and in the steps of our ancestors we heed.

The next account of dramatic acts is the Egyptian ceremonial worship of the Nile; the yearly celebration of the 'Nile Bride' i.e. an offering to the gods to secure their crops and habitat from the flood.

Socrates the 'gadfly' followed; according to the words put into his mouth by his student Plato, Socrates believed that he had been sent by the gods to act as a "gadfly" to the Athenian state. Plato in his *Apology* for the life of Socrates reminds us that all societies need a "gadfly" to sting the "steed" of state into acknowledging its proper duties and obligations:

... am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long I and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. (libertyfund.org)

The dramatic presentations of ancient Greece continued to develop out of religious rites performed to honor gods or to mark the coming of spring. Playwrights such as Aeschylus (525-456 B.C), Sophocles (496-406 B.C), and Euripides (480-406 B.C) composed plays to be performed and judged at competitions; from there on originated modern theatre. (Kirszner & Mandell, 2000, p. 909) Greek society viewed gods in human terms- gods held grudges, fought with each other. Hence, their drama focused on human struggles, but with a supernatural element. Still, the Greek society had a strong concern for humanity - the founders of philosophy came from this period. Their plays had a didactic nature in the sense that it instructed people concerning communal living.

The Roman held the torch of the theatre succeeding the Greeks. The first stone theatre was built in Rome (by Julius Caesar). The Roman theatre borrowed Greek ideas and improved on them adding their own spice. Their drama was less philosophical. Moreover, it enclosed more than drama; acrobatics, gladiators, jugglers ...etc. (Trumbull, 2007)

After the fall of Rome in the 600's A.D. came a period known to us as the 'dark ages'. There were much political turmoil and no reliable political structure. The Church was the only stable 'government'. Little is known about the theatre between 600-1000 A.D. There was little written drama; none that survives, and almost no other surviving references to it. (ibid)

During the Middle Ages, for a long period the, theatre, took place inside the church only. Then it moved to the churchyard due to the crowd. After a while, it expanded further though still under the control of the church. But gradually the church loosened its grip and the drama became more controlled by secular groups.

Medieval drama seems naïve if we don't understand the period. They have little sense of history – reflecting the limited knowledge of the people. The medieval mind looked at the temporal world (Earth) as transitory; Heaven and Hell were the eternal realities.

Religious plays took the platform next. Since the ruling of the era was in the hands of the church it is only natural that all aesthetic and cultural activities should relate to religion. Thus, three kinds of religious plays were circling:

- Mystery plays; about Christ or from the Old Testament usually done in cycles.
- Miracle plays; lives of saints, historical and legendary.
- Morality plays; didactic allegories, often of common man's struggle for salvation.

All three types had some characteristics in common; they aimed to teach or reinforce the Church doctrine; melodramatic: good rewarded, evil punished; God and his plan were the driving forces, not the characters, they an odd mixture of comic and serious kind of unnerving.

The Renaissance meaning rebirth founded primarily in Italy Around 1300 and had its beginnings in the 1200's. It circled around new ideas, based on classical teachings. By the 16th century, the Renaissance had permeated most of the European thought.

There were two big influences on the Renaissance; the weakening of the church and the invention of the printing press. New-classism with its interest in the ancient 'rediscovery' of the Roman classics was one of the renaissance contributions to drama.

The Spanish theatre was, in quantity and vigor, equal to that of England between 1585 and 1642. But it failed to probe deeply into man's destiny. A preoccupation with a narrow code of honor limited it. Spanish drama flourished in the 16th and 17th centuries, like England, but they came from different influences. Catholicism was able to become secure in Spain while religious fighting was rampant in the rest of Europe.

Elizabethan Drama was flourishing. Elizabeth became queen in 1558, died 1603. She outlawed religious drama. The Queen wanted no religious dissension therefore; there was a rapid development of secular drama as a result. In 1588, the Spanish Armada was defeated. There was a time of peace, domestic calm and the gradual supremacy of English, rather than Spanish, influence as a major world power. There was a mixture of theatrical performances with the influence of the medieval period. What is more is that acting became a legal profession in the Elizabethan era; theatres were built, the acting troupes, the university wits and most important the appearance of one William Shakespeare.

