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The Double-stage of Tony Kushner's Theatre

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Abstract

Tony Kushner has sparked controversy from critics about his Double-stage theater. Some have accused him of presenting a deceptive theater that manipulates to please all parties; However, others have considered that his double stage presents a true comprehensive picture of the political reality we live in. Between this and that, the study aims to analyze his plays and identify their characteristics.

The study reached its objectives by three chapters, preceded by an introduction, and followed by a conclusion. The study touched on several topics that contributed to achieving its objectives.

the first of this topic is: development of political theater through time; and its impact in Kushner's theater.

As for the second topic is from reality to the double theater.

the third topic dealt with the methods used by Tony Kushner in his plays.

The researcher concluded her study with a set of results, the most important of which was that Kushner's writings were honest, clear, and comprehensive plays, not hypocrisy; The study considered him to be the ideal writer of his time; The public has always been amazed at his concern for fairness. He can also argue so eloquently for both sides

that his plays take absolutely no position. The study also showed Kushner's attempt to bridge the gap between societies with a comprehensive drama despite the different cultures and languages. Kushner also realized the reality in his plays in a comprehensive and empty manner, so he uses the double presentation method in his theater to convey this comprehensive view to his audience. briefly, Tony Kushner's plays have big themes and great ideas. Kushner has produced a variety of plays that deal with compelling themes and ideas by resorting to unconventional theatrical formats and techniques. Whether he is viewed as a leftist or a free-thinking writer, what is perfectly consistent in his neo-realist form is his belief that theater can change lives for the better. The duty of the writer is to explain the world in which he lives.

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Introduction

Tony Kushner is a socio-political dramatist, whose overt political voice makes him a unique figure. He believes that “All theatre is political” (Perestroika, June15). James Fisher writes about Kushner, in his book *Understanding Tony Kushner* (2008), “Kushner is a true innovator in dramatic form” (1), whose dramatic form can embody a complete image of political reality of our world on the stage, and as a result in the audience’s mind. Thus, Kushner’s political drama can be regarded as a creative model of modern political theatre. Kushner sought to revitalize and politicize contemporary American theatre influenced by Brecht and Walter Benjamin. Kushner’s political attitude is clearly announced in most of his plays, such as *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985), *Angles in America* (1991), *Homebody/Kabul* (1997), *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* (2003), *Munich* (2005), and *Lincoln* (2011). Through these plays and more, Kushner dramatizes a political theatre which is collective, comprehensive, chronologic, and prophetic theatre.

There are critics who claimed that Tony Kushner produces ambivalent drama. Kushner is accused of playing on both sides, especially after his play *Munich* (2005). Kushner's bold declaration of his double-view of our political world and his realizing of the other are accused of critics as a trickish drama. For example, Tony Kushner's recent screenplay *Munich* is widely condemned by numerous critics as being grossly inaccurate in ways that are hostile to Israel and inappropriately sympathetic to Palestinian terrorists. Andrea Levin writes in his article

Munich and the Kushner connection: "Many of the themes of Munich appear to reflect Tony Kushner's deeply ambivalent attitudes toward Israel.... for example, he repeatedly blames Israel On the other hand, Kushner and Munich virtually disregard the reality of the Arab world's rejection Of Jews."(1)

Kushner's own words also increase attack on him. He called Israel's founding "a mistake" saying "it would have been better if Israel never happened". He also called American Jews who support Israel "repulsive," and Israel a "disgrace"(Jill, interview). Kushner sits on the Board of Advisors of the "Jewish Voice for Peace," which advocates divestment and boycott campaigns against Israel. Kushner is also involved with a radical anti-war group, "Not in Our Name" (NION), that opposes U.S. Policy in Iraq and Palestine.

