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HITLER DANCES ENSEMBLE: FRAGMENTS OF A DEVISED THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

Drama is a direct transaction between actors and audience. It demands interaction between people- a social process. It engages both the head and the heart. Learning through drama relies on the active involvement of our mind, body, feelings and spirit. Drama provides an opportunity to address moral dilemmas, to express our feelings, to be creative and to explore new ideas and ways of being. It provides great scope for innovation and experimentation. To devise theatre is to make performance from scratch. This occurs as a process of collaborative creation, where a group of individuals come together to think, conceive and form ideas. The power of devising theatre is its infinite possibility and opportunity to offer the artists to make something unique. They can express their ideas and experience of the world and create drama their own. Devising is a means to incite social change, an escape from theatrical conventions and a means to reflect social reality. The participation of all the actors and the spontaneous improvisation are fundamental for devised theatre. In Howard Brenton's *Hitler Dances*, a notable example of devised theatre, the elements of mainstream theatre are subverted.

Keywords: Devised, Experiment, Performance, Theatre

INTRODUCTION

Devised theatre is defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure. It is determined to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes or specific stimuli that might include music, texts, objects, paintings or movement. A devised theatrical performance originates with the group while making the performance, rather than starting from a text that someone else has written to be interpreted. A devised theatre product has emerged from and generated by a group of people working in collaboration. Devising is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product. It emanates from assembling, editing and re-shaping individuals' contradictory experiences of the world. It supports intuition, spontaneity and an accumulation of ideas and there is a freedom of possibilities.

The process of devising is about fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture and the world we inhabit. It reflects a multi-vision made up of each group member's individual perception of the world as received in a series of images, interpreted and defined as a product. Participants make sense of themselves within their own cultural and social contexts and they investigate, integrate and transform their

personal experiences, dreams, research, improvisation and experimentation. Devising is about thinking, conceiving and forming ideas, being imaginative and spontaneous. It is about inventing, adapting and creating what we do as a group.

In the devised theatre, there is no writer, the group are not given a script and they are not given parts. The characters are created as group members, research the theme and draw on their own lives, reflecting their experiences in the stories they choose to tell. It is an ensemble piece, and everyone has a role to play. Devising theatre allows the young people to be in control of the product they create and they are supported and directed by the facilitators. There is a strong sense of participation, ownership and empowerment.

During and immediately after the Second World War, playwrights considered both the personal and social effects of the conflict in their works. Terence Rattigan's *Flare Path* (1942) filmed as *The Way to the Stars* (1945), focused on life at an RAF base, considering the impact of the war on both airmen and civilians. Later, in Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952), the difficulties that the married Hester has with her younger lover, Freddie. It is exacerbated by his inability to find a role for himself in peacetime. While the next generation of playwrights, for example, John Osborne, who were concerned with lamenting the disappointments of victory, were identified as a lack of thoroughgoing social change in the post-war period. During the 1970's, the attention of a number of playwrights, many of them part of the post-war 'baby boom generation', turned back not only to the war and its legacy, but also to the ways in which the conflict had been presented in popular culture.

HOWARD BRENTON'S HITLER DANCES

The year 1972 can be seen as a watershed in the career of Howard Brenton. His collection of work includes- *Hitler Dances* (January), *How Beautiful with Badges* (May), *Lushly* (August), an adaptation of *Measure for Measure* (September), *England's Ireland* (September) and the un-produced radio play, "Government Property". Brenton's earliest plays were *Ladders of Fools* (1965), *Winter, Daddykins* (1966) and *It's My Criminal* (1966). Among these plays, *It's My Criminal* was staged at the Royal Court where Brenton was supported by the artistic director Bill Gaskill. Later he joined the Brighton Combination, a theatre company of the British counterculture, and started working on a play about Winston Churchill which would eventually become *The Churchill Play*.

Hitler Dances was first performed in January 1972 and was produced at the Traverse Theatre Club in Edinburgh by the Traverse Workshop Company. The production toured the country, including an Easter-week stay at the Young Vic., before opening at the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court in June 1972. The original inspiration came in 1970 when Brenton visited the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam with members of Portable Theatre. The writing of the play had taken five months. When the company started working on *Hitler Dances* in Holland during October 1971 and went into the first rehearsal, Brenton had not written a single line of the play. *Hitler Dances highlights the collaborative effort behind the creation of the play as Brenton used the experiences in rehearsals as well as the ideas of the actors to shape the play.* The opinions and experiences of the actors were vital for the play. In *Hitler Dances*, Max Stafford Clark, the director of the first British production summed up the play's argument that in order to fight fascism, the country had to become fascist itself. Howard Brenton described May 1968 as a great watershed which directly affected him. It not only destroyed the affection for official culture but also destroyed all notions of personal freedom and anarchist political actions.

