

**METATHEATRICAL AND
POST DRAMATIC DEVICES:
AN OVERVIEW
OF POST-MODERN
THEATRE**

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Abstract:

Modern theatre did not completely abide by classical devices or categories along history. There were some diversions among realists, naturalists and expressionists, however, the most revolting wave was that of the post modernists and their predecessors.

In dramas such as these perhaps it is the end of conventional notions of drama yet experimental theatre will last whereas theatre authenticity can never be lost.

Key words:

Post_modern - Experimental theatre - Classical theatre -
Expressionist theatre - Contemporary theatre

رؤية عامة في مسرح ما بعد الحداثة:

سمات ما بعد المسرح وما وراء الدراما

ملخص :

يدور البحث حول تراجع العناصر الكلاسيكية التقليدية من مسرح ما بعد الحداثة ، ذلك أن نصوص القرن العشرين والحادي والعشرين لم تلجأ للوحدتين الزمانية والمكانية ، كما أنها لا تدور حول نوع واحد من أنواع المسرح: التراجيدي ، أو الكوميدي ، أو الميلودرامي.

وقد غبرت مدارس حديثة كثيرة كالطبيعة ، والتعبيرية ، وحركة ما بعد الحداثة عن طرق متنوعة مثل التعبير أو الصمت المسرحي ، ومن كتابها بيتر هاندكه الألماني الأكثر شهرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

ما بعد الحداثة - المسرح التجريبي - المسرح الكلاسيكي - المسرح التعبيري - المسرح المعاصر

Introduction:

From the Greeks and Romans, to Plato and empathy or the moral Aristotle, theatre got its basics and most popular categories: the plot, climax, denamaut, the three unities, as well as the tragic hero, the wise clown and the witches. The cathartic, empathy or the moral lesson were some of the vital intentions of classical theatre regardless of its category. Tragedy mastered all and the tragic hero with his /her flaw and indispensable downfall were supposed to purify and teach audience where as the Shakespearian foolish clown was the wisdom deputy amidst human greed and lust. Theatre did not completely abide to these devices or categories along history. There were some diversions among realists, naturalists and expressionists, however, the most revolting wave was that of the post modernists and their predecessors.

A Metatheatrical Model:

In his book, Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form (1963). Lionel Abel coined the term "metatheatre" to identify theatre that is self-reflexive, that uses the stage to explore theatricality and, very often, its relation to life. Discussions of metatheatre subsequent to Abel's have elaborated the concept. Richard Hornby in his seminal book, Drama. Metadrama and Perception (1986), discusses a broad

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range of metatheatrical devices, including the play-within-the-play, the ceremony within the play, the role within the role, literary and real-life reference within the play, and selfreference within the play. Nicole Boireau in Drama on Drama: Dimensions of Theatricality on the Contemporary British Stage (1997), a collection of essays which addresses reflexivity in recent British drama, expands the concept of metatheatre further to include the playwrights' intentional intertextuality with previous dramatic eras, as well as the adaptation, re-contextualization and transcoding of previous theatrical models in order to challenge and redefine the conventions of contemporary theatre.

Metatheatricality has been, a rich and long established feature of Western dramatic tradition; playwrights have been interested in the capacity of the theatre to comment on itself and its relation with the larger world that in various ways it reflects. Many contemporary playwrights have adopted and adapted the principles and conventions of earlier dramatic periods, including Greek, Medieval and Renaissance drama, to heighten their own social and political messages. Joanne Tompkins in her article on the use of metatheatrical conventions in post-colonial drama points out

While theatre generally replays the present or the past to celebrate it, remember it, or decipher it, metatheatre ... is often a self-conscious method of re-negotiating, re-working-not just re-playing the past and the present. (42).

The metatheatrical which theorists have spoken of is 'estrangement', 'alienation.' or 'seeing double' is the true source of the significance.

One of the Anglo-American playwrights, Timberlake Wertenbaker (b. 1951) has been preoccupied with the capacity of the stage text and performance to refer to and comment on its own nature as an artistic medium. Wertenbaker points out in Timberlake Wertenbaker,

I think art is redemptive and the theatre is particularly important because it's a public space. That's the crucial element. It's discursive and it's public. (141).

Wertenbaker integrates the inner play and the frame play by making the characters in the frame play part of the inner play, participating and commenting on it.

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The Love of the Nightingale uses a number of metatheatrical devices, including the staging of a play within the play; Euripides' play, Hippolytus, and an enactment of the Bacchic rituals. Hippolytus is based on the Phaedra story, a key cultural myth. In his book, The Phaedra Syndrome, Gerard calls the Phaedra story,

an archetypal situation of transgression (which brings into play) the fundamental psychological motivations of love and honours, sex and vengeance. It exemplifies the utter disruption of natural order and moral hierarchies. (2).