Thus, some critics have rejected Tony Kushner's honoring. According to Piliavsky's article The Crimes of Tony Kushner, Dr. Alan Mazurek the representative of ZOA has written to Brandeis President Jahuda Reinharz and Brandeis Board members saying: "please, Mr. president Reinharz and members of Brandeis's National Board, search your soul, and do what's right and what's moral....Rescind this honor to the hater Tony Kushner and stop any further harm to Brandeis's reputation." (3) Some critics and Organizations, as previously mentioned, want to prevent Kushner's honoring, but Brandeis President reply: "this award is being given not because of Kushner's political views, but because of his artistic accomplishments."(The Crimes of Tony Kushner,4)

Kushner realizes reality in a comprehensive and blank way, so he employs double-staging technique in his theatre to convey this comprehensive view to his audience. According to Kushner's plays, the definition of the double-staging technique is that the stage of the theatre embodies of the two faces of the reality with each other in a foggy and partial image. Then, gradually, the stage is divided into two stages; in which every stage explores a face of reality, separately. Every stage of them dramatizes one face of reality completely through the embodiment of all passive and positive sides. After the realization of the two faces of reality in a separated clear image, the two stages are unified again to show the complete, blank, and comprehensive image of the double-faced reality. Kushner's double-staging technique gives the clear image of the two faces of reality and spotlights on the foggy parts of this reality. Kushner's double-staging technique also helps the audience to get the miss between cultures and civilizations. This technique seems as an invitation to see the other's world and admit of his existence for understanding the reality in a fair and logical image. Not because I'm democratic, the other should be a terrorist. It's probably that our deeds that push the other to be a terrorist.

Kushner does his best to show that his duality of view of our political world, which is embodied on his double-stage theatre, isn't ambivalent drama. It is only a comprehensive image of reality. Although Kushner's justifying, there is still a gap between his duality of view of political reality on his double-stage theatre and his accusation of introducing ambivalent drama. He has always believed that telling blankly all faces of reality by its

bitterness is more compelling and effective than dramatizing trickish drama. Kushner dramatizes all faces of reality on the stage and lets audience see them through Kushner's view and thinks of them through audience's mind himself. Kushner says:

I cannot be a playwright without having some temptation to let audiences know what I think when I read the newspaper in the morning. What I find is that the things that make you the most uncomfortable are the best things to write plays about. (Qtd in. Notes About Political Theatre, 25)

Chapter I

Political Theatre: Historical Background

“All theatre is political ... since it's true that everything is political it becomes meaningless to talk about political and nonpolitical and more useful to speak of a theatre that presents the world as it is, an interwoven web of the public and the private.” (“Notes about Political Theatre” 22).

Tony Kushner is a socio-political dramatist, whose overt political voice makes him a unique figure. He believes that "All theatre is political" (Perestroika, June 15). Few contemporary dramatists in the United States, whatever their personal politics, dramatize political issues and historical figures as Kushner does. He believes that "since it's true that everything is political, it becomes meaningless to talk about political and nonpolitical theatre, and more useful to speak of a theatre that present the world as it is, an interwoven web of the public and the private" (Notes About Political Theatre, 22)

He began to demonstrate the breadth and the virtuosity of his playwriting as early as 1982, and his range astonished critics, even those disinclined to appreciate his left-wing political proclivities. According to Fisher's *The theatre of Tony Kushner*, Kushner's political awakening had begun during his college days after reading Ernst Fischer's *The Necessity of Art* a Marxist Approach as well as the writings of Walter Benjamin, especially *Understanding Brecht*. From these writings, and from Brecht's plays themselves, Kushner gained a sense of the social responsibility of the artist (6).

The theatre, Kushner believes, presents "the sole realm in contemporary life" (The theatre of Tony Kushner, 30) where it is possible to explore the fact that things are not always what they seem to be. According to Ernst Fischer's *The Necessity of Art*, Kushner's belief is approved through ages. Fischer wrote:

"This magic role of art has progressively given way to the role of illuminating social relationships, of enlightening men in societies becoming opaque, of helping men to recognize and change social reality"(13)

James Fisher writes about Kushner, in his book *Understanding Tony Kushner* (2008), "Kushner is a true innovator in dramatic form" (1), whose dramatic form can embody a complete image of political reality of our world on the stage, and as a result in the audience's mind. Thus, Kushner's political drama can be regarded as a creative model of modern political theatre. Kushner sought to revitalize and politicize contemporary American theatre influenced by Brecht and Walter Benjamin. Kushner's political attitude is clearly announced in most of his plays, such as *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985), *Angles In America* (1991), *Homebody/Kabul* (1997), *Munich* (2005), and *Lincoln* (2011). Through these plays and more, Kushner dramatizes a political theatre which is collective, comprehensive, chronologic, and also prophetic theatre.

