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Tony Kushner's Postmodern Theatre: A Study of Political Discourse

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This study is primarily concerned with exploring/analyzing the political discourse as dramatized/concretized in the dramas of Tony Kushner who is considered one of the most politically-engaged playwrights in America today. For this reason, the researcher's point of departure is the concept of political theatre as developed by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. This theoretical explanation/exploration serves a double purpose; first, it is meant to provide a statement of the definitions and concepts central to this study such as political discourse, political theatre, and postmodern theatre; second, it gives the researcher the tools of analysis by which to read/analyze Tony Kushner's postmodern, politically-oriented texts. The aim in view is to try to define the major features of Tony Kushner's postmodern theatre and to find out how he theatricalizes/incorporates politics.

American drama in the 1980s and the 1990s has witnessed a noticeable thematic shift from exclusively personal plays and musicals that once dominated the American theatre for a long period of time to an increasing number of plays which put greater emphasis on exploring issues and questions of socio-political interest. As a result of this thematic shift, the predominantly private settings and familial character relationships of the traditional family play have been replaced by a great variety of public settings and non-familial characters.

Tony Kushner's theatre is a pioneering attempt in this respect. In Kushner's theatre, there is no room for the traditional family plays which have dominated the American stage in the 1960s and 1970s. Kushner has found that there is not enough political discourse in contemporary American Theatre. For this reason, he writes his plays to shed special

light on the politics of the American society in the 1980s, the 1990s, and in the beginnings of the 21st century.

In order to explore such thorny issues of socio-political concerns, Kushner has to depart both thematically as well as structurally from the traditional patterns of the family play, which have dominated the American Theatre landscape through most of the twentieth century. His first major play, *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985) draws parallels between Germany in the 1930s and the United States in the 1980s. It is actually a political critique of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan's America which was mainly characterized by Reagan's huge record of political failings, his unprecedented buildup of the U.S. military, and his administration's blatant disregard of the growing AIDS plague.

Tony Kushner's major breakthrough *Angels in America* (1994) is a tremendous hit which many theatre critics view as one of the most important plays of the twentieth century. In two full-length plays - *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* - Kushner condemns the political corruption which prevails the political system of the United States in this period. Kushner's third play "*Slavs!*" (1994) is about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under former president Mikhail Gorbachev. In this play, Kushner explores the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ruin left in its wake. Tony Kushner's latest play *Homebody/Kabul* (2002), written before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed, is an ambitious and powerful drama set principally in Kabul under the Taliban regime.

Key Words: Political Theatre, Political Discourse, Modernism, Postmodernism, Postmodern Theatre,

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1. Introduction, Theorizing the Postmodern Theatre.	1
2. <i>A Bright Room Called Day</i>	65
3. <i>Angels in America</i>	93
4. <i>Slavs! Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness</i>	164
5. <i>Homebody/Kabul</i>	189
CONCLUSION: Paradoxes and Perspectives	214
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	225
APPENDICES	

APPENDICES

SUMMARY

Since the time of Aeschylus and Sophocles, theatre has been one of the most important places where political debates and issues are raised. Dating back to the Greeks and the origins of theatre itself, political theatre in contemporary drama begins with the theory and practice of two major political theatre theorists, namely, Erwin Piscator (1895-1966) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Both believe that theatre should not just reflect the world but change it. Indeed, Piscator and Brecht assume that art can become a weapon in the socio-political struggle. But this would only take place if the audience are urged to question their relationships to the work onstage, and to overcome the theatre's traditional role of merely entertaining its audience. Theatre should not be something one consumes; it should be something that stimulates one to reflection, and more importantly, to action. It is immensely crucial to realize that the concept of political theatre as developed by Piscator and Brecht insists that the political is not just in the content but also in the form.

Just like world drama, American drama in the 1980s and the 1990s has witnessed a noticeable thematic shift from exclusively personal plays and musicals that once dominated the American theatre for a long period of time to an increasing number of plays which have put greater emphasis on exploring issues and questions of a socio-political interest. As a result of this thematic shift, the predominantly private settings and familial character relationships of the traditional family play have been replaced by a great variety of public settings and non-familial characters.

Tony Kushner's theatre is a pioneering attempt in this respect. In order to explore such highly debatable issues of socio-political concerns, Kushner has to depart both thematically as well as structurally from the traditional patterns of the family play. He has found that there is not enough political discourse in contemporary American theatre. Thus, he creates a type of theatre that defines itself as a public forum for the discussion of current political events and issues.

For this reason, he writes his plays to shed special light on the politics of the American society in the 1980s, the 1990s, and in the beginnings of the 21st century.

In this dissertation, the researcher has shown that the politically fervent first half of the 20th century was marked not only by a strong modernist political theatre praxis but also a vibrant vernacular one. The concept of political theatre has commonly been associated with European modernism and with avant-garde concepts of art and society. It stands for provocative anti-bourgeois declarations and bold experimentation. Due to its innovative and revolutionary nature, modernist political theatre has been mostly prominent in the twentieth-century theatre histories. However, the preoccupation of theatre scholars and critics with this model of political theatre has effaced another form of political theatre, which not only coexisted along with the modernist one but also had a rich tradition of playing an active role in society. The vernacular political theatre was particularly influential on the American stage in the 1930s. Being less radical and innovative than its modernist counterpart, it had often been considered of lesser political and aesthetic value. Rather than engaging in modernist experimentation, that form of political theatre generally chose to convey its political message via conventional modes of representation such as realism and naturalism. The vernacular political theatre situates itself within the aesthetic and commercial venues provided by the bourgeois cultural industry, whereas the modernist political theatre vehemently rejects the dominant cultural practice and attempts to subvert and negate it by producing an alternative one.

