



John Arden: A Playwright of Social Change

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ABSTRACT

A new generation of writers emerged and experimented about the forms and aims of new drama. The desire was to create dramas that would stand in the vanguard of political and social change. Their plays reflected a profound disquietness about the current state of nature. Like the previous dramatic revival the new drama developed as a part of what can easily be seen as a cultural crisis; but unlike it, challenge to mainstream theatre was far more widespread and for sustenance. Major new writings in two London theatres, Royal Court and Theatre Royal were present for the potential immediacy of new drama and able to present an enactment of a particular situation to an identifiable audience. Traditional arenas were passed over in favor of new arts labs, community centers, working men's clubs etc. Anywhere this facilitated a readily accessible performance that was in vogue. The evolution of theatre censorship in 1968, itself was product of struggle of the previous generation of writers in different ways particularly in their traditional climate. This helped to facilitate a group of writers and actors working together to furnish the demands created by social and political issues. This was not only the difference; however new writers of twentieth century particularly, Arden produced a real theatre; different from the traditional by a well produced plays. Their political protest contained within existing theatrical modalities. Their characters proclaimed a refreshingly abrasive form of Traditional arenas. Arden remains vehement to the theatre for perpetual challenges and inspirations. They came to maturity at a profoundly dramatic time in British social and political life.

Keywords: Abrasive form, Disquietness, Mainstream Theatre, Traditional Arena, Vague,

If one had asked me my name

I freely could have told the same –

John Arden (Thirty eight) of ancient family,

Writer of plays for all the world to see,

To see, and pay for, and to denigrate:

Such was my work since 1958... (Arden, *John Arden: The Bag man* 1970)

John Arden, since the world war, has written plays that had attracted the widest attention. He was the only one who enjoyed West End and Broad Way. Successes and more importantly had written a series of plays in which he had developed individual style and persisted in experimentation. He was born in 1930 and had worked primarily in England and has responded to social and political context. In this chapter I will analyze John Arden as a dramatist and critically examine his individual career and the content of all plays. It will be my endeavor to examine how he has made the theatre speak; how theatre worked for him, how he has controlled theatrical reality in words, actions and time. There are dramatists in new theatre like Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, Charles Wood and others who are promised and achievements were considerable, but lacked of the



sustenance in their art. A production by Peter Brook or performance by Paul Scofield could not hold hope for future because the production and performance in theatre rapidly changed. It became imperative to study the text of the drama's to relate a full theatrical experience because the continuous changes in performance bleaked the understanding of dramas through mind and other senses, New writers provided images for their contemporaries, like themselves, were only beginning to recognize and understand the adventure to respond these images were taking shape in the performance and also the growing convection of the playwright had to write for the theatre. John Arden plays were most innovating to the theatre language. He placed the audience in a position that made it possible for them to question their social and political or moral judgment.

Arden has made his judgment on the world he has created: the political and moral issues. Illustrated by the assembled cast or to be contrasted and compared with qualities, protest and recklessness and with self knowledge that comes from defeat and rejection. (Russell, *Theatre language* 24)

Arden used theatre to create and release a response and to discover what is involved in human activity and what is prevailing outside theatre. By making his theatre language more artistically he has given it a strong, bright colour, furious movements and open clarity. He believes that despite the difficulties of performance there was a way to make the play memorable. Artificially he creates carnival, normal behavior and from the spectators, an alert attention to large problems. He trusted the theatre to transport truth in a realization and audience find the truth in understanding.

Arden presented a rude critique of social system based on vulnerability and oppression and his course of action shows political, economic and ideological suppression as well as people's sufferings. Arden awakes attention so that spectators become aware and more questioning. He presented each element of play in theatrical experience like speech gestures, movements, groupings etc. so that audience became attentive and perspective. The imagination in his plays defines a wider range of social and political as well as historical reality. His plays reveal violence, helplessness, oppression and everyday issues of social milieu. In *Live Like Pigs* he presents a coercive bureaucracy and pressures when the Sawneys, a raffish family in an old tramcar down by traces are forced by officials into a public housing estate. The Sawneys turns their new house into a pigotry, offend their power to neighbors and provoke a bloody riot. "Here we are and here we have got to live. But we are keeping them out from us, every bloody one of them (He stand astride and terrible). They call me sailor Sawneys and no men slap his matter at me." (Taylor, *John Arden Three PLays*109)

From beginning of his career a number of military activities were campaigned by Arden. He was praised for returning quality and strength and gave efficacy to the theatre that had long been absent on British stage. Arden always remained impressive to contemporary playwrights and the one of whose efforts is most likely to remain constant and productive or beneficial. Arden's work would be represented 'civic in nature', his themes in most plays are political and his characters are involved with the artful plot of government. His plays create characters that represent the wide milieu of society. Mr. Huggins a noted critic described him as 'one of the giants of modern literature, who made a monumental contribution in Britain and England'. Film maker Leila Dolan describes Arden as 'genius' and a 'mighty spirit', who was committed to issues of social justice, as reflected in his art. All the dramas examine social institutions and social relationship from a revolutionary point of view and this attitude is personified in the style and entertainment. His style which was verbal, apparently literacy seems



to be acceptable by critics and audiences. His literary style bridges a bond between commercial theatre and literature.

