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CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH THEATRE 'A-LA-MODE' IN TURKEY (1990-)

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Introduction: Post-1990s British Drama

At the turn of the 21st century, the main new writing theatres in Britain such as the Traverse in Edinburgh, and the Royal Court, the Bush, the National and Royal Shakespeare Company in London renewed their historic commitment to developing new work. In this respect, artistic directors including Ian Brown, Dominic Dromgoole and Stephen Daldry started looking for new provocative plays to stage or changed their programming policies to include dramatic works composed by new writers, which directly or indirectly led to Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Martin Crimp etc. In a talk delivered to the Society for Theatre Research (Art Workers Guild, London) in 2010, Aleks Sierz has indicated that close to the end of the 20th century the United Kingdom was literally “drowning in new writing”. With relation to the predominant atmosphere and state of British theatre in this decade, he noted that if the 1990s were “the Quantum decade, with everything happening at the same time and all over the place. British theatre resembled a nuclear reactor: inside, everything is bouncing off the walls; common sense flies out the window; paradox rules okay”. Consequently, such inclinations and efforts led to dramatic works that have been grouped under the term ‘in-yer-face’ theatre.

In his influential work entitled *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Sierz defines ‘in-yer-face’ theatre as “any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message” (2001: 4). In practice, these are post-1990s plays displaying a harsh reaction to the spirit of the age, focusing on taboo or controversial subjects such as violence, victimization, sex, incest, rape, war crime, mental

illnesses, asylums, drugs, overdose and employing a series of theatrical techniques –raw, biased, coarse language, shock tactics, deliberate attacks on audience prejudices, and stage imagery emphasizing severe pain or vulnerability without relief. Now, it would be incorrect to say that the 1990s were completely composed of in-yer-face, but it definitely dominated the decade and continued to shape British drama even after it lost ground around 1999.

Although some of the sensibilities, techniques and subject matter present in in-yer-face theatre have prevailed on to the next era, there have also been certain innovations. As a broad way of categorizing, two kinds of theatre have been produced after 1999, “literal theatre”, a non-experimental kind of drama with social commentary showing the British nation to itself and “metaphysical theatre” –drama that is heavy on metaphor, visionary imagination and experimentation– that provides highly provocative examples of contemporary drama (Sierz: 2010). Further than that, it is impossible to group them due to their individualistic nature. For example, Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), Joe Penhall’s *Blue/Orange* (2000) and Anthony Neilson’s *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) all take up the theme of mental illnesses, but their form, style and the way they deal with this subject matter is very different; while *Blue/Orange* criticizes Britain’s health policies through two male doctors’ (senior Robert and junior Bruce) disagreement about the treatment of the possibly schizophrenic patient Afro-Caribbean Christopher, *Dissocia* questions the state of Lisa torn between an imaginary world (Dissocia) and real life (hospital) due to a dissociative disorder created by the trauma of childhood rape, and *4:48 Psychosis* illustrates the condition of a patient experiencing clinical depression. Among these three plays, especially Kane’s *4:48* proves to be distinct in its style, employment of poetic language, use of repetition, countdown, dialogue, monologue etc., A few examples from the play are as follows:

I am sad

I feel the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve

I am bored and dissatisfied with everything

I am a complete failure as a person

(2001: 206)

100

91

84

81

72

69

58

44

37

38

42

21

12

7

(2001: 208)

unpleasant
 unacceptable
 uninspiring
 impenetrable

irrelevant
 irreverent
 irreligious
 unrepentant

dislike
 dislocate
 disembody
 deconstruct

(2001: 221-2)

Even though it is impossible to classify new dramatic works in Britain, as mentioned earlier, the predominant dramatic inclinations of the last decade have been the portrayal of various sensibilities and voices – Muslim, Caribbean, gay, transvestite etc., in plays set all over world. Perhaps as an extension of this, politics –especially relating to 9/11 and its after-effect, war crime and trauma, war on and fear of terror, the culture of fear, problems relating to the Middle-East and Africa– have been presented through individual experience or by means of verbatim or plays resembling reality T.V. Of course, there have also been a vast number of plays concerning Britain, relating to national identity, class, social problems caused by Thatcher’s policies in the 1980s, racial tensions and poverty, segregation etc., but as Sierz has pointed out, there weren’t many ‘rebels’ “who were able to reinvent the old radical spirit of anger and criticism”. By referring to John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, he rightfully asks “Who can name this decade’s Jimmy Porter?” (2010).

British Drama 'a-la-mode' in Turkey

Having given a brief outline of British drama at the turn of the century, it would be appropriate to move on to Turkey. British drama – predominantly plays by Shakespeare – has always gathered a large crowd of spectators in Turkey, but in-yer-face theatre has become extremely popular. Turkish theatregoers, largely composed of young spectators, want to see provocative plays that express their generation. In addition, even classical plays, such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (Semaver Kumpanyası-2010) are being staged by the employment of 'in-yer-face' techniques. Since hot versions of in-yer-face require small spaces, enough for 50-200 spectators, this has, in turn, led to the increase of what I term as 'flat theatres', that is, small-budget theatres that entertain audiences in apartment flats or small venues, also called 'fringe' or 'black box'.

Many of these theatre groups in metropolitan cities have or are currently staging new British plays, especially in Istanbul; however, some might be surprised to learn that Turkish spectators were officially introduced to in-yer-face theatre in 1999, not by a private theatre company, but the Turkish National Theatre. They staged Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* in 1999, continued with the *Cripple of Inishmaan* in 2007 and are currently staging *Pillowman* (2012-) and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2013); *Lieutenant of Inishmore* was also staged by Kent Oyuncuları in 2003.

