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Political Drama in Postwar Britain

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Introduction

The British society, conditioned by an imperialist history, found itself at crossroads in the second half of the 20th century. In theatre, the inevitable dilemmas about which way to go brought about the definite emergence of political drama. In a country with a long and in many ways globally defining theatre history, political circumstances were always inseparable from art, which more often than not posed questions about its role in the society.

It is impossible to mention politics and theatre (in Britain and Europe) in reference to one another without mentioning Bertolt Brecht whose Epic Theatre altered not only twentieth century theatre itself, but also the way in which its role in the society was understood. Suddenly, theatre could be interventionist; Epic Theatre insisted that the socially engaged theatre could influence, if not change the society. Having in mind that socialism in Britain never took as firm a root as in some other European countries, it is clear why Brecht's vision of socialist drama had to be redefined and in many ways softened through the works of British playwrights. Political drama reached its culmination in theatre during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcherism, a specific economic agenda, was introduced to, or rather imposed on the country plagued by strikes and inflation. The abandonment of consensus politics of the post-war government and the rigorousness which accompanied this was seen by many as extremely authoritarian, uncompassionate and even tyrannical; the illusion of a unified society finally got shattered with the proclamation of an individual-centred politics (Peacock, 1999, 2).

It is no wonder that within such circumstances British dramatists set out to question how a fairer society, not only British, but also global, could be established. This mission of reconstructing society along seemingly socialist lines counted on the freedom that the stage offered after the powers of censorship were abolished in 1968. These are the issues on which the first part of the paper focuses; it provides the general overview of the British society in terms of its politics and analyses how this was reflected on the world of theatre.

In the second part, the paper analyses three authors whose works could be classified as pieces of political drama. One of the first openly political dramatists in Britain whose manifesto-like approach was always marked by great intellectual consistency was Edward Bond. Bond's claim that art has to be socially, that is, politically engaged, is examined in this paper through the analysis of two of his plays: *Bingo* (1974) and *The Fool* (1976). In *Bingo*, Bond symbolically makes Shakespeare, the most influential national dramatist, the main character, unable to

reconcile the social role of art with the rationality of reality, thus selling out morally and disregarding his art as it becomes separated from life. In *The Fool*, Bond reverses the process and makes another historical figure, 16th century poet John Clare, a non-compromising artist, the main character of his play. Clare does not succeed in his struggle with the authorities because of the lack of ideological programme that could be applied to political institutions. These two plays pose questions about the role of artists in their societies, and Bond examines possible answers in his typically harsh and violent manner.

As the second playwright whose writing can be seen political, the paper selects/focuses on Caryl Churchill and looks into two of her plays, namely *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Written by a second-wave feminist, these plays thematise sexual politics and try to emphasise that personal is political, especially when it comes to women and their position in British society. In *Cloud Nine*, Churchill juxtaposes images of colonial and sexual oppression in order to show what has changed in the society since the Victorian era, while in *Top Girls*, Churchill writes within the feminist context, issuing a warning about what it means to be a woman in a capitalist society that celebrates Thatcher's competitive ethics.

The third playwright whose works are analysed in this paper is Harold Pinter. Although Pinter is usually associated with comedy of menace which marked his early career, his later plays assumed a much more politically-charged atmosphere in terms of theme(s) and language. In *Mountain Language* (1988), Pinter sought to portray the relationship between power and language in a political context. In *Party Time* (1991), the playwright focused more directly on the privileged, the elite and its complacency, and the wilful ignorance of the rest of the society. My analyses of these plays will show that Pinter's political involvement was a representation of moral commitment rather than of persuasion that theatre or art could change the world.

The paper thus provides an overview of the development of political drama in Britain, an overview which mostly covers the 1980s, a period of turbulent political and social changes. In order to achieve that purpose, the paper observes and analyses in which ways the language and themes of the selected plays reveal or address the condition of British society in late 20th century and what British playwrights in the focus of the paper had to say about it. The paper also analyses structural aspects of these plays, although not all of these rely equally on technical aspects to convey their (political) messages.

Post-war Policies and Common Sense

In one of the defining episodes of the brilliant political satire *Yes Minister*, a British sitcom which ran on BBC during the 1980s, Sir Humphrey Appleby, a Permanent Secretary to the Minister, succinctly sums up the post-World War II:

[...] I have served eleven governments in the past thirty years. If I had believed in all their policies, I would have been passionately committed to keeping out of the Common Market, and passionately committed to going into it. I would have been utterly convinced of the rightness of nationalising steel. And of denationalising it and renationalising it. On capital punishment, I'd have been a fervent retentionist and an ardent abolitionist. I would've been a Keynesian and a Friedmanite, a grammar school preserver and destroyer, a nationalisation freak and a privatisation maniac; but above all, I would have been a stark, staring, raving schizophrenic. (Jay and Lynn 1982)

In this biting monologue, Sir Humphrey refers to all the major policies that came and went through the British government from 1945 to the 1980s when the show was being aired; he refers to the shifts from socialist economic planning of the consensus government to the neoliberal practices of Thatcherism, the struggles of nationalisation and privatisation, of economy based on industry to the one based on free market. This shows that the post-war politics in Britain primarily revolved around economic problems, and this had to do with both ideological and practical trends and changes in the British society.

Strong (2018) insists that one has to understand the moral triumph of the nation in the aftermath of the war; upon learning about the horror of the Nazi regime and the truth about the concentration camps, the British people expected that “the age of Utopia was about to dawn for them” (481). Strong (2018) points out that: “[t]here was a determination to secure what had so far been denied: full employment, adequate wages and increased social provision” (481). The fundamental pillars on which the post-war Britain stood were the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes and the “Beveridge Report”; this made the structure for what later got to be known as the era of consensus, a phrase used to describe the twenty five years after 1950 in the British society and politics (Strong 2018, 485). Namely, the end of the war saw a massive swing to the left; surprisingly, the war hero Winston Churchill and his Conservatives lost to the Labour party which came into power. As Strong (2018) writes, “Labour was viewed as the party that

would carry through what people had been promised in Sir William Beveridge's 1942 Report, which was the blueprint for what we know as the Welfare State" (483).¹ "The Beveridge Report" was written during the harsh years of war, and it very soon became very popular with the public because of its straightforwardness and optimism.² The welfare system stood as a proof of the growing working class pressure for "economic and social reforms, modified by the desire of a more centralised state apparatus to restructure economic and social policies for its own reasons" (Gough 1980, 10).³ It is obvious that the welfare state was seen as the middle way solution between the extremes of communism and free market capitalism.

Nevertheless, no government could have made it based on these principles, using weapons of war in times of peace. As Strong (2018) argues, the economy of consensus based on these principles was built on debt (491). Britain was in trouble; over the period of twenty years, the government policies failed to make a self-sustaining economic system; the welfare state was set up on borrowed (American) money which the British industry failed to repay. In the 50s and 60s unemployment never exceeded more than 3% of the workforce, but this meant that the government had to ignore "over-manning, restrictive practices and resistance to change. ... [f]ull employment meant bidding for workers and so wages spiralled ever upwards, in the end reaching unaffordable heights, fuelling a deadly inflation and pricing British goods out of the world markets" (Strong 2018, 492). The seed of destruction finally flowered in the 1970s when full employment began to vanish (Strong 2018, 492). No government wanted to admit that this policy of full employment had finally proven to be a constantly postponed failure because this would have brought about an unavoidable confrontation with the unions whose cooperation was crucial due to the state's dependence on economy and its workforce (Strong 2018, 492). By the mid-1970s, inflation was 25%, wages going up at the rate of 35%, and the public expenditure was eating up 60% of national income (Strong 2018, 504). Only a fool could not have predicted an

¹The welfare state could loosely be defined as a form of government in which the state protects and promotes the economic and social well-being of the citizens (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2015). In modern capitalist countries, as Gough (1980) writes, the welfare state comprises different cash benefits, such as pensions, as well as public benefits, such as education (9.) Important is to emphasise that Gough (1980) points out the two major goals this kind of system has: "the reproduction of labour power, and the maintenance and control of the non-working population" (9).

²Essentially, the welfare state promised by the Report included the expansion of National Insurance and the creation of National Health Service; everyone would have "medical treatment free of charge" (Strong 2018, 483).

³Strong (2018) explains: "In the forefront of Labour's programme came the implementation of that central article of socialist faith, Clause 4, through nationalisation. This began in 1946 with the Bank of England and civil aviation. ... The following year came the railways and the mines, both of which had been state controlled during the war, nationalisation merely acknowledging a reality" (485.)

utter catastrophe which was epitomized in the grim Winter of Discontent in 1979, the year in which Margaret Thatcher was to become the first woman prime minister. The consensus policy came close to proving that nothing is as permanent as a temporary government programme.

Thatcher(ism)

The Winter of Discontent marked the end of the Labour government and its general domination in post-war politics. The winter of 1978/79 was a cold one, with widespread strikes by public sector unions against income policy (Sandbrook 2013). The picture was a dystopian one. Due to the strikes of waste collectors, the streets were filled with garbage, the hospitals were not working, and with gravediggers protesting as well, the dead were buried in the sea (Sandbrook 2013). Change came with Margaret Thatcher's election as the new Prime Minister. Thatcher was not a traditional Conservative in the sense that she and her cabinet did not seek to preserve, but rather to change. This change consisted of a strong programme which did not only adjust the role of the state, but also radically changed its very function. It promised to finally control the unions, cut the taxes and government spending and reduce the soaring inflation (Strong 2018, 507). Thatcher was very clear and decisive about her objectives. Their realisation, however, came at great price.

Behind this upper hand was a new kind of government which had its roots in the ideology of neoliberalism.⁴ For Thatcher's agenda, this meant that she had to introduce a new economic liberalisation policies such as privatisation, deregulation, and free trade market, all accompanied by the reduction in government spending in order to increase the power of the private sector in the economy and society (Pettinger 2018, para 2). This was a great paradigm shift from the Keynesian consensus policies towards Friedmanite monetarism⁵. Thatcher understood that industry cannot provide enough profit in the post-industrial, let alone information age. This is why Thatcherism rested on the private sector—it has a profit motive, and is therefore more efficient than government-owned industries (Pettinger 2018, para. 6). It took some time, but the Iron Lady succeeded in implementing her policies; inflation was reduced at the cost of rising unemployment and the general disapproval which accompanied the moves.

⁴Neoliberalism is the ideology of the modern globalised world which is based on the idea of economic liberalism and free market capitalism (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018).

⁵Monetarism is a school of thought in monetary economics that emphasises the role of governments in controlling the amount of money in circulation; one of its first promoters was the famous American economist Milton Friedman (Kenton 2017).

Thatcher remains larger than life in the mind of the British nation. Thatcher's eleven-year-long premiership was marked by social unrests and high unemployment, and "British society is still feeling the effect of her divisive economic policies and the culture of greed and selfishness they allegedly promoted" (BBC News 2004, para. 5). The "selfish society" BBC news board refers to was a direct consequence of Thatcher's politics. Namely, neoliberalism insists on the individual; one of the axioms of the free market is the insistence on the individual's natural right to freedom, meaning that state intervention of any kind is seen as inhibiting the individual's freedom of choice (Gaspard 2004, 5). It is, therefore, easy to understand Thatcher's claim that there is no such thing as a society because society is made of individuals (Brittan 2013, 5).

In their reminiscences about Thatcher's premiership and the effects it had on the British society and culture in particular, several writers and theatre directors referred to some of these notions. For example, Richard Eyre (2009) writes: "Thatcher's relentless emphasis on money and management and marketing illuminated the value of things that couldn't be quantified, and her moronic mantra 'there's no such thing as society' gave the humanitarian and moral a conspicuous importance." (para. 20). In another entry, Hanif Kureishi (2009) draws a more contextual critique: "She was also a social atomist: she didn't understand altruism, solidarity and identification with others as a basic part of human nature." (para. 2). Thatcher's insistence on individuality meant that, in a neoliberal, and thus necessarily globalised society, citizens become consumers, and as McChesney (cited in Komlik 2016) points out that, instead of communities, this kind of society produces shopping malls, the ultimate result being "an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless" (para. 1).

The media personified politics in her. Thatcher became the epitome of determination, intellectual arrogance, self-apologetic aggression and ruthlessness. Thatcher openly believed in the inherent inequality of the society: "[n]ations depend for their health, economically, culturally and psychologically, upon the achievement of a comparatively small number of talented and determined people" (Lanchester 2013, para. 11); this belief made possible the philosophy of the free market which always favours the rich over the poor and strengthens social disparity. The kind of Machiavellian government which does not believe that it is necessary to answer to the question of "how exactly will the shutting down old peoples' homes revitalise the British economy" (Gough 1980, 7) epitomises Hayek's (1994) criticism of neoliberalism due to the fact

that “[e]conomic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means for all our ends” (95). Having in mind this moral vacuum, the ultimate question to be posed is what kind of consequences does this attitude have on the society as a whole; if all ends justify all means, do we speak about the final death of morality and ethics in one of the most powerful Western democracies? And finally, is this what democracy promotes and stands for, or did it sell its soul to the global neoliberal machine which swallows everything that opposes it on its way to more power and wealth. These were some of the questions in the minds of the artists whose plays are analysed in this paper.

A Few Notes on the Empire and the Cold War

How was the centuries-long imperial history to end? In 1945, Britain was still one of the “Big Three”, as Strong (2018) points out, “together with the Soviet Union and the United States, and had a thousand warships, a huge air force, and bases and troops scattered around the globe” (509). In order to maintain such global power, Britain had to count on enormous wealth, “a quarter of which had gone in the war” (509,) as well as on its future economic power.