Wertenbaker based her plot on another myth, that of Philomele, in which King Tereus of Thrace rapes his sister in law, Philomele and cuts her tongue to prevent her from publicly exposing him. The myth examines the same themes of sex, guilt, male and female sexuality, and gender roles. In The Love of the Nightingale, Wertenbaker provides a powerful reworking of the Philomele myth and a revised model of female violence as a means of critiquing patriarchal structures. Ann Wilson points out in Theatre, Colony, and Nation

As much as Wertebaker wants to celebrate theatre as 'a humanizing force' suggests that the social function of theatre,..... affirm human experience and generate social change, can as easily legitimize the social position of a dominant class. (33).

Early in the play, Wertebaker presents fragments from Hippolytus watched by the court of the King of Athens, with Tereus, King of Thrace as guest. The reception of the play by the onstage spectators is significant; as the play is performed, each of the characters responds to it in a different manner.

As a-play-within-a-play, Hippolytus crates an ironic and prophetic counterpoint to the fate of the characters in the frame play. In addition, the characters and action of Hippolytus serve in the dramatic debate about gender roles and the nature of violence.

Metatheatre is also realized in a less direct manner through allusion. Wertebaker uses allusion as a metatheatrical device through citing Hippolytus to explain and comment on the action of her play.

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The play-acting performed by Philomele during the Bacchic festival at the end of the play is another metatheatrical device used by Wertebaker. Philomele publicly reenacts the rape scene using life-sized dolls that she has been sewing and painting for years. As the stage directions point out, "The rape scene is re-enacted in a gross and comic was... Philomele then stages a very brutal illustration of the cutting of the female doll's tongue. Blood cloth on the floor. The crowd is very silent" (342).

In addition to the use of theatre as a survival tool, theatrical performance is also used to give Philomele a voice, a means of expression, and a way of communicating the truth. As Dymkowski notes,

By giving Philomele back her voice through the medium of theatre, Wertebaker also implies that theatre can give voice to others who are silenced, both on the personal and individual level and on the wider political and international one" (131).

In this play, Wertebaler is primarily concerned with the issue of language and the dangers of silencing people. As Wilson in Forgiving History notes,

Silence... can be the consequence of language which is marked syntactically; of the exercise of power which forces the victim into silence; and of the refusal to speak, creating the paradox of inaction, which is an implicit act of complicity because it allows brutality to persist unchecked. (158).

In the introduction to the published play, Wertebaker notes,

I was actually thinking of the violence that erupts in societies when they have been silenced for too long. Without language, brutality will triumph. (viii).

At the end of the play, the female Chorus link the silencing of Philomele with the silencing of oppressed groups over the ages.

June Why do countries make war?

Helen Why are races exterminated?

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Hero Why do white people cut off the words of black?

Iris Why do people disappear? The ultimate silence.

Echo Not even death recorded.

Helen Why are little girls raped and murdered in the car parks of dark cities?
(349)

Following the myth, the last scene shows Philomele, Procne and Tereus transformed into birds. The end of the play highlights Winston words about the need to

achieve moral understanding by interrogating the cultural values that resonate through time from the mythic dramas which help shape our actions.
(514).

Wertenbaker, ends the play in a question addressed by Itys to Philomele and to the audience, "Didn't you want me to ask questions?". In The Love of the Nightingale, Wertenbaker has succeeded in breaking the hold of deep-rooted traditions. As Dymkowski points out:

Wertebaker's own play its metatheatrical dimensions creating a collaborative enterprise between actors and audience, one which provokes a conscious engagement with the relationship between fiction and reality, theatre and life, and demands that we carry the concerns of one into the world of the other. (128 - 29)

The Love of the Nightingale intensely explores the relation between life and art, and celebrate the capacity of theatre to deconstruct in modern age.

A Post dramatic Model:

In her essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich notes,

We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (35).

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The French philosopher and critic Jaques Derrida developed the notion of deconstructing the conventional theatrical devices, His approach led to a new and challenging drama that may be called the post dramatist drama,

Samuel Becket's Play raises the question Is it a play? how do we separate real life from performance of life? Such questions in addition to repetition, contradiction, irony and the undermining of all expectations are il its accustomed shape, there no more unity tearof time as in Caryl Churchill Cloud Nine a century takelles twenty five years. While Peter Handke by the end of the sixties wrote a play called Offending the Audience, (1966) audience were shocked by the unexpected attitude of the actors w ho started going around them leaving the stage - the conventional acting space - to start calling them names. Handke defends his new revolutionary theatre saying that this play is against theatre, it is offending audience to be with them. The spectator is estranged in order not to have visual sight of scenes only, but also insight of thinking about what is beyond the physical performance. His aim was not making a new type of audience but rather, modifying the conventional one.

This play is considered an experimental one that was searching for the reactions and expectations of the audience. Handke was attempting to set rules affecting the theatrical process in one hand while breaking them down on the other hand.

Conclusion:

In dramas such as these perhaps it is the end of conventional notions of drama yet experimental theatre will last whereas theatre authenticity can never be lost.

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