The year 2005 proved to be very significant in terms of British drama, because it witnessed the rise of post-1990s British drama and underground-fringe theatres in Turkey. That year, Semaver Kumpanyası staged the controversial play *Trainspotting*. Also, the same year a theatre company that was going to have a vast influence on contemporary drama in Turkey had been established – DOT. DOT, starting in a 180m² flat at Mısır Apartment, was the first theatre company that made post 1990s British Theatre popular in Turkey. They have literally dedicated themselves to contemporary drama, especially those by British playwrights; some of the plays they staged up to 2013 include Joe Penhall's *Love and Understanding* (2005), Anthony Neilson's *The Censor* (2006), Tracy Letts's *Bug* (2006), Caryl Churchill's *Faraway* (2006), Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2007), Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008) and *Shopping and F***ing* (2009), David Harrower's *Blackbird* (2008), Simon Stephens' *Pornography* (2009), Simon Stephens' *Punk Rock* (2010), Dennis Kelly's *Orphans* (2011), Bryony Lavery's *Beautiful Burnout* (2012), David Greig's *Yellow Moon: The Ballad of Leila and Lee* (2012) and Ali Taylor's *Overspill* (2013).

Perhaps due to DOT's success, many young theatre groups lacking proper funds, space or cast preferred staging similar plays that require small locations enough for a small number of spectators. This has led to an increase in the number of alternative theatres in Turkey; some of these venues are İkinci Kat Tiyatrosu, Kara Kutu, Oyuncular Tiyatro Kahve-Cem Safran Sahnesi, Tiyatro Artı, Kubaracı50, Oyun Kutusu, Domus Sanat Çiftliği and Dip Sahne.

The next topic to address might be the British playwrights staged in Turkey. Martin McDonagh, the first one to be staged, has already been covered in connection to the National Theatre and Kent Tiyatrosu, but it should be added that Yan Etki theatre group is currently staging *The Lonesome West* (2013). Sarah Kane is, without a doubt, the most popular of such playwrights; all of Sarah Kane's published work have been staged in Turkey apart from her screenplay *Skin; Crave* together with *4.48 Psychosis* at Maya Sahnesi in 2003 and by Tiyatro POT in 2012, *Peadra's Love* (2006) by Tiyatro Oyun Kutusu, *Cleanced* by a group of drama students of Ankara University at Domus Sanat Çiftliği in 2010 and *Blasted* by Karakutu the same year. Another British playwright that has swept Istanbul is Anthony Neilson; after the *Censor* was staged in 2006 by DOT, three of Neilson's plays are being staged this season (2013); *Normal* by Ölü Aktörler, *Penetrator* by In'Tackt and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* by İkinci Kat Tiyatrosu. Philip Ridley seems to be yet another favourite among young directors; following DOT's staging of *Mercury Fur* in 2007, İkinci Kat Tiyatrosu staged *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* in 2011, Tiyatro Yan Etki staged *Leaves of Glass* in 2012, and İkinci Kat is currently staging *Pitchfork Disney*) this season. Next we have Joe Penhall with two plays-*Love and Understanding* and *Some Voices*, Simon Stephen-Pornography and *Punk Rock* and Mark Ravenhill -*Shopping and Fucking* and *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*. Of course there are others, but these seem to be the most popular.

Now, theatres in Turkey are moving on to the next step. They are looking for new provocative plays to stage composed by young Turkish playwrights, most of who have been greatly influenced by in-yer-face. Some examples are Özen Yula's *Gözü Kara Alaturka* (Bakırköy Belediye Tiyatrosu-2007) portraying the lives of various underdogs of the backstreets of Harbiye, Sami Berat Marçalı's *Limonata* (İkinci Kat Tiyatrosu 2011) -a commentary on topics such as military service, homosexuality and violence, Ebru Nihal Celkan's *Kimsenin Ölmediği Günün Ertesiydi* (Kumbaracı50-2013) about transvestites' lives and *Nerede Kalmıştık?* (Şermola Performans-2012) presenting a soldier's difficulty adapting to normal life after returning from military service in

South-Eastern Turkey, Buğra Gülsoy's *Pragma* (Garajistanbul-2011) on pragmatism and serial killers, *Aut* by Alper Kul and Özgür Özgülğün drawing parallels between football and violence (İkinci Kat-2011-), Yiğit Sertemir's *Katilcilik* (Kumbaracı50-2013) about three women who initially meet on the internet and end up committing a murder, Ahmet Sami Özbudak's *İz* (Galata Perform-2013) following the lives of different characters in the 1950s, the 1980s and around 2000s, who have lived in the same house at different times etc. Of course almost all of these plays have not been published yet and must be viewed directly on the relevant stage.

Similar to post-1990s British drama, the majority of the plays produced by a new generation of Turkish playwrights, take up taboo subjects, employ shock tactics to show the violence, obscenity, cruelty that people are subjected to and address issues relating to the world in general, and especially to the social and political history of Turkey.

In conclusion, in-yer-face theatre and post-1990s British drama has attracted the attention of numerous theatre companies, especially fringe theatres, and young theatre spectators in Turkey. As a result, many plays by contemporary British playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley etc. have been staged by Turkish theatre companies in metropolitan cities including İkinci Kat Tiyatrosu, Kara Kutu, Oyuncular Tiyatro Kahve-Cem Safran Sahnesi, Tiyatro Artı, Kubaracı50, Oyun Kutusu, In'Tackt, Domus Sanat Çiftliği, Dip Sahne etc. This popularity has, in turn, led to the composition of controversial plays by a new generation of young Turkish writers that show a great influence of post-1990s British drama.

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