Among the first countries which gained independence was India, together with Burma and the subsequent independence of Pakistan (Strong 2018, 510). The British also decided to leave the territory of Palestine in 1948, upon the proposal of the United Nations that that territory be the new land for the Jewish people, a new-born state of Israel; this decision was immediately followed by the Arab-Israeli War (Strong 2018, 510). The British left behind them a still unresolved conflict in the Middle East. The greatest shock came in 1956 with the Suez crisis. The newly elected Egyptian nationalist leader, Colonel Nasser, nationalised the Suez Canal, which was up to that moment owned by a French company; this caused outrage in both France and Britain which demanded that the Canal be internationalised (Strong 2018, 510). In the aftermath of failed negotiations, Israel attacked Egypt, giving Britain and France the excuse to intervene in order to prevent further conflict. Strong (2018) refers to this strategy as “a lasting shame” in which “the moral order of international law was used to camouflage naked aggression” (511); the whole crisis ended when the United Nations Security Council demanded a ceasefire (512).⁶ The final defeat of the Empire came from Africa which was engulfed in the new

⁶Strong (2018) emphasises the importance of the Suez crisis for the understanding of the new post-war world order: “But the issue was far more complex and humiliating for Britain than even the surface events indicated. ... The oil

wave of nationalism (Strong 2018, 512). As Strong (2018) writes, Britain had to grant independence to many countries or be drawn into an expensive armed conflict, which it could not afford. In 1982 came the final confirmation that Britain was fully dependent on the support of the United States. The Falklands War was won with the support of Reagan's condemnation of the Argentinian invasion. The island with nearly 1,800 citizens of British descent was retaken, granting Margaret Thatcher an unprecedented popularity (Strong 2018, 514).

Final issue to be mentioned in the context of the imperial burden of the United Kingdom was the problem of Northern Ireland. In 1949, the Irish Free State became the Republic of Ireland, while Northern Ireland with the majority of Protestant population remained a part of Britain. Catholics, comprising only a third of population, were reduced to the status of an underclass (Strong 2018, 520). In 1960s, Britain gradually lost control over Northern Ireland political system; the subsequent events led to the split of the Irish Republican Army, the IRA, of which one half was for peaceful approach in the fight for the civil right movement, while the other half "committed to defending the Catholic minority against the British troops" (Strong 2018, 520). Nevertheless, the situation got worse in the 80s, especially in 1984 when the IRA bombed the Tory Party conference hotel in Brighton, almost murdering Margaret Thatcher (Strong 2018, 521). This atmosphere of unpredictable terror marked the lives of the ordinary people, as much as the peril of the Cold War and the danger of total annihilation that was hovering above their heads ever since the 1950s.

In 1984, British band Frankie Goes to Hollywood released an anti-war song called "Two Tribes". The song was released at a time when the Cold War had intensified; Thatcher and Reagan diplomatic collaboration proclaimed that to fight the Soviet Union and communism was their primary common goal (BBC Downing Street). Everyone knew that this fight was based on nuclear domination. The song brilliantly portrayed the world polarisation, but its most interesting element were the snippets of narration from *Protect and Survive*⁷ public information films about how to survive a nuclear war; the snippets included advice on how to tag and dispose of family

supply was also seen to be under threat, as the move had offended the Arab countries. The only other source for both money and oil was the United States, which was opposed to the action. ... In one devastating denouement Britain was seen no more to be a world power." (511)

⁷*Protect and Survive* was a public information series on civil defence produced by the Thatcher government; it was supposed to inform British citizens on how to protect themselves during a nuclear attack (Brown 2017).

members should they die in the fallout shelter⁸. In 1954, under Churchill's chairmanship, the Defence Committee decided that Britain must build its own hydrogen bomb. This meant that Britain, together with the allies from its polarized bloc, would have to plan an Armageddon for the next thirty years. Having in mind the uncertainties of the British economy discussed previously, Strong's argues that this nuclear project was already problematic because "the technological change in the nature of warfare was so enormous that the economy could no longer afford it" (513). In May 1957, the first British hydrogen bomb was exploded (Strong 2018, 513).

Through the 60s and 70s, the British people lived under the constant threat of the bomb(s). It is generally agreed that the Cuban Missile crisis which took place in October 1962 was the closest to bringing the world to total annihilation. It is no wonder that this unstoppable atomic nightmare entered culture and arts as well⁹. Ian Fleming's James Bond, the unstated (national) hero of the Cold War, provided material for numerous books and movies about a British spy who always anew confirmed the power of the West. Nevertheless, in 1963 this espionage propagating franchise was confronted with a more morally objective spy novel by John le Carre, *The Spy Who Came from the Cold*. This novel showed the moral inconsistency of the Western democracy, namely the inconsistency between its alleged values and methods, between means and ends, democracy which apparently celebrates the individual over the ideology and yet always sacrifices the former (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018).¹⁰

The Cold War symbolically ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Those whose minds and hearts were not poisoned and blurred with the already worn out talk of "us v. them" knew that the main reason behind the victory of the Western block was that the Soviet economy could not keep up (with) the warfare. The end of the Cold War was essentially the end of all ideology; ideologies died with the end of the 20th century. The dominion of neoliberalism established money as the only ideology, and the global consumer society it created was (and still is) the greatest proof of this.

⁸One of the snippets instructs as follows: "If your grandmother or any other member of your family should die whilst in the shelter put them outside, but remember to tag them first for identification purposes." (BBC News 2006)

⁹The 1980 Summer Olympics boycott showed that sport is not safe from polarisation of the world. Upon the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, US President Jimmy Carter called for a boycott of the Olympics; almost 60 countries joined; Great Britain decided not to observe the boycott, but it allowed its athletes to choose whether to compete (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018).

¹⁰In the 80s, popular culture testified to the prevailing atmosphere of fear among the people. In 1984, the most popular show on television was *Threads*, an apocalyptic war drama produced by BBC which was an imaginary account of nuclear war and its effects on the city of Sheffield in Northern England (Sandbrook 2013).

Britain Never Had It So Good—or Did It?¹¹

Amidst all the economic and political overturns, as well as the looming nuclear Armageddon over their heads, ordinary people were buying refrigerators. The consensus policies of the 50s and 60s with its constant rising of the living standard produced an unprecedented consumer boom during which people bought cars, home appliances and other goods. The age of affluence was a direct consequence of the newly established post-war economy. Most of the population truly lived an affluent lifestyle undreamed of by the previous generations. Strong (2018) points out that the average national income doubled between 1948 and 1976, and continues this line of thought:

During the 1950s a car, a holiday abroad and a raft of consumer domestic comforts like central heating gradually became commonplace. In 1986 no fewer than 20 million people went on holiday abroad. By the 1990s house ownership was the rule rather than the exception, followed by an ever-rising share ownership. As a result British life is now dominated by a consumer-led white-collar middle class. (536)

The British society was steeped deep into materialism when the consequences of this kind of lifestyle became apparent. Consumerism created a society of integrated inequality; the class system was changing in the sense that the old upper classes had virtually vanished, but only to be replaced by a new one which consisted of businessmen, politicians, and academics (Strong 2018, 536). One must not forget about the main premises of philosophy that supported consumerism; neoliberal insistence on individuality and the rights of an individual directly provoked the change in social attitudes which now became more liberal. This gave birth to a permissive society. In an attempt to define permissiveness, one could say that it stands for a liberal stance towards social, cultural, and moral norms. It could also be described as a free society in which individuals can make their own decisions, on account of intellectual independence; this freedom of autonomy includes freedom of expression as well (Mitchell 2012). A society in which an individual is not free is an oppressive one, therefore a neoliberal society seems to be the society of the free¹²; this meant a lot in the context of the Cold War and the polarised world.¹³

¹¹Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister (1957–1963) who is said to have “inaugurated the era of spend, spend, spend” passed into history when he said that British people had “never had it so good” (Strong 2018, 498).

¹²The question of freedom, however, is always a problematic one, since one’s freedom can often endanger another individual. Collins (2017) points out some of these paradoxes in the British permissive society: “Yet most people

It is interesting to pose a question of how much the atmosphere of violence of the 60s and 70s owed to consumerism and affluence of the 50s. John Lennon, initially one of the leading figures of the calm and relaxed 50s attitude, subsequently became one of the first British angry voices among the young, openly speaking against capitalistic exploitation and mindless consumerism, protesting against the war in Vietnam and nuclear armament (Sandbrook 2013). The 1960s passed into history as the golden age of the student movement which was dedicated to resolving issues involving general civil rights, poverty, militarism, and student rights (Sandbrook 2013).

The Conservative government did not really support what they deemed to have been moral decadence. As a close Thatcher's ally Norman Tebbit protested in 1985, "Bad art was good art ... Good manners were no better than bad. Family life was derided as an out-dated bourgeois concept. Criminals deserved as much sympathy as their victims. ... Violence and soft pornography became accepted in the media. Thus was sown the wind; and we are now reaping the whirlwind" (as cited in Eccleshall 2002, 247). This whirlwind was followed by hysterical headlines in the papers, predictions of disaster, street riots such as Brixton and Toxteth in 1981, images of violence on the streets, especially the brutality of the police, censure of the media¹⁴, the emergence of punk as the final anarchy movement among the young, and alike. It is most certain that in order to understand the post-war British culture, one has to be familiar with this socio-historical context and to grasp the psychological impact that this (in many ways threatening and peculiar) context had on one whole generation. Another question posed by

were still not prepared to sanction behaviours which they perceived to disrupt the stability of society. What united such disparate issues as pornography, illicit drug-taking, unregulated immigration, murder in the absence of capital punishment and male homosexuality with the advent of HIV/AIDS was the perceived damage caused by individual behaviour on others. Even when critical of permissive change, the majority did perceive such change as having taken place. In that sense, opinion polls suggest that people in post-war Britain tended to believe that they belonged to a 'permissive society' that they opposed in many crucial respects." (para. 2).

¹³Permissive society inevitably regulated previously illegal and stigmatised social activities. For example, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967 (Great Britain, "The Abortion Act of 1967"); abortion was now possible with an obtained medical permission and within certain time limits (Great Britain, "Sexual Offences Act 1967"). Events that became social phenomenon, such as the publication of D. H. Lawrence's unedited version of the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960 or the Summer of Love in 1967 in San Francisco, are usually mentioned as significant for revolutionising social attitudes and behaviour.

¹⁴Ken Loach (2009), a popular film director, remembers the difficulties of working during the Thatcher government, openly speaking about the censure practices of the (then) leading media: "I was desperate to make a programme about the strike because the news presentation of it showed the opposite of what was actually happening: the brutality of the police, the subterfuge of the government, the power of the state, the fact that the other trade union leaders were turning their backs on the miners. None of this kind of thing was talked about at the time—it was a parallel universe" (para. 28).

almost all the plays that are analysed in the main part of this paper is whether this kind of “free” society, created within the nets of politics and economy, has truly contributed to freedom of thought and expression, or whether it has repressed fear through intolerance and injustice. If one accepts the permissive society as the new British reality, then what is the best that an individual as its most important element can do in order to prompt some change or bring closer these complex historical processes to the ordinary people. As usual, theatre offers some answers.

Political Theatre in Britain: Trends and Distinctions

The claim that all theatre is political can be explained through one of the oldest thoughts on humans. Aristotle's definition of a man as the political animal (*zoon politikon*) permanently locates the individual within its community; humans are social animals and as such are determined by the community in which they engage in "organized cooperative activities that entail collective decision making, coordinated behaviours, and leadership" (Corning 2018, para. 1). Shakespeare's plays show that the famous playwright understood this concept proposed by Aristotle in the sense that a human being is essentially determined by the different forms of political organization since these "encourage different forms of human development. ... A monarchy will inevitably discourage certain forms of political activity (particularly those that challenge monarchy), while a republic may cause the very same activities to flourish" (Cantor 2014, para. 11). This explanation shows that the communal context in which a human being exists determines his or her activities, including theatre.

In his informative and concise survey of political theatre in post-war Britain, Patterson (2003) claims that one of the reasons why one should regard theatre as the most political of all art forms is due to the fact that "it is presented in a much more public form than any other art" (1)¹⁵. All performances could always be regarded as political because, even if they do not challenge the existing condition, their upholding of the dominant culture is always political. Theatrical activity comes from observing and witnessing reality which is necessarily shaped by human activity.¹⁶ Billington (2007) playfully makes us remember that "dissidence [has been] in the DNA of theatre from its origins. Dionysus, god of wine and theatre, is the disturber of the repressive rule of Pentheus, King of Thebes" (para. 9). Ancient theatre shows that it had a political and educational aim of promoting ancient virtues through performance; one of the main dramatic concepts, catharsis, had a role of "strengthening political unity through the shared experience of purging emotion ... often problematized, and then resolved, tensions within the social order" (Morgan 2013, 5). In this way, political drama can have a cathartic effect; the

¹⁵While discussing Brenton's career, Dickson (2010) quotes the playwright himself: "I write for other people. The play doesn't reside in heaven, or in a library. As a dramatist, that's your instinct: without other people, the play doesn't exist" (para. 1).

¹⁶ One must remember that, as Morgan (2013) states, for thousands of years, the study of politics was inseparable from social life as a whole (1); the division of art, religion, history, and politics into separate entities which were always understood as interconnected, came with modern age, "the liberal art of separation, our successful legal division of public life from private life" (2).

critique of an opposed protagonist may not only serve as a mirror to the society, but also actively respond to it.

In order to understand the British post-war political theatre, one must look to Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Patterson (2003) succinctly identifies the key elements and figures who determined the direction in which the political theatre developed:

In the twentieth century, theatre with an intention to convert to a new way of thinking, or at least to challenge old modes of thought, became more overtly political, questioning not so much social morality as the fundamental organization of society, with the emphasis on economics rather than on ethics. Usually informed by Marx's analysis of capitalism, a number of directors and playwrights, most notably Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, sought to use the stage to propose socialist alternatives to the injustices of the world about them. (1)

Further in his analysis, Patterson (2003) provides a much more precise definition which supports the previously provided social and political context: “[Political theatre] is defined as a kind of theatre that not only depicts social interaction and political events but implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems” (4). It is clear that post-war theatre owes a lot to the left-wing sentiment present among many writers. Having this in mind, one should not be surprised that political theatre is mostly related to the left-wing theatre movements which are critical of capitalist system and express the need for radical change; the first part of this paper has shown that this kind of critique could be applied to the British society and the politics which significantly determined it.