Thus, it is essential for understanding Kushner's political attitude and the noticeable influence of political writers such as Brecht and Benjamin on him, to shed light

on the history of political theatre, its origins, purposes, and influence.

The stage has forever been a place where political issues have been examined. Political theatre is drama or performing art which emphasizes political issues in its theme or plot. It can also be defined as exploring themes more universal and central to society, especially when that society defines itself as politically conscious. These themes are not necessarily criticizing governments or attacking a certain policy or ideology. They may be about inequality, injustice, exploitation, the corruption of institutions...etc. John Pymm and Gail Deal explain in their book *A student's Guide to A2 Performance Studies for the OCR Specification* (2005):

" Politics is not only about governments. A performance piece might be about injustice or corruption or prejudice. Look at pieces from other countries. What message is the practitioner trying to convey to the audience? Is it about inequality? Is it about oppression? Poverty? Sexuality? Gay rights? the corruption within corporate institutions"(80).

Politics is so much a part of the way we experience our lives- from the communities we live into the food we eat, to the way we are educated, and to the resources we do or do not have access to. It only makes sense that the stories onstage reflect these realities, and political theatre is the place for compelling stories about the complexities of the world in which we live. Kushner said about politics in his interview with Jill Taft- Kaufman:

"Of course, politics is just another aspect of human behavior. and I think one of the great things about American democracy is the way in which it has carved out space in the American soul. It's political ground across which all sorts of human issues- sexuality, gender, fear of the other, identity, pride, hope- traverse. So, I think that politics is an inseparable fact of life, and all plays talk about it in some way or another. some plays do it more overtly than others" (interview, November,2002)

Also, the antenna of people's social and political consciousness raises by dramatizing their lives in a mirror which makes the picture clearer. But on what basis can a society define itself as politically conscious or not. Is it a mere personal choice or a social choice? Is it derived from class or gender? As the nucleus of the society, the individual's political identity is shaped according to his surroundings. Alan Sinfield explains in his new introduction to *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (2007):

"Political identity does not derive directly from class or gender or racial position, or sexual orientation: or simply from personal choice. It derives in large part, and this is not sufficiently remarked, from involvement in a milieu. so, an individual discovers a certain kind of selfhood in relation to others, learns to inhabit certain preoccupations and forms. A subculture sets the framework of understanding- makes certain stories plausible (266).

Political theatre aims to convince its audience that the real change starts here from their recognition of the values

which are dramatized on the stage, which pushes them to make a change and achieve more social justice and redistribution of power. Political theatre reinvigorates the progressive/ leftist spirit through not only the necessity for change, but also its inevitability. Baz Kershaw confirms this fact when he defines the political theatre and the purpose behind establishing it:

"Traditionally, of course, 'political theatre' has been taken to refer mainly to 'left-wing theatre'. Irwin Piscator was one of the first writers to develop this connection in the Political theatre His was a Marxist theatre that aimed to promote revolution, to overthrow the institutions of capitalism and to replace exploitation with justice, inequality with equality. embedded in his practice was a vision of Utopian democracy in which each will contribute according to ability and receive according to need (67).

However, the political theatre is not only confined to the leftist views, but it can also extend to include any other ones:

"The intention of the practitioner may depend on their political stance and beliefs and on the era in which they are writing. Political Practitioners will use their work to alter the audience's expectations, opinions, values, and worldview. They challenge 'norms' that are established in their society. Again, their techniques will vary but many practitioners use structural devices to set up contrasts between traditional ideas and their contemporary ideas (Pymm and Deal 81).