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**POLITICAL ELEMENTS IN THE PLAYS  
OF JOHN ARDEN AND EDWARD BOND**

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BY  
HALA AHMED BADER EL DIN HAMMOUDA  
UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF  
PROFESSOR FADILA MOHAMED FATTOUH  
AIN SHAMS UNIVERSITY

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**Political Elements in the Plays of  
John Arden and Edward Bond  
(1965 - 1975)**

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توقيعه

فخري - شرف

أ.د / فخرية محمد فتوح  
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رئيس مجلس القسم

أ.د / محمد شرف

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                  | <i>Page</i> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Introduction: .....                                              | 1-7         |
| Chapter One: Politics and the Modern British Theatre .....       | 8-33        |
| Chapter Two: Political Ideologies in the Twentieth Century ..... | 34-59       |
| Chapter Three: John Arden: .....                                 | 60-131      |
| A: Early Social Plays .....                                      |             |
| B: Middle Period Historical Plays .....                          |             |
| C: Autobiographical Plays .....                                  |             |
| D: The Irish Problem : <u>The Ballygombeen Bequest</u> . ....    |             |
| Chapter Four: Edward Bond: .....                                 | 132-194     |
| A: Early Social Plays .....                                      |             |
| B: Middle Period Historical Plays .....                          |             |
| C: <u>Lear</u> .....                                             |             |
| Conclusion: .....                                                | 195-214     |
| Bibliography: .....                                              | 215-230     |

# INTRODUCTION

One of humanity's basic needs is to understand the world it inhabits - how societies work, the relation between the individuals and society, why things go wrong and how things could be made to work better. There are many attempts to explain these questions - some religious, some social, some scientific and some political. Political science propagates certain abstract and theoretical ideas as political solutions to these problems.

Concentrating on modern British drama the researcher finds that throughout the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, political ideas are not very prominent. Writers of that period did not treat absolute politics but are more interested in socio - economic problems and their impact on the human psyche. Nevertheless, political ideas are the dominant themes in the theatre of the mid-century. John Arden (1929 - ) and Edward Bond (1932 - ) are two modern British dramatists committed to using politics as a means of political persuasion and change in the struggle to create a better society.

Through a detailed critical study of the plays of the two dramatists in chronological order, this thesis will attempt to point out the political elements in their plays. Moreover, it will draw attention to the similarities and differences in the treatment of these political elements. The analysis aims at assessing how far these two dramatists succeed in dramatically propagating the abstract and theoretical solutions advocated by political science so as to better the conditions of society.

This thesis will deal with the plays of John Arden and Edward Bond written during the period 1955 - 1975. From the very beginning of their

2

dramatic careers, Arden and Bond prove themselves to be politically committed left-wing developing dramatists who identify with the cause of the dispossessed, the exploited and the underprivileged. They attack social ills, reveal the social forces that cause these diseases and warn society that change is necessary. In other words, they share the same interests and objectives in regard to the use of politics for dramatic presentation. In addition, Arden's and Bond's dramatic careers take an entirely individual direction. The originality of their experimental techniques to convey their political themes is the more remarkable at a time when some other contemporary British dramatists still write within conventional, realistic, and traditional well - made models. This research will cover the period between 1955 - 1975 because Arden's and Bond's plays written during that period are truly representative of their dramatic works. Furthermore, these plays represent a development in Arden's and Bond's political and theatrical orientation. Arden's plays include those he writes by himself and those he writes in collaboration with his Irish wife Margaretta D'Arcy. These collaborative works indicate the development and shift in his political and dramatic attitude. As for Bond, his plays written during this twenty- year period are also representative and demonstrate the development in his dramatic career.

The thesis will be divided into four chapters. Chapter I, entitled "Politics and the Modern British Theatre", will attempt to prove that throughout the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries politics is not treated by modern British dramatists. This kind of evasion continues with some mid - century dramatists till John Arden and Edward Bond

introduce new themes to modern drama. They use political ideas as a means of political persuasion and change to ensure the greatest happiness for the greatest number. The chapter will aim at verifying the reasons why these two British dramatists become interested in the use of politics. It will also trace their personal background and political interests. The relevant political events as well as the socio-economic shortcomings in Britain during that time will be respectively handled. Moreover, their interpretation of politics and their conception of the role that the dramatist and the theatre should play in public life will be expounded as it helps the researcher to apprehend why Arden and Bond are involved in politics.

Chapter II, entitled "Political Ideologies in the Twentieth Century", will provide a general survey and definition of the political ideologies that are promoted during the Twentieth Century. In addition, it will discuss the reasons for their appearance, trace their historical origins and their introduction to Britain. The survey will extend to include the contemporary conception of these political ideologies. This information is necessary because it will enable the researcher to understand and later analyse the political elements in the plays of Arden and Bond. It is important to note here that Socialism will be treated with special emphasis since its influence on the two dramatists is greater than Capitalism, Communism, Fascism, Racism, and Pacifism.

However, the survey presented in chapters I and II cannot be complete without referring to the fact that the visit of Bertolt Brecht (1898 - 1956) and the Berliner Ensemble to London from 27<sup>th</sup> August to

11<sup>th</sup> September 1956 had a profound impact on John Arden and Edward Bond. This season of plays had a strong influence on the two dramatists and made them interested in the use of politics in drama. The presentation of the plays convinced them to have a strong faith in the social potentials of the theatre. It showed them also that it can be an instrument to diagnose the defects of society, awaken social and political consciousness and propagate certain political ideas with a view towards solving problems. In other words, Brecht's plays showed them that there was no need to write about the little things any more and that they could concern themselves with the relationship between the individuals and society. Brecht, therefore, served as a model to be followed and modified. This Brechtian impact will not be handled in detail in this thesis, but will be referred to whenever necessary.