The post-war clean slate was an opportunity for new things in British theatres as well, especially after the powers of censorship had been abolished in 1968 and freedom of expression on stage came hand in hand with the liberties of the permissive society. As Patterson (2003) points out, the British playwrights could choose a style to write in, and a new theatrical strategy to adopt. In order to portray how left-wing writing (in theatre) came to be so dominant, Patterson suggests that one of the possibilities could have been the socialist realism which in the

Communist countries was a significant political element, but which never took root in Britain¹⁷. Similarly, the strategy of agitprop, which was so popular in Russia, the US and Germany earlier in the century, was not an option for the British playwrights either: agitprop functioned well to help reinforce socialist convictions through stereotypical (flat) portrayal of both figures and political and social issues, but it could not be the strategy of “playwrights who wanted to explore political situations in greater depth” because it settled political debate in advance. This factor also made agitprop “a fundamentally elitist device” (Patterson 2003, 14)¹⁸. In the midst of these options, British playwrights turned to “conventional modes of Western theatrical discourse” (Patterson 2003, 15), meaning that they wrote either in the so-called “reflectionist” tradition, which in a mirror-like manner reflects reality as accurately as possible, or “interventionist” one which seeks to interpret this reality and challenge its perception (Patterson 2003, 15).

Using Patterson’s classification, Brecht’s Epic Theatre has to be understood as a highly interventionist type. Brecht’s dramaturgy could almost be discussed at the level of ideology, since he used the theatre as a space for social education and subsequent political organising; his Marxist background sought to “unmask the mechanisms of capitalism and taught his audience about both the present state of exploitation and alienation, and the potential future state of equality and humanism” (Morgan 2013, 11). In this sense, Epic Theatre and its strategies must always be interpreted as an attempt to confront the political and economic oppression of the modern world by generating political awareness and developing skills of critical thinking in its audiences. Brecht claimed that the so-called ‘epic form’ in contrast to the ‘dramatic form’ treats social beings as the ones who determine thought, not vice versa, meaning that man is alterable, and not given and immanent; this provides ground for societal change which is the essence of political theatre (Boal 2008, 80). In this sense, a political playwright does not merely record events, but seeks to establish the causal relations between them; within a broader context, it is possible to *understand* theatre as artistic means to envisioning a different political future, while at the same time it serves as a medium which “allows us to experience politics through art”

¹⁷As Patterson (2003) explains in greater detail: “... The primary purpose of socialist realist drama was to offer optimistic reassurance that the world was constantly improving, thanks to socialism. In fact, ‘realism’ was a crass misnomer, since the plots and character depictions were highly idealized” (34).

¹⁸Apart from those discussed in this paper, the following are British dramatists of the period who may be regarded as political (at least for some of their plays): Peter Barnes, Robert Bolt, David Edgar, Barrie Keeffe, David Mercer, Peter Nichols, Alan Plater, Stephen Poliakoff, David Rudkin, Tom Stoppard, Peter Terson, Charles Wood, Liz Lockhead, Timberlake Wertenbaker (Patterson 2003, 5).

(Morgan 2013, 8). Brecht's dramaturgy is a distinctively political one, and its influence on British theatre was enormous.

There are many British dramatists whose work can be perceived as political in the previously defined sense¹⁹; the following part of the paper portrays the post-war political drama through the work of several selected playwrights and different theatrical trends and defining moments organized in two chapters: political drama in the 50s and 60s, and 70s and 80s.

Political Drama in the 50s and 60s: Performing the Words That Mean²⁰

There were several crucial events which truly transformed English language drama and theatre in the post-war period. One of these was the founding of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in London in 1953. The Workshop was one of the first attacks on the 'apolitical' and mainstream world of the plays presented in the West End which rarely discussed social conditions, but were rather examples of well-made plays, farce and light comedy, steering far away from any political controversies²¹. Littlewood wanted to get across the social message in the first place by introducing European aestheticism and theatrical strategies with "a deeply English love of popular theatre" (Billington 2014, para. 10), and working in a theatre which is working-class oriented (Rabey 2014, 40). In 1963, Littlewood staged and directed an epic musical about the World War I *Oh What A Lovely War* which questioned the national attitude towards conflict by showing it from the perspective of a common soldier and revolutionary juxtaposing the patriotic songs from that period with "grim battle statistics that appeared in a running newsreel tape above the stage" (Billington 2014, para. 1); as Billington argues, it is clear that at the time, this play was seen as a political provocation, posing questions about heroism and patriotism in the post-war reality of disillusionment (para. 11).²² It is important to emphasise that

¹⁹In 1996, John McGrath wrote about the times after Thatcherism, claiming that it was still necessary to write against the ideology she had established: "In short, public language is in danger of losing its ability to tell the truth of the world in all its complexity, then perhaps at least some writers should refuse complicity with this failure by declining to indulge in smart post-modern games-playing, and rather struggle to create recognisable images of a world in transition, and even to dare to ask: transition to what? To answer we must have words that mean." (McGrath as cited in Peacock 1999, 9).

²⁰West End theatre is a common term for mainstream professional theatre in and near the West End of London. Same as New York's Broadway theatre, it is a synonym for commercial theatre.

²²Goorney (n.d.) summarises his reflection on Littlewood's importance: "It may be that Harold Hobson was overstating the case when he said 'I doubt if there would have been any Fringe without Theatre Workshop and Joan Littlewood', but the influence on the work of some of the pioneers of the political theatre in the late sixties has been

Littlewood's efforts brought about the founding of many new "little" theatres and clubs, such as the Arts, the Mercury, and many others²³; the gradual increase in Arts Council²⁴ funding in the post-war period supported the reformation of some old theatres such as Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, with educated and influential figures such as Peter Hall and Laurence Olivier at the forefront (Rabey 2014, 63). This context encouraged dramatists and theatre workers to see themselves "as contributors to the political, social, personal and moral changes taking place rapidly around them" (Peacock 1999, 216).

Two extremely important events in the history of the British post-World War II theatre both occurred in 1956—the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and the visit of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble. Osborne's voice was the first one to violently shatter the agonizing silence that descended upon the British theatre after WWII, initiating the birth of the so-called kitchen-sink drama. Its protagonists were described as "angry young men", young working-class Britons characterized by their impatience with the status quo, refusal to be co-opted by a bankrupt society, and an instinctive solidarity with lower classes (Gilleman 2008, 105). Kitchen-sink used the style of social realism in order to portray the harsh living conditions of the working-class and explore controversial social and political issues. Many promises of the post-war governments were betrayed, and *Look Back in Anger* expressed what it was like for the neglected lower classes (who were rarely a subject of mainstream plays) to live in England during the 1950s. Angry young men created artworks which portrayed a deep irreverence of the British class system due to its injustice and predominance, and which spoke harshly against the escapism of the mainstream theatre. Rabey (2014) argues that *Look Back in Anger* "has been read as anti-hegemonic social realism, and subsequently as a precisely culturally manufactured example, in its 'success', of cynical (specifically, misogynistic) repressive tolerance and the adaptability of commercialism, responding to offset a fear of national decline" (32).²⁵

acknowledged, not least in their appreciation of the need to develop the physical skills of the actors, the value of the use of common speech in the theatre and the advantages resulting from group work" (para. 7).

²³Pal (2010) lists other agitprop theatre companies that were founded in Britain in 1968: "... CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre), The General Will, Belt and Braces, Foco Novo, and the North West Spanner — Red Ladder is the only company to withstand the test of time and survive today" (51).

²⁴Developed from CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) in 1946 in the pursuit of decentralised British Theatre (Arts Council England 2019).

²⁵Similarly, John Osborne's *The Entertainer* is also an example of the genre known as state-of-the-nation plays, a metaphor for the condition of the culture (Lawson 2016, para. 2).

Another maybe not-so-angry man from this generation has to be mentioned. In his kitchen-sink plays, Arnold Wesker explored the everyday lives of working-class people, attacking “the deadening effects of prosperity more often than the uncomfortable confines of poverty” (Rabey 2014, 30). Rabey claims that most of the Wesker’s plays “present intensified critical images of British society: hierarchical, compartmentalised and dehumanising through purposeful narrowness of focus” showing in his play *The Kitchen* “how pressured and hierarchically separated working conditions intensify resentments and lead workers to drop standards in ways which are apparently acceptable to industrialised consumerism” (37). In Wesker’s play *Roots* from 1958, the transition of the main protagonist Beatie is portrayed; Beatie goes from an uneducated working-class woman obsessed with her liberal city boyfriend Ronnie to a woman who can express herself, her family, and the struggles of their lives and times. Nevertheless, Wesker never shows the same amount of anger and frustration as Osborne; as Patterson (2003) points out, his stage discusses politics and philosophy and this “so frequently attracts the stigma of being ‘didactic’” (29)²⁶. Wesker’s writing, however, was not experimental, but rather an example of “conventionally realistic mode, familiar to London theatre-goers from the plays of Terence Rattigan and Noel Coward” (Patterson 2003, 27).

As stated above, the second extremely important event was the visitation of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble in 1956. When in 1949 Bertolt Brecht returned to East Germany from his exile in the US, he founded the Berliner Ensemble in order to promote his ideas of the Epic Theatre, which, in its insistence on the development of critical thinking, was based on reason rather than empathy. It experimented with the form, structure, avant-garde techniques such as montage, collage, light, and alike (Boal 2008, 80). Most importantly, the Theatre was based on two key notions: theatricalism, which always reminded the audience that what they were seeing was not real, but only a theatrical representation of reality; and the alienation effect which again had the same goal—making the audience a conscious critical observer.²⁷ It is obvious that Brecht’s dramatic theory reflected his left(ist) position. Consequently, the visit of the Berliner Ensemble in 1956 was seen as problematic and “anti-western” by the Foreign Office; it was,

²⁶One has to remember that, as Wesker himself said: “There is a quality in my writing which makes it very un-English and which comes from my Jewish–European background” (Patterson 2003, 29).

²⁷Alienation demands that “both audience and actors ought to maintain a critical detachment from the play rather than submitting to the staged illusion or easy emotional identification with character and situation” (Cuddon 2013, 20). To achieve that, different techniques are used in order to “persistently draw attention to the work as a dramatic illusion and construct” (Cuddon 2013, 20).

however, allowed because of the officials' fear of being criticised (Barnett 2001, para. 4). For the wider audience, Brecht's ideas did not prove significant; the plays performed in German were tiresome and encouraged no understanding of the key notions²⁸. Nevertheless, among the educated dramatic enthusiasts, this visit was so important that the idea of launching epic theatre in UK was born; that same year, a Brecht's play premiered in the Royal Court (Barnett 2001, para. 10).

As a very concisely defined theatrical practice, the Epic Theatre was a chance for many young (British) dramatists to be direct and forward in the post-war times of affluence characterised by the lack of social accountability. Social issues such as housing policies, local government corruption, the Cold War, post-war neglect of the soldiers, and the prevailing atmosphere of different kinds of violence could be discussed in theatre now. Two young British dramatists, although in completely different ways, proved to be the most courageous in adopting and adapting the techniques of Epic Theatre: John Arden and Edward Bond.

John Arden was at first, as Patterson (2003) cites him, very modest in "his claims for the effectiveness of his theatre" (3), believing that "[p]rotest is a sort of futile activity in the theatre ... The only thing you can do is to keep on saying what you don't like about the society in which you live" (Arden as cited in Patterson 2003, 5). Arden made it clear that his intention was not to copy Brecht; the young playwright rather modified some of the Epic Theatre practices, and insisted that there could be no simple answers to complex questions (Patterson 2003, 45). The analysis of his work shows that Arden relied on Brecht mostly in terms of the anti-illusionist theatricality, stating that "[p]eople must want to come to the theatre because of the artificiality, not despite it" (Arden as cited in Patterson 2003, 44); in this sense, Arden used many of the music-hall techniques such as dance routines, comic monologue, direct address to the public as Brechtian practice of the breaking of fourth wall (48). In his second play, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, which premiered in 1959, Arden used these and other Brechtian elements such as historical setting, songs as commentary, and minimal(ist) sets. In this play, Arden questions the disparity between everyday life and ideals through the portrayal of negative aspects of army life

²⁸The original review from 1956 proclaimed that: "The most notable feature of Brecht's dramas is that there is no attempt to create the illusion of reality. His is a theatre of disenchantment. The viewers are not expected to suspend disbelief but to maintain it. ... The Berliner Ensemble is criticised from opposing ends. The average citizen says that it is too realistic, for it provides no escapes and provokes no passions. Moreover, it is didactic: those who want to remain politically untainted – in their Communist purity – keep well away from it. The sophisticated critics decry its lack of realism, and allege that it has the flavour of a circus troupe. The support for the ensemble is equally inconsistent" (*The Guardian* 2011).

on soldiers. Its main protagonist, Musgrave, is tortured by the guilt over the death of a soldier and five other civilians who were killed in retaliation, and he wants England to partake in the responsibility²⁹.

Edward Bond is probably the most representative Brechtian disciple in the British theatre. In his truly idiosyncratic plays, Bond experimented both ideologically and stylistically; one of his dramatic strengths lies in the fact that for him aesthetics matters as much as the social function of art, which is why many protagonists of his plays are poets. Bond's approach to writing included a very well-built theory. Moreover, Innes (2002) claims that all of Bond's plays are a "variation on a single theme, analysing the causes of contemporary violence, and showing its psychological effects" (154)³⁰. For Bond, all art is political, and those who create it should, therefore, never forget or disregard its social role. Bond's "rational theatre", which is openly didactic, is "a theatre of political persuasion" (Innes, 2002, 168). As the biggest culprit for the state of the British society Bond saw its social institutions:

Social institutions, originally developed for the protection of individuals, become self-perpetuating. Law and religion, mores and morality, now have no function but moulding individuals to serve their needs. Regression leads to aggression, and this aggression is the driving force behind social progress. Thus, all social activity is presented as moralized violence. (as cited in Innes 2002, 160)

Bond was conscious of the ubiquity and viral spread of violence in the post-war Britain and his now famous words reveal this: "Violence shapes and obsesses our society and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence

²⁹Later in his career, Arden's strong Marxist conviction defined his writing, clearly situating him in the context of political theatre; the following quote selected by Patterson at least partially highlights the opinions of many playwrights who wrote in the 70s: "I hope I have made clear... [t]hat I recognise as the enemy the fed man, the clothed man, the sheltered man, whose food, clothes and house are obtained at the expense of the hunger, the nakedness, and the exposure of so many millions of others: and who will allow anything to be said in books or on the stage, so long as the food, clothes and house remain undiminished in his possession" (Arden as cited in Patterson 2003, 55).