Neoclassicism in France was a rage. After the death of Shakespeare, France tried to gain control the French Academy was established. It was a prestigious literary academy to maintain the purity of the French language and literature. Neoclassicism took over France for 100 years. Although Racine, Molière and others did their best the great period of French Playwriting was soon over.

In the Restoration period, Theatre was outlawed. It was connected with the monarchy and with "immoral," non-Puritan values. The monarchy was restored in 1660. Charles I's son, Charles II, restored to the throne. The type of theatre brought back resulted in a sort of protest against the Puritan ideal and was designed primarily for the aristocracy. Again this form of theatre was, in turn, rebelled against.

Rationalism prevailed during the 1700s. The concept of Rationalism [The Age of Reason], faith in reason, began to take over from faith in God – Rationalism begins to lead away from the strict rules of Neoclassicism. This comes from a faith in man. Part of this led to the movement of Sentimentalism in the theatre – asserted that each person was essentially good. The 18th century most revolutionary act was putting women on the stage to act the female roles. Other 18th century noticeable forms:

- Ballad Opera; sections of dialog alternating with lyrics set to popular tunes, a precursor to musical comedy.
- Farce was also a popular form of the times.
- Pantomimes; became popular by 1715 – combined dancing, mime (silent mimicry), done to music, with elaborate scenery and special effects – done as an afterpiece after plays. They combined Commedia, farce, mythology.

- The Harlequin; came from these pantomimes – with his magic wand, the scenery would change. It was primarily visual and aural entertainment.
(novaonline.nvcc.edu)

5. Nineteenth-Century Theatre

The Nineteenth-century was often called the Age of Independence. Along with this came the view that Nature was something to honor. The Romantic professed that God had created nature, and we must know as much about it as possible. Nature is Truth. Parading nature Romanticism takes us into the nineteenth century.

The Western World has a great appetite for all sorts of performed art and with such diversity, change is expected. In the Age of Enlightenment, a procession of them filed through. Wikipedia made a précis of them in a few lines:

Nineteenth-century theatre describes a wide range of movements in the theatrical culture of Europe and the United States in the 19th century. In the West, they include Romanticism, melodrama, the well-made plays of Scribe and Sardou, the farces of Feydeau, Naturalism and Realism problem plays, Wagner's operatic Gesamtkunstwerk, Gilbert and Sullivan's plays and operas, Wilde's drawing-room comedies, Symbolism, and proto-Expressionism in the late works of August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen.
(Wikipedia)

According to Professor Eric W. Trumbull (2009), “*Melodrama was the primary form of theatre during the 19th century, despite other influences, becoming the most popular by 1840. Melodrama is still with us today.*”

6. Ibsen Social Plays

The modern realistic drama portrays everyday life with its ups and downs, unlike other types of drama, classic, historical, fictional...etc. Such dramas present a replica of day to day life stories and the spectator muses over them with a detached eye. Some may acquaint themselves with certain characters or situations. At times, some scenarists depict a real-life story of a celebrity or for a cause.

In his realistic plays, Ibsen was merciless in his quest to expose all social facade, hypocrisy and pretence. He showed Europe that theatre could be an art form addressing the most serious moral and social questions of the time. Ibsen was an inflexible and destructive dramatist of all false idols and corruption and dynamiter of all social and

economic deceit and dishonesty. He aspired to deracinate every stone of the social structure, in his search for truthfulness and freedom. (N.A, p.850) The public was first shocked and later thrilled, to have controversial themes presented on the stage, and to have them presented through carefully drawn character and well-constructed dramatic situation, not through special effect. (ibid)

“The North breeds mystics. In his bones, he is a moralist, in practice an artist.” Wrote James Huneker (1910) of the Norwegian Poet stating his admiration of the ‘mysterious’ ‘moral’ Norse ‘artist’. Born Norwegian with a mixture of other European blood, Henrik Ibsen is rated among the greatest ‘visionary’ playwrights of the world. In his book *Iconoclasts*, Huneker describes Ibsen as:

Ibsen is a reflective poet, one to whom the idea presents itself before the picture. A Romantic originally, he pays the tax to Beauty by his vivid symbolism and his rare formal perfections. And a Romantic is always a revolutionist. Embittered in youth—proud, self-contained, reticent—he waged war with life for over a half-century; fought for his artistic ideals ... he has swept the younger generation along with him. He, the greatest moral artist of his century ... though not veritably pessimistic of temperament; moral indignation in him must not be confounded with the pessimism that sees no future hope for mankind. (Huneker, II)

Ibsen has been often called ‘polemic’ and a ‘pessimist’ but in his social plays one recognizes a strong belief in the instinctive goodness of mankind. Ibsen wrote in cycles. He has 26 plays and advised that they should be read chronologically.

Critics and biographers categorized his work with minor differences. His social work lies in the middle of his career. It comprises of four to five plays. One has to bear in mind that demarcation lines are hazy. Also that the well-being his country-men was Ibsen driving force. It has been recognized through his writing but his correspondences clearly declare it. In one of his letters to Bjornson:

We have with us not more than a single matter for which I think it worth while [sic] to fight; and that is the introduction of a modernized popular education. This matter includes all other matters; and if it is not carried through, then we may easily let all the others rest. ... I do not think it is our task to take charge of the state's liberty and independence, but certainly to awaken into liberty and independence the individual, and as many as possible. (Kildal, 1910, p.83)

The Young Men's League is actually the first of the prose social dramas. In it, Ibsen portrays a lawyer who has so long misled himself that he misleads others. The protagonist is a phrase-monger, a social climber and a traitor. He is, in a word, a politician all the world over. When the comedy was produced, a scandal ensued. The dramatist had spared neither high nor low. The piece was hissed and applauded until the authorities interfered. Yet, it was just the warm-up. It was more local than any of the plays. Though some of the characters are sufficiently universal to be appreciated on any stage Steensgaard the lying lawyer-politician in particular.

The sarcastic '*Pillars of Society*' is the fifteenth play of Henrik Ibsen. Its imposition on the ruling commercial classes is apparent. In this play, Ibsen daringly exposes a varied row of whited sepulchres. As always Ibsen smells corruption in all governments of the people by the people and against the people.

The plot of the story, though tightly woven, is not complex. If Consul Bernick had not been in need of money, he would not have married his meek wife, Betty, to whose elder half-sister he had previously pledged his faith. As a pillar of society in a thriving small community, as the pillar of its church and commerce, Bernick could never afford to be caught making a faulty step. Once it had nearly happened. He had carried on an illicit love affair with a French actress. Her husband surprised the pair. Bernick contrived an escape, implicating his brother-in-law. So this brother-in-law, who had slipped away to America, was blamed for the scandal, and you may easily imagine the tongue-wagging and head-nodding in this philistine town.

In *A Doll House*, the sheer sense of justice impelled him to view the institution of matrimony as not always being fair. A woman is- above all- an individual. She has, therefore, her rights, not alone because of her sex, but because she is a human being.

This Scandinavian Frou-Frou, [Nora] bursting with the joy of life, is confronted with a grave problem, and as she has been brought up perfectly irresponsible and a doll, she solves the problem in an irresponsible manner. She [unknowingly] commits forgery, believing that the end justified the means. The reader/spectator inevitably sympathizes with her as her act brought good, not evil.

Ghosts came as a shock. As if Ibsen is saying: 'you can accept the thesis or leave it, but this how your life looks'. Once you read it you cannot be indifferent that is how powerful

it is. The sense of reality is tremendous and nerve-shattering. The play is a dramatic setting of the biblical wisdom that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. Of *Ghosts*, Huneker concludes:

Anatole France once wrote, "If the will of those who are no more is to be imposed on those who still are, it is the dead who live, and the live men who become the dead ones." And this idea is the motive of *Ghosts*. (VII)

An Enemy of the People is an exquisite social piece because of the strong moral stress it carries. In this play, Ibsen spared no one. His tone was scornful. Standing on his own Ibsen insisted that 'majority is never right'.