Each of the following two chapters will be devoted to one of the two dramatists under examination. The analysis of the plays will be carried out in the light of the background material. It will draw attention to the political elements and the techniques adopted to convey them. For example, the critical analysis in chapter III will demonstrate how John Arden is disillusioned by the hope offered by the Welfare State. Consequently, he raises his voice in protest and attacks the social, economic and political imperfections of contemporary British society. In the early social plays The Waters of Babylon (1957), Live Like Pigs (1958) and The Happy Haven (1959), Arden criticises the social ills that cause the conflict between the individuals and the state. He addresses the audience to arouse their social consciousness and make them think about the plight of underprivileged immigrants, gypsies and old people.

In addition, this study will show that in the middle period historical plays written in collaboration with his Irish wife, Margaretta D'Arcy, Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1959), The Business of Good Government (1961), Armstrong's Last Goodnight (1964) Left-Handed Liberty (1965) and The Hero Rises Up (1968), Arden tackles the political problems of war, violence and government. He addresses the audience to arouse their political consciousness about these political problems. When handling the two autobiographical plays, Squire Jonathan and his Unfortunate Tresaure (1971) and The Bagman (1972), it will be proved that they express Arden's crisis of conscience concerning the role a dramatist should play in public life. They demonstrate his belief that he is avoiding total commitment and is tempted to indulge his artistic instincts. Moreover, the analysis will affirm that Arden and D'Arcy demonstrate an interest in the Irish problem in The Ballygombeen Bequest (1974) and The Non - Stop Connolly Show (1975). They explain, elucidate and clarify the many aspects of the Irish issue to help the audience reach a partisan conclusion, that they have to use their newly acquired social and political consciousness to solve the Irish problem. However, The Non-Stop Connolly Show will not be handled in this thesis because The Ballygombeen Bequest is an adequate illustration of the authors' concern during that period.

With regards to techniques, the plays of John Arden display enormous variations of styles. Yet since he upholds the importance of content, the researcher discovers that it is the content of his plays that affects the form and dictates the techniques manipulated to further

political themes. Consequently, the analysis in chapter III will refer to Arden's use of satire, masks, the prologue, the parable, the narrator figure and songs as some of the most traditional techniques employed to convey political themes. In addition, the chapter proposes to show how John Arden manipulates the new theatrical techniques of Bertolt Brecht such as direct address and placards to break the traditional hypnotic magic illusion of the naturalistic theatre in order to alienate, activate and help the audience infer their own conclusions with regards to the political messages of his plays.

Chapter IV will draw attention to how Edward Bond, also, is disillusioned because of the hope offered by the Welfare State. Consequently, he, too, raises his voice in protest and criticises the social ills that cause the conflict between the individuals and the state. In the early social plays The Pope's Wedding (1962) and Saved (1965), Bond dwells on the social restrictions forced upon individuals in British society to arouse the audience's social consciousness. In addition, the analysis will show that the middle period historical plays Early Morning (1968), Narrow Road to The Deep North (1969), Black Mass (1970), Passion (1971), The Sea (1972), Bingo (1973), and The Fool (1974) arouse the audience's political consciousness. Bond demystifies historical eras, figures, and events to demonstrate the historical roots of contemporary social problems. In addition, he attacks the myths of British society, and shows how religion and art are used to encourage people to accept the existing social structure. Moreover, in Lear (1975) he revises a historical play and concentrates on its political aspect to orient the audience to act

on their newly acquired social and political consciousness to better society.

The critical analysis will also point out that Edward Bond believes that form and content are indivisible because the how of expression cannot be meaningfully detached from the content and substance. His theatre, therefore, draws on a variety of techniques from the past. In addition, he utilizes and introduces new techniques. Bond rearranges these techniques so that they can have a flexible interaction with each other to provide a theatrical experience where the audience are both entertained and instructed. The chapter will, therefore, refer to Bond's use of satire, the prologue and the narrator figure as some of the most traditional techniques adopted to promote political themes. In addition, it proposes to show how Edward Bond builds on Brecht's alienation techniques. He introduces isolated moments of violence not to distance the audience but to involve them with the events so they would see society objectively and be oriented towards action.

The conclusion will finally summarize the differences and similarities between the works of the two dramatists. It will also assess the extent of their success in dramatically propagating the abstract and theoretical solutions advocated by political science and adopting special techniques so as to expose the oppressive relationship between the individuals and the state and better the conditions of society.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **POLITICS and THE MODERN BRITISH THEATRE**

Worthy of remark is the fact that theatre drifts to politics because through dealing with politics drama can enlarge its scope and become international in appeal. It can show an increasing awareness of the vital, topical political issues in the life of the world. It can try to become a socially committed art, a faithful mirror that deals with the spectators's everyday political problems and a potential instrument to solve these problems. In addition, through referring to politics the theatre can attempt to reform society by presenting artistic models of the social life of human beings. These models can assist the audience in understanding their social surroundings, diagnosing the defects of society and then improving this society. In short, politics can enable drama to show the audience the causes of misery in the world, point out who the persecutors are, and how they are to be got rid of in order to achieve social progress and happiness.

That all theatre is political in the sense that it is not independent of society has always been a controversial issue G.S. Fraser states in his book The Modern Writer and his World that a play is political in the sense that drama is a social activity. It is the social expression of thought and uses the social medium of language. Consequently, a play is a political one if its subject is society and the relationship between the individuals and society. In addition, it is regarded as political if it deals with social and moral issues. That is to say, a play is regarded as political because it reflects