³⁰The atmosphere of violence in the British society in the post-war period, referring to its many sources and consequences, and justifying Bond's poetics is summarised in the following line from the British play *Cousin Vladimir* by David Mercer: "Beneath that skin there's a meanness, a rancour, a mindless violence brewing... [w]hich for the first time in three hundred years we can neither take to war nor export to some remote colony, dressed up as civilisation, honest commerce, religion or any other kind of mumbo-jumbo. ... I doubt you'll ever again find so much impotent fury draining like pus into the glum business of daily existence. Or else into macabre fantasies of where to point the finger and who to smash, who to blame, how to legitimise a new order of hatred on the grounds that the old one's succumbing to violence and anarchy" (Mercer as cited in Rabey 2014, 69).

want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence” (as cited in Billingham, 2014, 38). Bond’s play *Saved* (1965) is even nowadays remembered as the one in which a baby is stoned. This play is full of verbal and physical violence. The language spoken by characters coming from the working-class is terse, violent, disinterested; human relations are rotten, family home utterly debased. One should note that although under the influence of Brecht’s alienation effect, Bond adapted this practice into what he called “the aggro-effect”. Unlike Brecht who wanted to exclude the emotional reaction of the audience, Bond believes that “it is necessary to disturb an audience emotionally to involve them emotionally in my plays” (Innes, 2002, 169)³¹. The third part of the paper analyses two of Bond’s plays in more detail.

In 1968, David Hare founded the Portable Theatre Company; it gathered several important (political) playwrights of the new generation whose writing shaped the following decade (Patterson 2003, 84). Its founder summarised their sentiment upon the entrance into the new decade and a new phase in British political drama:

We thought, wrongly, as it turned out, that England was in a state of apocalyptic crisis. And we didn’t believe that contemporary theatre dealt with that crisis. We felt that plays about psychology were simply irrelevant to what we took to be our country’s terminal decline. We had lost faith in its institutions, we thought that Britain’s assumption of a non-existent world role was ludicrous, and we also thought that its economic vitality was so sapped that it wouldn’t last long. So we wanted to bundle into a van and go round the country performing short, nasty little plays which would alert an otherwise dormant population to this news. (Hare as cited in Gaston 1993, 215)

Political Drama in the 70s and 80s: Theatre of Discontent

British theatre of the 1970s was strongly defined by its political tendencies, resulting in a great number of political writing. With the abolition of theatre censorship in 1968, a new freedom was gained. Peacock (1999) outlines some of the main theatrical currents and defining moments of this decade:

³¹Innes (2002) writes: “Bond sees outraging the audience emotionally as a sort of shock therapy designed to galvanize their consciences into life and provoke them into viewing society ‘objectively’ and ‘rationally’” (170).

During the 1970s, British political theatre, like the Russian and western European political theatres of the 1920s and 1930s, rejected the realistic well-made play of the mainstream theatre as an inappropriate discourse. ... [i]n order to delineate public/political issues, oppositional left-wing dramatic and theatrical discourses generally took one of three alternative forms. The first, adapted from the work of the Blue Blouse Groups of post-revolutionary Russia, was agitprop. This was employed particularly in non-theatre venues in industrial disputes or protest meetings. ... Alongside this was of the type of social realism that emphasized the “typicality” of social roles and was written by Trevor Griffiths. ... The Brechtian gestic, epic-structure was also adapted by, amongst other dramatists, Edward Bond and Howard Brenton. Here, in an historical context, they explored the inequities of capitalism and speculated on alternative political and cultural possibilities (9).

Among the most important political playwrights of the 70s and 80s were Howard Brenton and David Hare. Their collaboration started with the founding of the aforementioned Portable Theatre Company in 1968, and although their manifestos were similar, they differed in their approach to strategies used. As Patterson (2003) points out, Hare’s strategy is “the essentially Brechtian one: to face us with a choice” (137). In his play *Plenty* (1978), Hare does exactly this; he portrays a story of Susan Traherne, a woman living in the post-war Britain whose aspirations, wants and disillusionments are an outcome of the political situation after the war, a time which was supposed to bring plenty to the society. Susan is a former secret agent whose glorious and triumphant war-past is contrasted to her contemporary ordinary life; after working behind the enemy lines as an important agent in Nazi-occupied France, Susan becomes dissatisfied with her life, increasingly depressed and unhappy in her marriage to a diplomat whose career she has destroyed. Susan’s psychological state parallels that of the state of the nation—she is morally bankrupt, self-absorbed, and destructive, and her mental health is slowly deteriorating. Rabey (2014) argues that “Hare prefers to examine middle-class characters whose ideals burn and smoulder over a longer period, tracing the consequences of English social history where ‘corruption and disillusionment offer only the choice between madness and complicity’. The repeated collision of individual idealism with public political cynicism impacts social entropy into a sense of personal deadlock or disintegration for these characters” (112).

On the other hand, Howard Brenton preserved much more outrageousness of the fringe in his plays; it is from this fringe heritage that Brenton brought the shock tactics into mainstream theatre. As Patterson (2003) writes: “The shocks in Brenton’s plays occur in his use of provocative content and unexpected juxtapositions rather than in an aggressively interventionist style of theatre” (94–95). Apart from this, Brenton was a convicted Marxist, and for him, the only way to defeat capitalism and its moral decadence was through communism³². In his notoriously controversial play, *The Romans in Britain* (1980), Brenton comments on the then burning question of the British military presence in Northern Ireland by drawing parallels with the Roman invasion of Britain in 54 BC. This is one of the things that make this play Brechtian: one historical setting is contrasted with another in order to instigate critical thinking and to spark up change. Peacock (1999) thus argues that this play “explores and demythologizes myth-making against a broad historical panorama” (69). One of Brenton’s motivations to write this play was the fact that no plays about Ireland were written, which he regarded as a great failure of the British political theatre (Meaney 2010, 194). The play was problematic in two important aspects: first of all, in a very epic and potent way, it commented on imperialism and the conflict of culture(s), which for the British public is often a hard pill to swallow—one only has to remember the atmosphere of terror in which the society found itself with the IRA bombings in the 80s. Another problem was Brenton’s literal portrayal of the colonial raping of one culture by another: in a scene (which later became the reason for the persecution of the play’s director on the charges of gross indecency), a Roman soldier tries to rape a Celt. During a very turbulent period of the trial in which Michael Bogdanov was persecuted, Brenton remained publicly silent; Peacock (1999) emphasises that because of the associated publicity, “consideration of the play’s aesthetic value or its political message was ignored. Instead, it became the stimulus for public debate concerning Britain’s current morality, state support for the arts and the freedom of the theatre to deal with politically or socially sensitive issues” (71).

³²Patterson (2003) highlights many of Brenton’s thoughts citing the playwright: “Rejecting the humanism of Wesker, the pacifism of the early Arden and Bond and the idealistic hippy culture of the sixties, Brenton committed himself to revolutionary socialism: ‘I think the fringe has failed. Its failure was that of the whole dream of an ‘alternative culture’ – the notion that within society as it exists you can grow another way of life, which, like a beneficent and desirable cancer, will in the end grow throughout the western world, and change it. ... The truth is that there is only one society – that you can’t escape the world you live in. Reality is remorseless. No one can leave. If you’re going to change the world, well there’s only one set of tools, and they’re bloody and stained but realistic. I mean communist tools. Not pleasant. If only the gentle, dreamy, alternative society had worked’” (95).

John McGrath differed from all of his colleagues and collaborators. Unlike most of them, McGrath chose the form of agitprop, to which Peacock (1999) refers as the musical political documentary which has a lot in common with Littlewood's work (7). McGrath most openly held fast to a Marxist model of political theatre "which assumed the working-class to be the potentially progressive force for change" (Rabey 2014, 114). McGrath wanted to combine this belief of his with the general advancement of popular theatre; again, similarly to Littlewood, together with his wife Elizabeth MacLennan, McGrath founded his own theatre group named "7:84"³³. The group was later divided into two branches, the first became 7:84 England and the latter one 7:84 Scotland³⁴. The Marxist plays performed by these two groups were "intended to raise class consciousness by revealing the insidious exploitation of the working class by capitalist forces, and to suggest how change might be achieved by communal political action" (Peacock 199, 132). In 1973, 7:84 produced a play which incorporated elements of popular theatre performance such as music, dance and direct address; *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* is a politicising view of Scottish heritage, full of proclaimed devotion for the Scottish highlands and a series of historical episodes which reveal different phases of its exploitation by the rich, namely the multinational oil companies which were extracting oil from beneath the North Sea in collusion with the British Government (Patterson 2003, 119). This play makes it very clear that McGrath saw the solution to the "sinister and all-pervasive influence of capitalism" in the "traditionally Marxist-class-unity" (Peacock 1999, 5). Additionally, Peacock (1999) refers to this play as "the most theatrically effective political play of the decade" but claims that its political effectiveness is much more difficult to ascertain (135).

It is no wonder that McGrath suffered the greatest repercussions with the new Thatcherite government³⁵. A great shift in almost every aspect hit theatres with the new decade. In 1978, a Conference on Political Theatre was held; according to Peacock (1999), its aim was to analyse the last decade's output of political theatre and assess how effective it has been in "raising

³³Interestingly, the idea for the name came from the official data published in *The Economist* in 1966 that 7% of the population of the UK owned 84% of the country's wealth (Patterson 2003, 109).

³⁴The English group folded in 1984, having lost its grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain (*The Ashden Directory* 2019, para. 2).

³⁵Soon after Thatcher became Prime Minister, McGrath unapologetically staged a play in which he critically addressed the neoliberal policies of the new government. Peacock (1999) writes: "... McGrath's *Night Class*, in response to the new Tory discourse that was redefining the fundamental concept of 'freedom' through such terms as 'Freedom Association,' 'free choice', 'freedom for enterprise,' 'Free World.' The play set out to portray this new discourse as one of deceit by uncovering the 'hidden contradictions' within its concept of democracy" (137).

working-class consciousness and provoking widespread demand for political change” (1)³⁶. Rabey (2014) points out that “[t]heatre was – like everything else under Thatcherism – widely held to be answerable and justifiable on financial terms alone” (169). Apart from this, political theatre with its left-writing was very soon threatened from several frontiers. Peacock (1999) outlines some of the most important moments regarding theatre subsidies in post-war Britain:

The Arts Council had, since 1946, rigorously maintained an ‘arms length’ principle of awarding subsidy for the arts and for artists. ... Even during the 1970s, when the political theatre movement was at its height, it saw no difficulty in supporting left-wing theatre companies, such as Red Ladder or 7:84, who actively sought the overthrow of the capitalist system that provided their resources. ... However, from April 1981, for the first time in its 35 year history, as a result of the government’s proposed reduction in its financial allocation, the Council was forced to make drastic cuts. ... These events appeared to confirm the suspicions of theatre workers that the new Conservative government was to be no friend to the arts. (36)³⁷

The rise of the Conservatives was a moment of great cultural shift. The financial pressures immediately effected the managements of the theatres³⁸. If theatre was to maintain an oppositional stance or function as a social commentator, it had to “evolve new dramatic and theatrical discourses that would both embody a rejection of the discourse of Thatcherism and also replace the now evidently obsolete forms of the political theatre of the 1970s” (Peacock 1999, 216). According to Peacock (1999):

Faced with the energy and seductiveness of the Thatcherite discourse, the Left was generally found to be impotent and, in spite of its dalliance with the carnivalesque, was unable to evolve a theatrical and dramatic discourse capable of engaging with the new

³⁶Political drama entered a new decade with the glum words of Hare who stated that “consciousness has been raised in this country for a good many years now ... [f]urther from radical political change than at any time in my life. We have looked. We have seen. We have known. And we have not changed. A pervasive cynicism paralyses public life.” (as cited in Peacock 1999, 2).

³⁷Even Kingsley Amis, once an angry young man of the novelist world, gave his arguments for abandoning state funding of the arts, or more precisely drama: “The drama, with the obvious exception of Shakespeare ... makes little appeal to me, and makes that much less nearly every time I take the appalling risk of seeing a play by a contemporary playwright” (Peacock 1999, 35).

³⁸Peacock (1999) points out the weight given to managerial changes and the pressure to incorporate business methods: “Constant worries about funding and the experience of continually living hand to mouth were exhausting and absorbed energy that could better have been applied to creating the theatrical ‘product’” (216).

political and cultural climate. It is significant that whatever oppositional theatre did emerge during the 1980s in the spheres of post-modernist performance or women's theatre, was primarily the site of cultural rather than political opposition. (216)

In 1985, Peter Hall voiced the opinion and the struggle of the theatre world which was battling with the gluttonous financial impositions: “The saddest thing of all ... is having to keep justifying that the arts should be subsidized. I thought that battle was over. We don't have to justify what we spend on education. I think we all live in the same world. The soul of this country, I believe, resides in its education, its universities, and in its art in all forms. And that's being denied” (as cited in Peacock 1999, 60). What Hall was fighting for was the understanding of the aesthetic, spiritual, moral, and educational social value of theatre; but the discourse he was fighting against was purely materialistic.³⁹ The unwillingness of the Thatcherite government to work with the arts in general showed that in the new neoliberal era, theatre was not perceived as “an agency of cultural, spiritual, social or psychological welfare, but an entertainment industry that was otherwise irrelevant to the workings of society” (Peacock 1999, 215). The conservative spirit deemed the radical and innovative theatrical practices of the 60s as the cause of contemporary social and moral decline. Furthermore, Peacock (1999) points out that: “In the Thatcherite view, it was, therefore, justifiable to provide enough money to keep theatre viable but not to encourage any activity which had socio-political intent unless, as with urban regeneration, it coincided with current Tory policy” (216).