All social drama creates a model that community is required to reach. Adopting it or rejecting it is then left to them. Thus theatres change their shape and form according to the needs and issues of its society. The Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen had realized the need for social change in his era, stated Barton and McGregor (2008) that:

his works became one of the most visible models and a boot process for social change, as not only his attempts to deal with real issues and address the prevailing values by criticism and queries which leads to a demand for social change

They went on clarifying how he himself changed and shocked the theatre audiences with his use of prose rather than poetry in order to make it applicable to the daily happening. He did not just announce the need for change but conducted on himself.

Playwrights, the world over (not just Ibsen) use their works to show the ills inherent in their society. The tricks played by politicians to hoodwink and beguile society are laid bare by the dramatist as one who has penetrated the "deep social-political terrain of his nation". It is left to the spectator/reader to grab the wand held by drama to search and get a solution to the ever ending shortage of decent leadership.

New Trends in Drama

We have seen the progress of drama from the 'mime' till 'soup-operas' and it is still modifying and refashioning with every break of dawn. The latest is in the second millennium.

- 20th-Century Theatre

Sociologist and psychologists researchers and all those working in the fields of education, training, correction or anything to do with human behavior welcomed ‘the highly reactive form of theatre’ and all the dramatic innovation that followed. Every new day dramatic usage is branching out because it works through the key attribute of our existence which is interaction. As Jackson (2001) puts it:

Any good theatre will of itself be educational –that is, when it initiates or extends a questioning process in its audience, when it makes us look afresh at the world, its institutions and conventions and at our own place in that world, when it expands our notion of who we are, of the feelings and thoughts of which we are capable of, and of our connection with the lives of others. (Cited in Lavrinienko, p.9)

Theatre and social change have always been two sides of the same coin. Innovative playwrights put an image in front of the viewer’s inviting them to have a look and think about how it could be. In such a case it is evident that describing theatre as a direct cause for social change would be unjust, but it certainly paves the path. Social dramas are charged interludes of social action that spurt forth from the smooth surface of routine public life. They are possibly turning points in situations where the social order gets broken down, disputed, and rectified. “*Social dramas resemble narratives in that they have discernible plot structures or stages that resemble beginnings, middles, and ends*” (Turner 1969, p. 68). (Cited in McFarland)

In these theatres, matters of social importance were presented and debated. New ways of approaching and experiencing both personal and social realities were tested. New means of expression were put before the public. Furthermore, that public was broad-based, including people from various classes, religions, outlooks, and opinions.

What matters, after all, is not what the performance boiled down to, but the promotion of a rich interpretative discussion; which will blossom into more knowledge of the self: and that precisely was Ibsen’s conduct.

Political theatre does not necessarily involve audience participation. A play can speculate on political issues and provoke the spectator towards new ways of thinking, although production of the specific purpose of participation is not stated. However, political activism and theatre may be yoked together around the common aim of contributing to bring about social change. In such cases, theatre will often invite participation not in the

performance itself, but in the controversies and forms of action emerging in the wake of the play. (Lavrinenko, p.8)

- 21st Century [TfSC]

Theatre for Social Change [TfSC] is a 21st century, newly devised, term for an old practice. The term is deceptively straightforward: clearly this is a “theatre in the service of social change” (Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 12). It waves its politics like a flag with the inherent assumption that society needs to change. It implies that theatre can contribute to change, so has an instrumental value. It is a genre bringing together the two distinct worlds of theatre and the social. But beyond this seeming simplicity, TfSC is much more complex. It is not one form of theatre but, as Nicholson (2005, p. 2) said of Applied Drama, a set of “interdisciplinary and hybrid practices”. It spans the participatory and professional arts sectors and the fields of arts and activism. It inhabits the liminal space where art and social practice collide. (Cited in Thornton, 2012)

The historical origins of TfSC are most obviously to be found in the Popular and Community Theatres of the 1970s, the Happenings and Alternative Theatres of the 1960s and the Political Theatres of the 1930s. But its roots are evident in the theatre and democracy ideals of the Ancient Greeks, the subversion of the early carnival; the inflammatory writing of Ibsen and Shaw, and, of course, in the radical theatres of Brecht and Boal. TfSC is potentially amorphous depending on how one chooses to interpret the ideas of change and society.