This study actually raises a question which is crucial for political theatre praxis and criticism; how is the political effect of a dramatic work to be evaluated? Should one go by the intensity of revolutionary sentiment displayed inside the theatre, by the debates a performance generates, by the degree of popular success, by the degree of critical acclaim, or by the extent to which it resists the status quo? Certainly, all these factors should be taken into

consideration without limiting political efficacy of a performance to either of them. But even then, it is difficult to determine what concrete political changes a performance effected in the social realm. Thus, it would be futile to argue, for example, that Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is politically more effective than Arthur Miller's political drama *The Crucible*. What one can evaluate, however, is the clarity of a political agenda, and the methods of translating it on the stage. In the same way, political theatre, ultimately, constitutes itself not only in the act of critiquing the status quo, but also in the act of resisting it. In this regard, form is indisputably as politically important as content, regardless of whether it is innovative or conventional. Concurrently, innovative form alone cannot carry the political message of a performance by itself, but does need a substantial and clear political argument to back it up.

Today's postmodern theatre has been able to assert itself politically. It has done so precisely by redefining its relation to hegemonic cultural practices. As Philip Auslander points out, contemporary political theatre has moved from a politics/aesthetics of transgression and intervention to a politics/aesthetics of resistance (Auslander, 24). This means that even though political theatre is today confined to operating from within the object of its own critique and to recycling and reproducing the hegemonic representational means provided by this culture, it can nevertheless articulate its suspicion of them. Hence, it is capable, in this respect, of resisting and subverting the status quo. It is, in fact, that articulation/resistance which postmodern political theatre has to offer. As Tony Kushner rightly points out, "while we are trained to see the personal dimension of an event, we are often unable to detect its political meaning, particularly since the mass media are strongly invested in blurring it" (Kushner, "Notes About Political Theatre" 22). Thus, wars, political and social injustices, and epidemics are seen as mere human tragedies eliciting only sympathy but, at the same time, preventing people from asking more uncomfortable political questions about what has really motivated these events in the first place and in

what social, ethnic, cultural and political contexts they occur, in the second. The task of political theatre thus remains essentially the same: to reveal the political at the heart of the seemingly personal, to unmask systems of oppressions behind that what seems "eternally human and natural" (Kushner, *ibid*, 21). As before, it is out to unveil "the great historical project of capitalist myth-making: the transformation of that which is social, cultural, and political, and hence changeable, into nature, which is immutable and eternal" (Kushner, *ibid*, 21). Today, political theatre needs to be aware of the limits of its practices as well as explicitly acknowledge this awareness to the audiences. In so doing, it is, then, able to address the current cultural situation. Concurrently, postmodern political theatre entails studying the failures of previous political practices and boldly investigating their complexities, contradictions and paradoxes. Only in this manner, postmodern political theatre can avoid what Peter Brook terms the 'deadly theatre', "a theatre that not only fails to elevate and instruct, but hardly ever even entertains" (Brook, 10).

In the shattered world of post-9/11, Tony Kushner may have found his time. He has long embraced the label of a 'political playwright', always searching in his own work for the socio-political armature that girds characters and theme. In his *A Bright Room Called Day*, he draws parallels between Germany in the 1930s and the United States in the 1980s, charting German social democratic impotence at the rise to power of Nazism; in his most acclaimed work, the two-part epic *Angels in America*, he presents a 'gay fantasia on national themes' that places personal sufferings and betrayal in the larger worlds of disease and homophobia; in *Slavs*, he evokes the death of the Soviet Union amidst chaos and corruption; and in his most recent *Homebody/Kabul*, he uses modern Afghanistan to shed light on contemporary American politics in relation to ideas of isolation and the difficulties of connection on an international scale.

Aside from the particulars of the plays themselves, one can think of the work of Kushner as a theatre of 'resistance' in itself. Kushner views contemporary America as a society that has lost various essential belief systems that create strong communities. For him, what is missing from the modern world is a sense of 'interconnection' that can unite both the divergent cultural sensibilities within the American society itself and that can bond the increasingly disconnected United States to its international neighbors. In Kushner's plays, such interconnection is possible and real. Community, as a term, has had a recent resurgence in American culture, perhaps particularly after 9/11. As communities crumble and notions of interconnection continue to decline, everyone is implicated and the only solution is coming together in opposition to the problems. Kushner makes it clear that people should not lead their lives in isolation. Connectedness, or human communion, is the major premise of Kushner's politics as he strongly believes in the supreme importance of interconnectivity and interdependence between all members of a society, and consequently among different nations on an international scale.

Similarly, Kushner's political theatre celebrates dissent. Although his works vary widely in setting, ranging from the Nazi Germany to the Soviet Russia and contemporary Afghanistan, they all delight in bringing fractious characters together. What these plays make clear, however, is that not all nations view intellectual and political dissent as congenially as America. In *A Bright room Called Day*, Tony Kushner unintentionally affirms American values through their very critique. In fact, what many critics have overlooked is that in the context of Nazism, Zillah's outburst against the U.S. administration demonstrates an assertion of her ability, and consequently, Kushner's, to criticize the national government without reprisal. Similarly, *Angels in America* critiques the U.S. administration of the 1980s while simultaneously lauding America for welcoming the diversity its cast represents. *Angels* and other works even emphasize such an astonishing diversity by presenting only a few actors to

play all the roles, indicating that boundaries between categories of race, gender, and sexuality are more permeable than might be assumed. The very fluidity of these categories in a play about America suggests that Kushner perceives his utopian vision not merely as an artistic fantasy, but as a potential reality stemming from America's foundations of openly accepting all peoples.



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