It is no wonder that during the early 1980s, the West End theatres embraced the new commercial and marketing philosophy; very soon, the Thatcherite theatre became the musical theatre with Andrew Lloyd Weber as the main protagonist of this trend. Faced with this context, apart from the financial pressures, political dramatists, especially those who had written from a left-wing perspective were faced with three problems identified by Peacock (1999):

The first was how to critique dramatically the values of the Thatcherite ideology. The second was to find a theatrical discourse capable of effectively portraying that critique

³⁹In 1989, Lord Palumbo, Chairman of the Arts Council, said of Mrs. Thatcher: “You could go and see her, her door was always open. Though the arts were not the epicenter of her interest, she made you think they were the most important of all. She had read the briefs, she had a thorough understanding of them, her questions were penetrating. ‘Tell me what they cost,’ she said. ‘What do they generate? Give me examples. What is your evidence for this statement?’ She was absolutely dazzling. If I asked her for thirty million, I would get twenty-five or twenty-seven.’ ... She wanted every pound put into the arts to return two pounds to the Treasury” (Peacock 1999, 60).

and engaging an audience that was becoming increasingly unsympathetic to socialist politics. The third was whether to abandon as obsolete a public, Marxist viewpoint and focus instead, like the majority of mainstream theatre, on the private and personal. (65)⁴⁰

In 1985, Hare and Brenton commented on the Thatcher government in their jointly written play *Pravda*. In it they confronted the Thatcherite ideology of free-market capitalism through the portrayal of the right-wing newspaper magnate and megalomaniac named Le Roux. Le Roux is an emblem of money-making; he is an unstoppable amoral force, and his “natural” entrepreneurial drive makes him “an allegorical character representing naked capitalism” (Peacock 1999, 75). In this period, Brenton summed up the sentiment of many when he said that “Thatcher made conservatives of us all. We found ourselves defending institutions which previously we would have had no time for, because these institutions were better than barbarism” (cited in Rabey 2014, 115). Thus, Brenton and others were defending “the ideals and instincts formerly supposed to be the heart of traditional institutions” (Rabey 2014, 115).

In 1975, Gillian Hanna founded Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company with the aim to promote women and their writing in the world of theatre. In the 80s, this company became one of the most important left-wing theatre forces which sought to “discover theatrical forms which proclaimed their identity, appealed to their particular constituency and conveyed their philosophy and values” (Peacock 1999, 9)⁴¹. Monstrous Regiment shared a lot with McGrath’s 7:84 in the sense that it illustrated the effects of Thatcherism on the oppositional theatre⁴². Hanna believed that “theatre could still instil a sense of purpose ... generated by its ability to provoke an awareness amongst women of being ‘part of a larger group, a larger movement, as actors in the world, and not as isolated individuals’” (Peacock 1999, 146)⁴³.

⁴⁰Peacock (1999) points out that “Characteristically, the oldest political dramatist in the institutional theatre, Edward Bond, ignored both the change of government and of political discourse. During the late 1960s and early 1970s his political drama had been concerned with revealing the iniquities of capitalism and had called not simply for political revolution but for a new way of viewing human potential, which would itself lead to a new way of living” (66).

⁴¹This paper does not deal with drama concerned with racial and ethnic writing specifically. Nevertheless, as Peacock (1999) argues, theatre companies representing political agendas of these social groups “have on occasion effectively challenged conventional dramatic and theatrical discourse” (9).

⁴²As the strongest force in women’s writing in 1980s, Monstrous Regiment stemmed from its feminist and socialist political impetus, but time has shown that its work was essentially theatrical.

⁴³Peacock (1999) writes about Timberlake Wertenbaker’s views concerning the potential influence of theatre on women’s lives: “I don’t think you can leave the theatre and go out and make a revolution. That’s the naivete of the 1970s. But I do think you can make people change, just a little, by forcing them to question something, or by intriguing them, or giving them an image that remains with them. And that little change can lead to bigger changes”

In his survey of women's drama, Peacock (1999) reveals that "between September 1982 and September 1983 of 1024 plays performed, only 11 percent were by women" and that even "within this total, of the 620 plays produced by repertory theatres, forty-two were written by women and, of these, twenty-two were written by Agatha Christie" (147–148):

Theatres may have felt discouraged from producing plays focusing on women and women's issues by the consideration that, although 52 percent of the population is female and more women than men are theatre-goers, the majority of critics are white, middle-aged, middle-class men. The cultural climate is, then, primarily determined by male perception. (Peacock 1999, 148)⁴⁴

Women's drama in Britain explored and focused on experience common to women: the exploration of women's issues, a critique of women's interpersonal, intra-sexual, social and domestic relationships and, where they exist, a theatrical de-centring of male characters. Apart from these, issues concerning the politics of feminism such as equal pay, education and job opportunities were thematised, including the then-current issues such as free contraception, abortion, financial and legal independence, etc. (Peacock 1999, 145). Playwrights insisted on the female perception and drew from Cixous's *écriture féminine*. This resulted in plays which were characterised with the disruption of the temporality, dialogue, and the general linearity of the narrative, plot, and characters: "much women's drama has been characterized by fluid, imagistic and even surrealistic structures and by a conspicuous reorganization of time that makes the audience aware of change, particularly in interpersonal relationships, and of growth and decay" (Peacock 199, 150).

This can particularly be applied to Caryl Churchill's dramas *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* which are analysed in the following part of the paper. Churchill is undoubtedly a major political figure of the political theatre of the 70s and 80s; her voice oscillated from feminism to politics, essentially making her work an epitome of gender politics. Churchill wrote about the society she believed in: "decentralized, non-authoritarian, communist, non-sexist—a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives" (as cited in Patterson 2003, 4).

(146). Apart from Churchill and Wertenbaker, Louise Page and Sarah Daniels are the most important women playwrights from this period.

⁴⁴Peacock (1999) argues: "On the management side, the study revealed that, in the 119 theatres surveyed, women accounted for only 12 percent of artistic directors. The National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company had no women as directors" (148).

The analysis of Churchill's plays in this paper will show that her examination of gender and power relations is mostly conducted through the questioning of structure and dichotomies "such as subjective/ objective, past/present and masculine/feminine" (Rabey 2014, 135). For the moment, one might conclude with Patterson's (2003) claim that the women's movement was "one radical political movement that has had an obvious and immediate effect on the laws, economy and social attitudes of the British nation" (154).

In the 80s, another already famous playwright started writing political plays. Harold Pinter's early career was marked by the strong emotional menace that coloured his dramas, so much so that these are referred to as comedy of menace. Throughout his work, Pinter kept playing with the notion of language, always innovatively emphasising the black holes of communication, both thematically and structurally, often sending the existentialist message that "language is actually used to keep thought at bay" (Rabey 2014, 52). In the 80s, Pinter wrote several plays which directly dealt with the "dramatic presentations of the repressive processes of authoritarian political regimes" (Rabey 2014, 57). This transition to political writing was prompted by different global events of repression and dispossession of different races. As Rabey (2014) points out, the plays were political in the sense that they criticised the current Conservative Thatcher Government and its policies, "specifically, insidious but purposeful anti-democratic increases in state power and allied assertions of police power to pressurise any dissenting voice" (57). The plays *Mountain Language* and *Party Time* are assessed in the analytical part of the paper.

Bond and the Politics of Imagination in *Bingo* (1973) and *The Fool* (1975)

It is indeed hard to analyse and truly understand any of Edward Bond's plays without turning to the playwright himself. Bond's approach to drama⁴⁵ is complex and radical. Similarly to George Bernard Shaw, Bond writes lengthy prose introductions to his plays in order to explain and bring home his ideas. In one such introduction, Bond (1987) stated that it was wrong to ask and write only about human nature, but that one should rather "ask about the 'nature of society'" in order to 'know yourself'" (ix). Bond's vision of this (modern) society shows it to be a deeply unjust one; it is ruled by those who would do anything to keep their (political) power. For Bond (1987), injustice is "always a great threat to the human mind" because an unjust society damages "ideas, feelings, emotions, relationship, work, technology, law, all the ways we see, treat and deal with one another" (xvii); the playwright further points out that modern democracies enable mental slavery, in which "the body is free and the mind is in chains" (xii). The key idea of Bond's plays is democratic freedom: "[t]here can be no confusion when we say that an unjust society cannot defend freedom—because without justice there is no freedom. Or real democracy. Or any of the things which would make society truly civilised" (xvii). Similarly, in his preface to *The Fool*, Bond (1987) insisted that "[t]here is a discrepancy between what we have to do to keep our society running and what we're told we ought to do to be human. ... We need anti-social behaviour to keep society running but this behaviour destroys society" (69). It is clear that Bond writes about Britain, especially when he attacks nuclear policies, but his words should be read in terms of the Western civilisation in general. Bond clearly identifies capitalism and consumer totalitarianism as enemies of the democratic freedoms he writes about, and his critique definitely resonates with the post-war British society:

The richer our organization becomes, the more impoverished are our schools, hospitals and welfare and social services. We abandon the old, we can't afford to socialize our children, our cities decay and our streets become the playground of violence, because we have neglected the necessities and decencies of life for the trivializing and ultimately despairing consumption of ersatz satisfactions. That is another irony: affluence impoverishes and produces the social conditions of scarcity. (1987, 70)

⁴⁵Bond draws a distinction between "theatre, which is for entertainment, and drama, which can change the world" (Penford 2012, 15).

Always resourceful and inquisitive, Bond identifies culture as a means of changing society; the societal change will come with a cultural one. By claiming that “[c]ulture is the way society’s run and owned, and we’re trying to run and own it in old ways” (Bond 1987, 75), Bond gives a chance to art, summarising in many ways, the essence of his dramatic manifesto: “Nowadays art is often dismissed as irrelevant to the solution of social problems. It will be clear that I don’t believe this. If creative imagination exists in all people, it must have a use. It’s too potent, and in the past has been too effective, to be an accident of nature” (77). It is obvious that Bond places a great amount of responsibility on the backs of artists, whose imagination is always political, in accordance with the playwright’s opinion.

These are the issues tackled in *Bingo* and *The Fool*. The protagonists of these plays are artists whose social responsibility is questioned through the analyses of their behaviour in situations which request action. In *Bingo*, which first premiered in 1973, Bond revises history by portraying Shakespeare’s moral dilemmas upon the practice of land enclosure in the 17th century England⁴⁶. Namely, *Bingo* depicts Shakespeare in his later years as a landowner whose income mostly came from rents (or tithes⁴⁷) paid on common fields at Welcombe near Stratford where he lived. In the course of the play, Bond’s Shakespeare consciously chooses to protect his own wealth to the detriment of the local peasants when Combe proposes that the land at Welcombe be enclosed despite knowing that this privatisation of land could cause hardship for the peasants who worked and lived there under the tithing system; knowing that his own income would be guaranteed if he signs the contract, Shakespeare acts in pure self-interest and agrees to Combe’s proposal. Throughout the play, Bond portrays Shakespeare as passive, silent, and rather desolate; his (in)action confuses everyone who, in the eyes of the audience, “understood and articulated the human condition more than any other [author]” (Penford 2012, 15). The rest of the play and characters themselves emblematised this main idea of the catastrophic consequences of capitalism and consumerism, and try to query into the question of artist’s responsibility in such a society. Most of the characters are portrayed as victims of the system which was becoming more industrial; the character of the Young Woman shows the destiny of those who suffered the

⁴⁶Penford (2012) cites George Orwell’s reflections on the land enclosures: “Stop to consider how the so-called owners of land got hold of it. They simply seized it by force, afterwards hiring lawyers to provide them with title-deeds. ... [t]he land-grabbers did not even have the excuse of being foreign conquerors; they were quite frankly taking the heritage of their own countrymen, upon no sort of pretext except that they had the power to do so” (23).

⁴⁷Tithing was a system by which the peasants paid one tenth of their yearly earnings, either in money or goods, in return for land (Penford 2012, 21).

consequences of enclosure. Many labourers, mostly farmers, lost their homes and were left unemployed, thus they were forced to travel in search of a job or a place to live. It is in this state of displacement that the Young Woman appears immediately at the start of the play, with Shakespeare reading a letter in which the peasants are asking for help in the matter of enclosure, as we later conclude. By the end of the third scene, the Young Woman is hanged; classified as vagrant and with no state support, she turned to crime to provide for herself; she is a tangible consequence of Shakespeare signing the contract with Combe.⁴⁸

The subtitle of the play “Scenes of Money and Death” further underlines the playwright’s intention of declaring money and commercialism as crucial problems of the (17th century) society. In the Introduction, Bond (1987) sarcastically writes that “A consumer society depends on its members being avaricious, ostentatious, gluttonous, envious, wasteful, selfish and inhuman. Officially we teach morality but if we all became ‘good’ the economy would collapse. Affluent people can’t afford ten commandments” (7). It is clear that Shakespeare’s moral battle is symbolic of “the fundamental conflict society experiences every day” (Bond 1987, 5); do we not participate in the systematic and rampant labour exploitation by fashion industry every time we shop for great brands? Is one moral misdeed enough for us to feel collective responsibility and guilt that Shakespeare felt in the play? It seems that nobody is free in a capitalist society, because everybody’s responsibility at one point or another (or everyday) finds itself in a dead-end street. Poignantly enough, Bond (1987) makes a literary parallel within his revision: “Shakespeare’s plays show this need for sanity and its political expression, justice. But how did he live? His behavior as a property-owner made him closer to Goneril than Lear. He supported and benefitted from the Goneril-society—with its prisons, workhouses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpit-hysteria and all the rest of it” (6). Nevertheless, this dilemma between financial and human value brings Shakespeare to suicide—his artistic sensibility wins, although too late and in a wrong way. By the end of the play, Shakespeare understands that even his family relations are corrupted; he admits that he has tried to buy the love of his daughter Judith, but

⁴⁸In Scene One, while opposing Shakespeare’s meek attempts to fight his proposal, Combe summarises his own motivations and effects of enclosure, exhibiting his entrepreneurial character which gave birth to the European capitalist society: “Then it’ll be profitable to grow more wheat and the price will come down. Always take the long view, Will. I selfishly cut down my labour costs and put up prices and the town suffers—but not in the long run. This is the only way men have so far discovered of running the world. Men are donkeys, they need carrots and sticks. But there’s a difference between us and the beast. We understand the nature of carrots and sticks. That’s why we can get rid of the bad farmers who grow starvation in their fields like a crop, and create seven hundred poor in a town of less than two thousand” (Bond 1987, 20).

concludes that “money always turns to hate” (Bond 1987, 56); the last scene shows Judith looking for money or a second will over the dead body of her father.