Describing the genesis of *Hitler Dances*, Brenton recalled visiting Eindhoven in the Netherlands with a touring production in the late 1960s: "I saw a bomb-site there, with children playing on it, this heap of rubble-history. And the idea of a German soldier coming out of the ground become meaningful" (Introduction vii). The play emerges from actors in workshops and incorporates both children's games and the image of a German soldier, rising from a heap of rubble who wants to return home. The cruelty and violence of the children's games stand as a synecdoche for the violence of war. During the workshop process, the actors draw on their own knowledge of the war, generally second hand in nature, describes a more detailed examination of received attitudes regarding the war. The play involves actors playing multiple roles and donning masks. It acts

like a bridge between Brenton's past in the fringe and future in the mainstream. Boon asserts that *Hitler Dances* "marks the first serious full-scale attempt to involve the audience directly in the *argument* of a Brenton play, to make the stage a public forum for a debate in which not only the writer and the actors take part, but also the spectators" (175-76).

The text of *Hitler Dances* was not presented to the Traverse Company as a finished piece of work. Brenton's initial idea acted as the basis for a collective exploration by the whole company of the themes and possibilities it suggested. He gave importance to the creative sharing of ideas and experience. The presence of the Traverse company is felt everywhere in the text. The final form of the play owes nearly as much to group experience and experiment. The structure of the play appears to be disjointed and fragmented. The play is divided into twenty-four scenes with no specified setting and only minimal costumes and hand-props are used. It is performed by six actors and four musicians, who both take part in the action and perform the six songs in the script. Each actor plays several parts, sometimes using masks. The actor is required to play not only several roles, but several types of role, from near-naturalism to two-dimensional satire and even to inanimate objects. The script is suffused with the informality of a rehearsal. The actors' own names are used throughout and the stage directions are personal in their tone and specificity. In an interview with Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, Brenton describes the play's essential style as "the sense of being fluid, working very rapidly, ensemble playing, the rapid creation and dismemberment of effects, the involvement of story-telling, the juxtaposition, stylistically, of things that are quite different in a very powerful series" (18). It is this sense of the practical, intensely theatrical, rather than the formal and literary characterises the play.

The playing of children's games is an established workshop technique in *Hitler Dances*. It is used to break down personal inhibitions and to forge the sense of close-knit group identity and commitment. The aim of the work is to fire imagination and to stimulate personal creativity. Sabin Epstein was encouraged to incorporate his own ideas into his playing of the dead German soldier rising from the grave:

Originally Howard wanted a wholly horror situation. I suggested a combined image of Christ's resurrection and a Frankenstein's monster. That helped greatly. When I'm really working I have to think through the whole process... Then realising I am holding a gun –which immediately leads to other associations. (Introduction xii)

Similarly, Kevin Costello, who played Captain Potter, was personally involved in the development of his character:

At first I wasn't aware of being anything like Potter. Then Howard presented me with a speech in which Potter lists a series of books, like *Paradise Lost* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* which he claims will help the war effort. It was quite eerie because I'd read all the authors mentioned-and... Howard had spotted this during an improvisation and had used it to write that speech. (Introduction xi)

Collectively the company used its childhood memories to recreate the atmosphere of war time Britain.

The idea of the Second World War became more powerful to me as the work proceeded. None of us had actually experienced the war... But I remembered things my father had told me...it was a question of going back to childhood – remembering things like rationing, the sense of austerity, and the togetherness of the country during and just after the war (qtd in Peter Ansorge 61).

The company began to supplement its own memories with conventional historical research, and with interviews with members of the war generation, including Dutch resistance workers. It focuses on the sense of distance between the attitudes of the cast and those of the previous generation:

There's a total myth about the Second World War. My father was quite young when the war started. Yet he wanted to join up right away which is something inconceivable to me...That's what the characters in *Hitler Dances* say constantly- Back here in 1941 pissed out of our minds. (Introduction x)

The second half of the play focuses on retelling the story of Violette Szabo, a British SOE agent in France, who was executed in Ravensbruck. Szabo's story was the subject of the 1958 film *Carve Her Name with*

Pride, based on R.J. Minney's book of the same name. Violette is the daughter of a French woman and an English man. She falls in love and married a French soldier, Etienne, who is killed at the Battle of El Alamein. The widowed Violette is filled with anger towards the Germans and joins an anti-aircraft unit. She is then recruited as a Special Operations Executive agent by Captain Potter and sent to occupy France after being trained by Brigadier Badge in Scotland. During her mission, Violette is captured and interrogated by Hans Josef Keiffer. At the end of the interrogation, it is told that Violette was never tortured by the Gestapo and she was executed because of administrative confusion. In *Hitler Dances*, Szabo's story is defamiliarised, with each of the actresses in the company taking a turn at playing her.

CONCLUSION

Hitler Dances is not a thought-out but an emotional show. The development of the two central narratives and their exploration of various theatrical means of presenting those narratives on stage provided Brenton with definite ideas. The definite ideas are formed not only about the structure of the play but also about the structure of this writing. The personal experiences of the actors were valuable in helping Brenton shape the play. The play is mainly about the approach towards history and the relation between the past and the present. As Andersen states, "the play is not about individually held notions but about our collective cultural ideas" (220). Brenton's narration not only gives information about the time and setting of the scene but also provides an outlook towards the war. Thus, the audience is provided with some information to think upon and make their own commentaries on the action that is portrayed. *Hitler Dances* represents an unusual and very different departure in the writer's career and marks an important step in his development as a dramatist.

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