Drama has been widely acclaimed as a positive medium for mirroring society hence the popular saying ‘drama is a representation of life’. So, while drama entertains it also teaches and informs. This powerful attribute of drama has been employed by playwrights over the ages to make constructive commentaries on the happenings in society and thus affect some positive changes in man and his environment.

Is a familiar term in Italian for a practice that in different Anglophone contexts has a diverse and bewildering ‘nomenclature’: applied theatre (the UK and Australia), community-based theatre (USA), theatre for development (certain Asian and African countries), or popular theatre (Canada). These different terms are used to ascribe (teatro sociale) which is translated to (social theatre). (Thompson / Schechner, 2004, p.1)

Social theatre might be [newly] defined as theatre with specific social agendas; theatre where aesthetics is not the ruling objective. A theatre outside the realm of commerce,

which drives Broadway/the West End, and the cult of the new, which dominates the avant-garde.

Such social theatre takes place in diverse locations—from prisons, refugee camps, hospitals, schools, orphanages, and homes for the elderly. Participants are local residents, disabled people, young prisoners, and many other groups often from vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. Or even with individuals who have lost touch with a sense of group-ness, who are internally as well as externally displaced and homeless. Social theatre, which often takes the form of participatory theatre, has a non-commercial nature and does not always have aesthetics as its foremost concern. It invites individuals to participate in the performance by creating discussions based on the issues raised by the play, by letting spectators create alternative versions of the play, or encouraging them to step into some role.

These social theatres often occur in places and situations that are not the usual circumstances of theatre, turning "nonperformers" into performers:

Social theatre practitioners are "facilitators"—the choragus to use Schinina's term or the joker to use Boal's— helping others to perform as much as performing them-selves. Social theatre activists often are artists, but they need not be (Thompson / Schechner, 2004, p.15).

Social theatre draws on the theory that pertains to the particular locations where the projects happen. So, for example, theatre in schools made use of educational theories to perform its work; theatre for development has taken developmental theory to guide its analysis. While theatre in prisons used different models of criminology or rehabilitation theory to manage and obtain its practice.

The act of applying theatre to the issue or situation at hand means that the social theatre worker enters a practical and a discursive space already full of psychological and/or sociological reference points. Those supervising social theatre projects are aware that permission for their performance does not come from arts funders, critics, theatre audiences, or the academy. But from different governmental organizations [GOs] and Non-governmental organizations [NGOs], individual bureaucrats [i.e. prison officers, teachers, social workers, etc.], and local community leaders. (ibid, p.12)

Social theatre sells itself by asserting that it ‘supports self-esteem’, ‘builds confidence’, ‘manages anger’, ‘heals socio-psychological wounds’, ‘creates new approaches to learning’ and ‘promotes participatory community development’. The work is thus translated to fit its specific social contexts. Still, restricting social theatre to definitions determined by public policy discourses marginalizes the practice. It has become a settled fact, through history, that Theatre (with all its types); has a great role on affecting people's lives, by helping them to see their lives and problems more clearly. It became a tool to understand the real problems of society in order to look for an effective solution for them. Through dialogue by elevating the level of awareness as well as it contributes to the empowerment of all involved. It may also mobilize people to take action and support them in processes of social and political change.

7. Conclusion

It has been confirmed through this inspection that drama/theatre is indispensable to our life. The power of theatre in its conventional form is undeniable through the ages; be that in its use as a tool for social change or when applied in educational, political, or social activism. As the world changes the theatre regenerates and transforms to accommodate and fill the need. As the mirror at home theatre is vital to the foundation of a refined society.

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