Following the revisionist line, Bond wrote another historical play in 1975. *The Fool* uses one more historical figure as its protagonist—the 19th century English poet John Clare. Clare’s poems celebrate the English countryside and describe the sorrows at its disruption brought about by industrialisation. Just like Bond, who came from the workers’ background, Clare was the son of a labourer, a farmer turned poet. *The Fool* gives glimpses of Clare’s life rather than telling his whole history. As Loxton (2010) points out, “Bond is more interested in the conflict between the poet who loves his countryside and sees it and the lives of his fellows being ruined and the fashionable society folk who patronise him as a peasant poet” (para. 3). The play opens at Christmas 1815: the defeat of Napoleon brought peace but also a fall in prices and cuts in wages. By Scene Two, it is clear that the workers, Clare’s friends from Scene One, are suffering the effects of industrialisation and agricultural revolution which cleared the woodlands and deprived the common folk of free timber and fishing (Loxton 2010, para. 1). In Scene Two, Bond depicts the riots of the farm labourers against the comfort of the landed gentry; in a typical scene of violence, Bond shows a local parson as a figure of power being stripped of clothes and possessions by the peasantry. Throughout these events, Clare is somehow mostly an observer, and one can follow his journey from land towards poetry which is the manifestation of his need to speak of and against the malignant forces which destroyed and displaced his friends. By the end of the play, as Mark Ravenhill (2010) points out, Clare is lost, “no longer a farm worker but no longer a famous poet” (para. 3). Namely, Clare’s poetry became too political; in his poems, he bitterly commented on the treatment of farmers by landowners. In Scene Five, these same landowners, portrayed in the character of Lord Milton and Clare’s patron Mrs Emmerson, insist that the poet removes these remarks because, as Admiral points out, “The people you criticize... are the only ones who can afford books. The only ones who can read!” (Bond 1987, 125). The dialogue between Admiral, Clare and Mrs. Emmerson furthermore shows the main conflict of the play—Clare’s political voice cannot be tolerated, and he is expected to change the subject-matter of his poems:

ADMIRAL: Your publishers won’t like you to alienate the already limited reading public-

CLARE: On’t see no nymphs in our fields but I seen a workhouse.

MRS EMMERSON: How does it help to shake your fist at heaven when some homeward-wending swain perishes in the snow? (Bond 1987, 126)⁴⁹

Bond foregrounds Clare's role through Charles Lamb, another character in the play who appears in Scene Five and expresses admiration for Clare's verse, saying that "Clare tells the truth" (Bond 1987, 121); when misunderstood by Mrs. Emmerson, Lamb elaborates the underlying idea of the play: "Truth isn't governed by the laws of supply and demand. When it's scarce its price goes down. So it's not a luxury, it's never found in palaces, or paraded by judges. Truth shelters in the gutter. Only the man who stoops finds it. ... Truth is often ugly. The spit on god's face" (121). Lamb concludes that only a wise man, who is often considered a fool, tries to free the Truth from its cage. This is the kind of a fool Clare is; he stoops low and loses his sanity in his attempt to tell the truth through his poetry. Babak (2015) argues that

John Clare is depicted as a fool in this play and in order to historicise the problem of the contemporary writer, we can interpret the artistic function of John Clare in comparison with a Shakespearean Fool. They, both, are dependent on their patrons: both should be patronized; their role is to remind the truths which are ignored; however the society is immune to the sting of sarcasm found in their voice and none of them threaten society, because whatever they say is considered as foolish statement. (9)

There is no way for Clare to survive in his world but to withdraw into his imagination, which eventually brings him to asylum, although he is not truly mad. The destruction of land and nature which he witnesses cannot be communicated in any substantial way; as Babak (2015) points out, "idealistic goals without fundamental means of attaining them in a neoliberal community makes life tough for people, especially an artist" (5). In the Introduction to this play, Bond (1987) himself expresses that Clare cannot relate himself to society which results in his passions and emotions turning inward, relating only to himself and inventing "a fantasy reality" (74–75)⁵⁰. In a way, Bond pessimistically creates a world in which a man like Clare cannot cause a change in a society as it is weighed down by political oppression. Babak (2015) claims that:

⁴⁹This dialogue symbolically happens at the same time as the fight between bare-knuckled boxers in Hyde Park.

⁵⁰Clare becomes obsessed with the character of Mary being his real wife.

Bond portrays Clare as a falling character due to his insistence on staying a real artist and standing against social norms. Clare finally returns to asylum, not because he is mentally ill but because he is an asylum seeker to be protected from political problems.” (8–9)

Bingo and *The Fool* are plays influenced by Brecht’s work both structurally and thematically⁵¹. *Bingo* is divided into two parts, both of which have three scenes. Most of the action happens outside—in Shakespeare’s garden, on a hill and in fields; the scene with Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s fellow playwright and rival happens in an inn⁵². One could argue that the setting narrows down from nature to the confinement of Shakespeare’s room in which he poisons himself in the last scene. The schematic form of *The Fool* points towards Brecht: “six scenes that revolve around the titular themes of money and death” (Fricker 2010, para. 2). Thematically, Bond follows Brecht’s footsteps merely by choosing a historical setting and revising it, thus making ground for an objective analysis of society and its institutions⁵³; most importantly, both plays insist that an individual cannot be separated from his society and that one must find a way to integrate a personal dilemma with the social problem. Although often harsh and radical in his work, Bond works within one of John Clare’s poems which reminds the reader that “No man eats sleeps or loves for himself alone / Harvest and dreams and teaching the young / Don’t take place in a small room / But in the spaces of other men’s lives (Bond 1987, 155). Edward Bond does not preach moral responsibility, the burden of which he himself does not carry; and in this sense, he probably is one of the most uncompromisingly political British playwrights.

⁵¹Nevertheless, when asked about Brecht’s influence on his plays, Bond replied: “It is,” he says, “absolute rubbish. Anyone who says that doesn’t know what Brecht is doing. I’m the opposite of Brecht. I saw the Berliner Ensemble when they came to London in 1956, and learned from Brecht how theatre could take on big subjects and banish decorative staging. There was no chintz in a Brecht set. But Brecht was very privileged. He got his father’s secretary to type up his first play; when I began, I didn’t even own a typewriter. I was also very critical of the corruption and viciousness of the communist world. My argument against Brecht, whose theatre was based in East Berlin, was, ‘How could you work in that hell?’ It was an absolute betrayal of the duty of the writer. Brecht also wanted us to forget the individual and think about the type or the situation. The man is lethal. You really do have to examine the logic of your position, which is why I call Brecht ‘the playwright of Auschwitz’. His arguments lead straight to the death camps” (as cited in Billington 2008, para. 6).

⁵²This encounter between Ben Jonson and Shakespeare is full of irony; Jonson recounts a life full of violence compared to Shakespeare’s “serene” existence, admitting that he hates writing: “Fat white fingers excreting dirty black ink. Smudges. Shadows. Shit. Silence.” (Bond 1987, 45).

⁵³In the Introduction to *Bingo*, Bond explains the relation between the historical facts and the play, its main protagonist to be more precise: “It is based on the material historical facts so far as they’re known, and on psychological truth so far as I know it. [...] I admit that I’m not really interested in Shakespeare’s true biography in the way a historian might be” (Bond 1987, 4).

Personal and Political in Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982)

In his survey of political drama in post-war Britain, Patterson (2003) notes that Caryl Churchill's work might not be considered 'political' in a narrow sense of the word (159); apart from being a solitary female figure among a number of male authors, Churchill's plays are hybrids of different techniques and expressions of specific movements and worldviews. Naismith (2005) argues that Churchill belongs to the stream of socialist theatre that developed in period from 1968 to 1978, and he defines it as "a non-didactic political theatre, [that] has involved the audience directly in judging not only the action but also, to an extent, themselves as part of the society which is being examined dramatically" (xxiii). Apart from the socialist worldview, Churchill's plays have a strong feminist line; the playwright admits that very often her ideas came from analysing the traditional structures of "female" and "male" (Naismith 2005, xxii). Interestingly, Trussler (2005) concludes that "the 'feminine' quality of her [Churchill's] writing may simply have to do with dialectic replacing conflict, and open-endedness being preferred to climax" (as cited in Naismith, xxii).

This dialectic way of thinking truly characterises almost everything Churchill has written. By juxtaposing different issues, Churchill seeks to "embrace a more objective and analytical way of looking at things" (Patterson 2003, 159). *Cloud Nine*, a play which premiered in 1979 at the wake of the Thatcherist era, works precisely on this dialectic structure; Act I is juxtaposed to Act II not only structurally, but also thematically—the two acts form a contrapuntal structure. Namely, Act I is set in British colonial Africa in the Victorian era, while Act II is set in a modern-day London park in 1979. Part of Churchill's recognizable playfulness is the temporal aspect—only twenty-five years pass between the two acts. The playwright operates on another dialecticism, which is again her trademark: *Cloud Nine* subverts gender and racial stereotypes by using cross-gender and cross-racial casting—some female and male characters are to be played by performers of opposite sex. In many ways indebted to the Epic Theatre⁵⁴, this structure that disrupts the expectations of the audience provides Churchill with space in which she can examine different social issues. In this play from the 70s, the dramatist draws parallels between colonial and sexual oppression.

⁵⁴Patterson (2003) notices the connection between *Cloud Nine* and Brecht's early play: "Apart from being set in Africa, with Queen Victoria on the throne, the first act is 'deliberately historically imprecise'. This disjunction is reminiscent of the vague colonial setting of Brecht's *Man Equals Man* (1926), which is supposedly set in India in 1925 but includes a pagoda and has a queen on the British throne" (164).

Cloud Nine revolves around an array of characters. Clive is a British colonial administrator in Africa in late 19th century who lives with his wife Betty (played by a man in Act I), his mother-in-law Maud, his two children, Edward and Victoria (impersonated by a girl and a dummy, respectively), the governess Ellen, and the African servant Joshua (enacted by a white actor). The family and their complex identity and gender issues are further complicated with the arrival of Mrs Saunders, for whom Clive shows a sexual interest, and Harry Bagely, gay explorer who is interested in Clive, but also Joshua and Edward, all the while responding to Betty's hidden affection. Ellen, who reveals that she is a lesbian, is forced into marriage with Harry, and the first part of the play ends with the wedding celebrations. Act I mostly unravels around these complicated affairs and love/sexual interests; often bordering on farce, Churchill nevertheless succeeds in presenting the issues she sets out to explore. The play opens with characters singing a song called "Sons of England" (following Brecht's tradition); immediately, the song reveals that the subject-matter of the play is colonial and gender oppression. Clive introduces himself as "a father to the natives" and his wife Betty as "everything she is she owes to me"; Betty, impersonated by a man in Act I, retorts with verses: "I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life / Is to be what he looks for in a wife. I am a man's creation as you see, / And what men want is what I want to be." (Churchill 1985, 251). Racial and colonial issue is presented through the character of Joshua, who chants the following lines: "My skin is black but oh my soul is white. I hate my tribe. My master is my light" (251)⁵⁵.

Churchill (2003) summarises her ideological vision of the play:

I had the image of a black man aspiring to white values and literally being a white negro. And the idea of a woman who has taken men's values, a sort of manmade woman who has no sense of herself as a woman ... [t]hose characters [that] had no sense of their own identity but were trying to be what the white man wanted them to be. (as cited in Patterson, 166)

Act I ends with Joshua pointing a gun to Clive; although a shot is heard, the audience does not see if Clive dies. Act II begins more than a hundred years later with the same, but not cross-gender characters, who are only twenty-five years older. In the modern age, Betty has left Clive, Victoria is married to Martin, an author writing about feminist issues, and Edward is in a

⁵⁵ Later in the play, Joshua sings a British Christmas carol "In the Deep Midwinter" (see Churchill 1985, 272).

relationship with Gerry. Victoria decides to leave Martin and enters a lesbian relationship with Lin, who has a daughter Cathy (the only cross-gender character in Act II). Gerry leaves Edward who moves in with Lin and Victoria, and Betty subsequently begins a relationship with Gerry. Act II shows all characters seemingly liberated, free from sexual and gender oppression that imprisoned them in Act I. Nevertheless, different kinds of oppression still stifle them. Victoria, who was only a dummy in Act I, incapable of speech and independent action, is not happy with Martin—he is domineering, cheats on her with other women, all the while parading about feminism. He is the “new man” (Patterson 2003, 171), but is as oppressive as Clive had been, only in a much more subtle and even more destructive way. Although he encourages Victoria when it comes to her career, he is more than often condescending and patronizing, as this excerpt vividly shows: “I’m not putting any pressure on you but I don’t think you’re being a whole person. God knows I do everything I can to make you stand on your own two feet. Just be yourself. You don’t seem to realise how insulting it is to me that you can’t get yourself together” (Churchill 1985, 301).

On the other hand, Betty has found her freedom, but she finds it very hard to cope with it, and she is, as Patterson (2003) notes, “like a long-term prisoner just released from jail” (172); through Betty, Churchill shows that what we might perceive as freedom can also be oppressive and disorienting. Betty complains that “I’ll never be able to manage. If I can’t even walk down the street by myself. Everything looks so fierce ... I do feel safer with a man” (Churchill 1985, 301). Act II does not represent some sort of a contemporary utopia. Victoria’s case shows that people are still expected to act according to the roles determined by the patriarchal society. Apart from this, it seems that newly found freedom brought new responsibilities; for example, Lin’s daughter Cathy, who is played by a boy in Act II, uses her freedom to “chant obscene rhymes, play aggressively with a toy gun and to behave in an utterly selfish manner” (Patterson 2003, 171). It seems that “contemporary freedoms may prove as confining as imperial morality” (Churchill 1985, 172), which appears to be one of Churchill’s messages—cloud nine might not be as carefree as we imagine it.

Brecht's influence is obvious; historicisation⁵⁶, unusual time gaps, songs, cross-gender and cross-racial acting are all theatrical devices which alienate the audience enough for it to engage in active critique of their institutions and ideologies that have been taken for granted. Churchill's achievement in *Cloud Nine* is that she has successfully united the personal and the political, the "internal states of being and the external political structures which affect them" (Churchill cited in Patterson 2003, 173), supporting Victoria's (political) statement that "You can't separate fucking and economics" (Churchill 1985, 310).

Top Girls is Churchill's best-known play. First performed in 1982, it was one of the first plays that directly addressed the effects of Thatcherism on women. The play examines the roles available to women in modern society, and very concisely asks what it means or takes for them to succeed. It is a portrayal of an individualistic society "in which the few thrive at the expense of the many" (Billington cited in Jeffries 2011, para. 2). It centres around Marlene, the head of a London employment agency called Top Girls, and explores the compromises that she had to make in order to build such a successful career. Marlene is ruthless in her business ambition; born into poverty, she had to fight her way to the top and give up things along the way. She is an epitome of the Thatcherite ambition which does not believe that anything is big or valuable enough to stand in its way; as she herself states: "I don't believe in class; anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (Churchill 2005, 83).

Just like in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill successfully turns to history for inspiration. The most famous scene from this play is in Act I in which Marlene has dinner with famous women from history (both fictional and real) in order to celebrate her promotion. In this dreamlike opening sequence, Marlene meets with Pope Joan, who, disguised as a man, is said to have been pope in the 9th century; the explorer Isabella Bird; Dull Gret, the harrower of Hell from Brueghel's painting; Lady Nijo, a mistress of a Japanese emperor and later a Buddhist nun; and Patient Griselda, the patient wife from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The celebration turns into a loud and exciting party during which all the women, increasingly drunk and sentimental, reveal their life stories and their suffering, mostly caused by patriarchal circumstances or, plainly put, men. Isabella Bird's life-story shares the most with Marlene—as an eager world traveller, Isabella did not marry young because of her writing career; later in her life, she became disappointed by

⁵⁶Even in Act II, Churchill keeps questioning the issue of colonial oppression through the British armed presence in Northern Ireland. The political commentary is provided by the ghost of Lin's brother, a soldier who has lost his life in the Northern Irish conflict.

marriage. Lady Nijo is presented as the most materialistic of all. Affected by her experience as a concubine rather than the period she spent as a Buddhist nun, Nijo was instructed by her father to sleep with the old emperor of Japan. She lost all of her children; importantly she retells of an incident in which men beat their women across the loins so that they will bear sons, not daughters. Dull Gret is a character who mainly keeps silent, but remains a powerful physical presence throughout the dinner scene. Dull Gret led the women from her village to hell to beat the devils and the source of evil which had slaughtered these women's families in the form of the Spanish invaders; she stands for the crude physical determination. Lastly, Patient Griselda, although a poor peasant girl, married the rich Marquis on the condition that she must promise to always obey him. After the birth of their children, Marquis ordered her to give them up and Griselda obeyed. Several years later, Marquis told her to leave. By the end of the story, Marquis invites Griselda back and introduces her to her children, saying that everything was a mere test of her obedience; although she defends her husband's actions, she admits that she would have been happier if he had acted differently.

All the *Top Girls*' characters' stories serve as a portrayal of what it meant and means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. Apart from this, the stories are an externalisation of Marlene's thoughts and anxieties over her own choices that she has made in her life. In a nonlinear structure, Act II (comprising three scenes) depicts the present day (early 1980s) Marlene at work. The employment agency is presented as a masculine world ruled by an all-female staff. Churchill introduces Marlene, Win and Nell interviewing female candidates in search of a job. The interviews show that the "top girls" must be tough and insensitive in order to compete with men in the job market. Marlene's condescending questions about family plans during the job interview she conducts show that "a single woman is a safer prospect to an employer, being less likely to leave to have children" (Naismith 2005, xv); unlike Marlene, Jeanine, a girl she interviews, shows no focused ambition and determination, which causes Marlene to discard her due to her "limitations" (xiv). In Scene Three, Win and Nell are shown as ambitious young women both of whom had to sacrifice a lot to be at their current positions: Nell has numerous love affairs, and although she would like a change in her life, she does not want to be "tied down to play house"; apart from that, most of her offers "can't afford" her (Churchill 2005, 46). Win, on the other hand, is a more rounded character in the sense that she reveals more about herself. She claims that her being successful has made her unpopular. Her life-story is a

sequence of different places and people, solitary moments, alcoholism, and a marriage born “in a moment of weakness” (Churchill 2005, 65). Both Win and Nell express their contempt for men whose careers they are concerned with. Another side of the coin is presented through the character of Louise whom Win interviews; Louise describes how she had dedicated her life to her job, working evenings at the expense of her social life, but without any reward; at this point of the story, Louise is 46 years old, has no husband or life outside of work, and men whom she trains at her job are constantly promoted over her.

Act III shows Marlene visiting her sister Joyce the year before. In this encounter, we find out that Angie, a girl of 16 who appeared in Act II and who is mesmerized by Marlene and threatens to kill her mother Joyce while playing with her friend, is actually Marlene’s daughter whom Marlene had given up in order to pursue her career; due to this stressful situation, Joyce had lost her own child. In an over-lapping dialogue, one of Churchill’s trademarks⁵⁷, Marlene and Joyce share memories of their parents; it is clear that their mother was unhappily married, and that Marlene blames their father for it, saying that their mother “wasted her life” (Churchill 2005, 84). Furthermore, Marlene expresses her admiration for Margaret Thatcher, calling her “a tough lady”⁵⁸. Joyce attacks this admiration; she admits that the eighties will be a great period for those like Marlene who “hate the working class” which actually, in Marlene’s words, does not exist anymore because it only means being “lazy and stupid”: “I don’t like the way they talk, I don’t like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits and brothers and sisters” (Churchill 2005, 85). When asked about Angie, Marlene says that “she’s stupid, lazy and frightened”; sarcastically, Joyce retorts with a political conclusion that she expects Angie’s children to say that she had wasted her life “if she has children ... Because nothing’s changed and it won’t with them in” (Churchill 2005, 86).

The images Churchill creates are so strong that they speak for themselves, often overgrowing the borders of symbols. The title itself is ironic; the play is less concerned with the celebration of successful women than with asking questions about the success that is shown. Nightingale (2005) summarises some of the play’s key ideas:

⁵⁷ Apart from contributing to the veracity of speech, over-lapping dialogue in Churchill’s dramas underlines the importance of observation; the audience must pay attention to who speaks and listens, and who does not, ultimately filling in the pieces of communication between the characters.

⁵⁸ Marlene has all the best to say about the early 1980s British society and its political elite: “This country needs to stop whining. Monetarism isn’t stupid. It takes time, determination. ... And who’s got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico.” (Churchill 2005, 84)

What use is female emancipation, Churchill asks, if it transforms the clever women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, weak and helpless? Does freedom, and feminism, consist of aggressively adopting the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex? (as cited in Naismith, xxxv)

In order to become successful, women have to adopt the same behaviour that women have traditionally resented in men. All those women from Act I would still be oppressed in a world ruled by Marlene and alike. It is clear that to become a 'top' girl in the existing competitive economic system, one must make great, although questionable, sacrifices. It is important to point out that the play does not say that women should not work. It just warns about the inevitable effects of a ruthless individualism which scarred the British society towards the end of the last century. The top girls of the play are not entirely happy themselves; as Naismith (2005) argues, Nell resents Marlene's success, Win is lonely, and Marlene has abandoned her daughter Angie who is the greatest victim of all (xxxvii); a question of what is going to happen with Angie, a confused young adolescent who has a vivid emotional life but feels frustrated and unaccomplished, looking up to Marlene, her real mother, as an epitome of happiness, but an epitome that had rejected her hangs in the air. Similarly to Bond, Churchill asks about social accountability and demands responsibility. Her vision of feminism is a socialist one, and she insists on collective group gain⁵⁹ in which women must not turn into new patriarchs who keep determining women's lives, cyclically repeating scenes from history through the compromises they make, even if the world they live in was made for men.

⁵⁹Churchill stated that the play was inspired by her conversations with American feminists who celebrated individualistic women that acquire power and wealth, and her subsequent comparison with European feminism that was much more focused on the shared gain. For more information see Patterson (2003).

The Abuse of Human Rights in Pinter's *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Party Time* (1991)

Harold Pinter's relationship with politics might at times seem rather ambiguous and seemingly full of contradictions. This impression comes from the fact that Pinter's early plays were not evaluated as political⁶⁰; his self-proclaimed affiliation with political drama came in the 1980s, with his play *One for the Road* (1984). Baldwin (2009) tries to comprehend this paradox and makes a distinction between Pinter as an artist and citizen, claiming that from the 80s until the end of his life, Pinter effectively combined these two roles into one (3). In this case it is of vital importance to understand what the term 'politics' actually meant for Pinter; Baldwin (2009) explains that Pinter used the term "differently according to context, at once about the relations of power between individuals as well as the structures of power which keep us subjugated" (4). Similarly as with Bond, the significance of political writing for Pinter lies in the moral obligation one has for and in the society as its citizen⁶¹. In one interview, when asked about the British intellectual tradition of "mocking any non-political force that gets involved in politics, especially within the sphere of the arts and the theatre", Pinter replied that such forces were seen as "wankers"; nevertheless, he concluded that he did not "intend to simply go away and write my plays and be a good boy. I intend to remain an independent and political intelligence in my own right" (Pinter 2001, para. 30). His public life testified to this—he remained a "permanent public nuisance, a questioner of accepted truths" (BBC News 2005, para. 3). His loud interest in politics resulted in many public protestations of "humanitarian warfare" and his critique was mostly directed towards the United States and its foreign policies, but he did not spare his homeland either, especially in the question of NATO bombings of Serbia and the invasion of Iraq.

Without the manifesto-like burden that accompanies Bond, Pinter's devotion to his beliefs is simpler in the sense that his voice against oppression is best heard as a plea against the abuse of human rights. Pinter had many times publically blamed western democracies, which he openly chastised as hypocritical, for their scant reporting on the abuse of human rights. Pinter

⁶⁰Baldwin (2009) recounts Pinter's insistence that his work was apolitical in the earlier period of his career: "I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social function. I write because I want to write" (5).

⁶¹"In 1988', he said 'I see myself not only as an actor and an entertainer, but ... I'm also a citizen of the world in which I live, and I take responsibility for that, I really insist on taking responsibility and understand my responsibility quite precisely as actually trying to find out what the truth is. And what actually happens. And so [what] I've found is that we're really at the bottom of a blanket of lies which unfortunately we are either too indifferent or too frightened to question.'" (Baldwin 2009, 60).

admitted that this openness came with his visit to Turkey in 1985 as a part of International PEN organisation⁶², where the discovery of a number of the political and artistic prisoners prompted him to openly turn to political writing.

Mountain Language is essentially the practical outcome of that Turkey trip. When asked why he wrote this play, Pinter (2012) stated:

It was a very vivid and highly illuminating trip in a number of ways. One of the things I learnt while I was there was about the real plight of the Kurds: quite simply that they're not really allowed to exist at all and certainly not allowed to speak their language. For example, there's a publisher who wrote a history of the Kurds and was sent to prison for 36 years for simply writing a history of the Kurds. (para. 1)

Mountain Language is set in the prison of an unnamed totalitarian state in which individual freedoms have been severely restricted. One group of prisoners are those from the rural parts of that country who are forbidden to speak in their own language, emblematically called the "mountain language"; the only language allowed is the "language of the capital". The play involves four main characters: a Young Woman, later called Sara Johnson, an Elderly Woman, a Hooded Man, later revealed as Charley Johnson, Sara's husband, and an unnamed Prisoner who is the son of the Elderly Woman. These are in stark contrast to the characters of the Officer, Sergeant and the guards of the prison where the Hooded man and the Prisoner are captives. The play is organized in four brief scenes⁶³; in the first, the Young and the Elderly Woman wait outside the prison all day to see their men; they are insulted and humiliated by the military, more precisely by the Officer and Sergeant. The Elderly Woman has been bitten by a guard dog; what follows is a demonstration of totalitarian military power in the form of dialogue that Sara has with the two officials. In a decidedly Pinteresque scene, the Officer insists that they give the name of the biting dog because even dogs must follow formal procedures. The Officer exposes the lack of any logical system of plan or duty when he suggests that, if the dog in question did not state his name before the biting, the Officer would follow an orderly system of regulations and shoot the dog. This scene supports Perkins's (2002) description of this play in

⁶²International P.E.N., the worldwide association of writers, exists to promote friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers everywhere, regardless of their political or other views; to fight for freedom of expression and to defend vigorously writers suffering from oppressive regimes (Pinter 2012, para. 8).

⁶³These scenes are named in the following way: A Prison Wall, Visitors Room, Voice in the Darkness, and Visitors Room.

which he claims that Pinter's combination of realism with elements of the absurd resulted in the portrayal of the reality of totalitarianism and the "meaninglessness at its core" (para. 1). The scenes inside of the prison are glimpses of the inhuman regime and political terrorisation: the prohibition of the prisoners' native language; Sara seeing her tortured husband; countless exhibitions of power through verbal and physical violence.

Paradoxically, although the characters are unable to communicate, this play leaves no space for confusion in the eyes of the audience; as Wardle (2019) wrote upon its premiere, "there are no cunning verbal mechanisms to stand between the spectator and the brute spectacle of state-enforced oppression" (as cited in Grove Atlantic, para. 2). The message of the play is very clear and its main axis is the repression of communication. By denying the right to a group of people to use a particular language, one denies history, cultural identity, and ultimately, the very existence of those people. The underlying conclusion and warning is that a totalitarian government can, through such practices, eradicate anyone and anything it perceives as a threat to the system, and history has shown that such punitive decisions of autocratic governments are often arbitrary. Knowles (1995) foregrounds the main idea behind the play:

The logic of totalitarianism always seeks to suppress speech—by book-burning, torture, murder, or exile—because speech is itself symbolic of freedom. To speak is to name things like truth and tyranny, to speak is to give one's voice in a vote, in antiquity, or to mark a ballot paper in modern democracies. The final tableau of mother and son indicates the end of democracy—the body politic made speechless. Thankfully, after sound mountains echo; that is their "language." (para. 5)

One must point out that Knowles's assessment goes hand in hand with the idea behind most of Pinter's plays, regardless in what period they were written. The playwright made it very clear that the destiny of the Kurds in Turkey was merely an inspiration for the play, but that it can be applied to any other similar context, including the British one⁶⁴. *Mountain Language* has a universal value because it presents an existentialist vision—no matter how hard the characters

⁶⁴On several occasions, Pinter insisted that *Mountain Language* must be interpreted universally, which makes the play even more political: "I mean, throughout history, many languages have been banned—the Irish have suffered, the Welsh have suffered and Urdu and the Estonians' language banned; the Basques' language was banned, you now, at various times" (Bratić and Nastić 2016, 34). This Pinter's play may also allude to political and cultural contexts of Great Britain in the 80s headed by Thatcher, which, among other things, forbade the television networks from broadcasting the voice of the leader of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams (Welch 2005).

try to understand the logic behind the world in which they live, all they face is meaninglessness which creates sense of complete isolation and existential dread. And the machine is broken at its core—communication. Words have a sub-textual meaning: they hide more than they reveal, and one can understand more through the analysis of *how* the characters use language, rather than through *what* they say. This is evident in the analysis of the actions of military officials who use language for domination established through absurdity. This philosophical idea is also incorporated in the structure of the play; it is unconventional, very brief, a collage of images and Pinteresque silences rather than a sequence of dialogues. Pinter's use of voiceovers in the second and third scene also shows that it is impossible for these characters to live in the real world, so their self-alienation grows until, as in the last scene, the mother cannot speak to her son even when allowed to use their language, whether due to the fear of causing more violence, or as a consequence of systematic oppression which has resulted in a catatonic state of being.

In 1991, *Mountain Language* was staged together with another Pinter's play. *Party Time* shows a group of people from upper class having a party in a fashionable apartment while in the streets outside some kind of political violence is taking place. The conversations of the posh party-attendants revolve around extremely superficial themes and subjects, such as health-club memberships, boating and vacationing on private islands, past romantic affairs, gossip, etc. The host, Gavin, is virtually courted by a yuppiefied⁶⁵ Terry who is obviously a social climber; Liz and Charlotte are women in their thirties who mostly gossip, reflect on the party and interact with Fred and Douglas, two men from whose conversation one can conclude that they have a political background. Dame Melissa's late arrival brings news of the situation outside: "What on earth's going out there? It's like the Black Death ... The town's dead. There's nobody on the streets, there's not a soul in sight, apart from some ... soldiers. My driver had to stop at a ... you know ... what do you call it? ... a roadblock. We had to say who we were ... it really was a trifle" (Pinter 1988, 286). Although it seems that all characters know about this, nobody reacts in any substantial way. It seems the world outside does not exist for anyone but Dusty, Terry's wife who every now and then asks if anybody knows what happened to her brother Jimmy, who significantly has a very common (nick)name when compared to the rest of the characters and who seems to have disappeared. Dusty's semi-hysterical inquiries are answered by her husband

⁶⁵"Yuppie" is short for 'young urban professional', a fashionable young middle-class person with a well-paid job. Stereotypically, the 1980s yuppies are represented as obsessed with material objects and financial success (Merriam-Webster 2012).

Terry who displays sexist attitude throughout the play: “Nothing’s happened. Nobody is discussing it, sweetie. Do you follow me?” (Pinter 1988, 284)⁶⁶. Everyone at the party is concerned only with themselves, and their conversations reveal shallow personalities and a superficial sense of moral values, be it in marriage, relationships, or business. The menace coming from the outside, unlike in Pinter’s other plays, is a positive force which is purposefully ignored, but which intrudes the party in the shape of a burning white light by the end of the play through the character of Jimmy, who was obviously some kind of force of dissent. In this uncaring and self-centred society, Jimmy appears as a ghost who once “had a name” but is now forever lost in the dark.

Pinter accentuates these ideas through repetition and silences. As Haddad (2015) suggests, with repetitions, he suggests either a lack of intelligence or insecurity of a character, which is the case with Liz: “I think this is such a gorgeous party. Don’t you? I mean I think” (para. 11)⁶⁷. As importantly as in *Mountain Language*, speech we hear is “an indication of that which we don’t hear ... [a] necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place” (Pinter 1985, 14). The speech about health-club is so obviously trivial that it necessarily prompts the audience to dig for what is beneath.

Pinter’s message is again very concise and impossible to oversee. The playwright harshly condemns the “apolitical materialism in which it is uncool to get het up about injustice and corruption”; the outside world is the world from *Mountain Language*, a world completely ignored and unaccounted for by the privileged whose “moral coarseness and spiritual barbarism” allows them to pay no attention to others by “hiding in the upper-class refuge” (Billington 2012, para. 1–2). Pinter sought to wake the people up from their indifference because he believed that everyone had to face their social responsibility. The playwright attacked the lifestyle and language of the disinterested because it is used only to “distort reality ... because we fear it. ... We are encouraged to be cowards. We can’t face the dead. But we must face the dead because they die in our name. We must pay attention to what is being done in our name” (Pinter 2012,

⁶⁶Sexism as a form of oppression is obviously very present in this society; Gavin makes a remark about Terry and Dusty saying “So odd, the number of men who can’t control their wives”, to which Terry retorts with, “What are you saying to me?” (Pinter 1986, 297); his question is calmly ignored.

⁶⁷She later says that she feels proud to “be part of a society of beautifully dressed people? Oh I don’t know, elegance, style, grace, taste...” which further underlines the idea of superficiality (see Pinter 1998, 308).

para. 2)⁶⁸. For Pinter, ignoring oppression equals to giving it moral support. In one of his interviews, Pinter (2012) reflected on the condition of the western civilisation, and the attitude that is presented here is the attitude criticised in *Party Time*:

We live within what seems to me to be a distinct and palpable discrepancy. We are glad to be alive today and look forward to being alive tomorrow. At the same time we draw closer and closer to death, by which I mean the destruction of the natural world and the end of civilisation; in effect, the end of the world. The destructive force we have created is both systematic and random, since, while its targets are specific, its effects will be unbounded. The term “the end of the world” is perhaps a cliché, but I suggest there’s nothing banal about the facts to which it refers. What strikes me as truly remarkable is that we live in the shadow of utter catastrophe and manage not to think about it. (para. 15)

The analyses of *Mountain Language* and *Party Time* prove that Pinter was indeed a political writer with a very precise artistic and civilizational agenda: to look for the truth and believe in this endeavour, because the search itself is a task of everyone who seeks to meet their moral responsibility in an increasingly immoral and self-centred world.

⁶⁸Pinter often accentuated the role of the media in shaping the public opinion; in the following excerpt he attacked *The Observer* for its lack of objectivity and war-mongering: “If the British press actually took pains to understand that there are more journalists in prison in Turkey than anywhere in the world, more writers in prison in Turkey than anywhere in the world, you might think that they would show some interest, but they don’t seem to be even interested in that – so there is not much fellow feeling there. In fact the only thing I can remember in the last few months of any moment in the British press, was an extraordinary front page account in *The Observer* of a supposed Kurdish plot to drop sarin gas on major cities in Europe. We haven’t heard another word about that. ... But it was followed a couple of weeks later (still *The Observer*) with a report that Saddam Hussein had enough chemical weapons to: ‘kill every man, woman and child on the earth’. It seems to me that the next thing *The Observer* will come up with will be, let’s say: ‘Cockney woman gives birth to eight donkeys’. This is the level of journalism we are now facing in this country. And *The Observer*, I remind you, used to be a great newspaper. ... To take this view is to do the following: It is to ignore the fact that thousands of people are tortured, imprisoned and killed in Turkey every year – and we, the United States and Germany and Italy supply the weapons” (Pinter 1997, para. 4).

Conclusion

This paper has tried to provide a survey of the political drama in the post-WWII Britain. It has outlined some of the most important socio-historical events that marked this period. It is superficial to try to understand the politics of one country without analysing its economic policies, and the period in question saw a great shift from consensus politics to a completely different philosophical and economic ideology of neoliberalism, which has since then become the defining trait of the global economy. In Great Britain, these changes were introduced by Margaret Thatcher who became the Prime Minister in 1979. The radicalness of her political actions was accompanied by social unrests. These political and social trends introduced the new age of unprecedented consumerism and affluence, and, together with the doctrine of individualism which stemmed out of neoliberalism, gave birth to the permissive society. The paper has shown that the Cold War and the end of imperial history influenced the general atmosphere of terror in the British society which lived under the threat of a Bomb for almost forty years.

This is the context within which political drama emerged and developed. Relying on Brecht's Epic Theatre and its belief in the possibility of intervention in theatre, political drama in Britain examined the socio-political reality and set out to challenge the dominant perception. The analyses have shown that some authors believed that it was possible to provoke the audience enough to instigate a political change, while others saw this kind of theatre as a medium for their moral, be it artistic or civilizational, responsibility. It is certain that most of the dramatic writing was inspired by the main ideas of socialism. Nevertheless, socialist drama never took root in Britain, and even agitprop as a form was never overly popular. The most important figures from the 50s and 60s when it comes to envisioning of a different political future in theatre were Joan Littlewood, John Osborne, and Arnold Wesker who brought drama closer to the working classes through forms of agitprop and kitchen-sink realism. The visit of the Berliner Ensemble in 1956 inspired the dissenting voice of John Arden and Edward Bond who relied on the idea of anti-illusionist theatricality. With the abolition of censorship in 1968, the realistic well-made plays were replaced with the provocative political dramas written by a new generation of playwrights such as David Hare and Howard Brenton. In the 1970s, agitprop lived its last days through the work of John McGrath's theatre company 7:84, which was an epitome of a Marxist model of political theatre. In the 1980s, the burning question was how and what to write in the age of

Thatcherism which definitely did not look approvingly on the political drama in general. The 80s also saw a rise and development of women's drama, especially with the work of Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company.

The analytical part of the paper has assessed the plays by Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, and Harold Pinter. Although all of these authors share a common ground when it comes to the defining traits of their poetics, they differ from each other. Bond's plays *Bingo* and *The Fool* insist that the moral sanity of one society rests on the shoulders of its artists. The life of this playwright shows that Bond adheres to the principles he preaches, which may explain why his plays are nowadays mostly staged outside of Britain. The analyses of Churchill's dramas *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* have shown that these work within different dichotomies of politics, gender, and race, and unequivocally dissect the 1980s British society within the context of feminism and imperialism. Harold Pinter's engagement with politics came later in his career; he used his reputation of an established playwright to speak and write publically and loudly about the abuse of human rights worldwide, which is evident in *Mountain Language* and *Party Time*.

One must ask if this paper has brought us any closer to a more certain conclusion of whether theatre can or even should be interventionist, i.e. whether (political) theatre can provoke changes in the society and in what way. All of the analysed dramatists have one thing in common: they write/wrote about a democratic society which is in danger due to different political and social injustices. For them, drama is a process, and we cannot expect results over a course of a single night. It is crucial to understand that there can be no division in theatre between an individual and the society to which that individual belongs, otherwise (political) theatres becomes self-sufficient and almost arbitrary. In a contemporary globalised society, this is of an even greater importance.

The last play that was analysed in this paper premiered in 1991; one could ask what has happened since with the political theatre in Britain. The world has not become a more just place; the struggle for human rights and freedom is still on-going. The world is plagued with wars, poverty, racial and gender injustices, and humans seem lost in the dominant narratives of individualism and consumerism. Is there anything theatre as one of the oldest forms of human expression can do? It is certain that it cannot conform to moral disinterest and general lack of concern for others as a direct consequence of individualism and positivism which have shaped

the western civilisation in the last two centuries. There must be art which is socially responsible, artists who are ready to sacrifice themselves and their work in accordance with their poet(h)ics.

In 1975, Harold Pinter received a letter from a Chilean, Mr. S. D. Meckled, who wrote him an anecdote. After the fascist coup in Chile, the writer of this letter spent one year in a concentration camp in which a group of prisoners chose to stage Pinter's play *The Dumbwaiter* as a part of their art rehabilitation process. The prisoners were convinced that the soldiers would not understand the play; nevertheless, the play was banned after the first official rehearsal. The letter was written from Mr. Meckled's exile in England after he had read about Pinter's political writings about Chile and the abuse of human rights. Mr. Meckled wrote:

And I can't help thinking about the coincidental aims of freedom and art. Your art meant freedom to us while we were in captivity. Your simultaneous backing to our rights - without knowing the fact I now tell you - reassures me that we had selected well when we took up your play. Art and liberation prove again to be born from the same root. Thank you, Mr. Pinter, in the name of the Chilean people for all you might have done on their behalf. (Pinter 2012, para. 2)

This letter is a proof that theatre can help the oppressed and the down-trodden, even if they are in another part of the world, living in a completely different context and under different circumstances. The moral responsibility these political playwrights demand has to be understood as a universal trait, because it is what makes one human.

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