John Osborne has said:

I'd love to write something for a circus, something enormous and immense, so that you might get a really big enlargement of life and people. What's so boring about the television is that it reduces life and human spirit. Enlarging it is something that the theatre can do the best of all. (Brown, *Theatre Language* 118-119).

Osborne further in an interview explained:

"That he did not worry 'as a dramatist' about reaching a mass audience. He wants to write for a circus in order to realize, control and use what the theatre can do supremely well to create an image of life on the stage that can dominate and excite". (Brown, *Theatre Language* 119).

Osborne was concerned to sustain the action, to effect the further exploration or highlighting of a situation. While as, in Wesker's plays, characters came and went with a definite purpose but limited by the immediate situation. But in Arden's dramas however, entries were bold clear, efficient by bringing a new figure on stage. His characters made his concern in the plays absolutely clear and performance was alive like a speech. Like ballad singers Arden did not wish to argue but offer a fable full of atmospheric activity and with clear statement and made the audience to draw its own conclusion. Arden, a modern dramatist of twentieth century concerned to state and explored many problems of contemporary society like pacifism, public welfare, and public images and so on and so forth. Arden as role of social analyst provided dynamic insightful reportage on the state of nation that was in fact in a narrow version of the complex theatrical landscape.

Arden makes a demand on audiences which radically undermine the conventional responses and bring to what he has called the 'legitimate theatre'. John Arden's theatre was not the theatre of illusion where aim of writers or actors is designed to convince the audience that everything is as it seems. It was something like Shakespeare's, or Brecht's theatre of skepticism and questioning.

Closely observe the behavior of people: consider it strong, although familiar, hard to explain, although the custom, hard to accept, though no exception events the simplest action, apparently simple, observes the mistrust... (Hunt, Arden *A Study of His Plays* 28)

Arden therefore was working in a tradition which represents his response to experience. It was tradition that had almost vanished in the medium in which he worked, 'The Legitimate Theatre'. This style of theatre ironically had been kept preserved and developed new technologies which reached popularly among audiences larger than Shakespeare. It later helped to shape the audience theatre. Arden continued to involve in theatre rather than in mass media and saw theatre as a place where physically people share their experiences. Arden's plays were written in the context to reflect a continuous struggle to create new relationship between theatre and audience both inside and outside the theatre. His function was to draw the audience into the play and represent qualities of character that was common to all. Arden's use of historical material and vast array of artistic conventions and theatrical craftsmanship explored the problems of contemporary relevance. "Like *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, *Armstrong Last Goodnight* deals with an attempt to stop violence; like *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* it springs



from an historical situation-this time, the war in the Congo that followed the proclamation of independence...” (Hunt, *Arden A Study of His Plays* 89)

Arden brought to bear valid insights into the behavior of Armstrong, a hero of the play *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* and of the authority that convey his demise at least as a political force. As Bryden notes, “Arden’s recurring theme is the denial of function. We are not the uniform we wear, he reiterates, but the naked, complex, contradictory animal inside them.” (Bryden, *The New Statesman* 783)

When we talk about the language of Arden, it was strongly influenced by ballad of English poetry. He employed the visual image to illustrate the dramatic issues and the functions of characters are directly drawn that are directly recognized by audience. Here Arden notes:

The costumes should be “working dress”... that is to say each of characters should be immediately recognizable as a member of his respective social class, rather than a picturesque element in a historical pageant (Norman Long, *The Use Of Historical Material* 148).

It was a ballad tradition the foundation of English poetry appears to be the strongest single influence on Arden. It was Arden’s ability to unite visual simplicity with an emotional feeling that bestows a good impact to his dramas. He feels emotional that public has lost the touch of this source. But there has been criticism in regard to this passion of Arden as Edwin Morgan expresses that Arden, “should be devoted to exploring his themes far more deeply and at far warmer level of involvement” (Morgan, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* 51).

Arden declares his faith in the theatre as a social transport; his dramas raised a number of social issues in a documentary approach. “Arden’s position is more optimistic; while he feels that there is some truth in, the modern idea of sludgy uninterested nation, married to its telly and its fish chips” (Brecht *Theatre of Pleasure* 71). John Arden’s dramas are concerned with emotions of people rather than their ideas, with expression rather than theory. He depicts man in society rather than man in drawing room. His desire was that after leaving the theatre hall audience will mentally and intellectually involved in the dramas. Arden has written his plays in order to change mindset of his audience. In fact Arden’s approach is well characterized by Brecht’s description of difference between his epic theatre and the conventional theatre.

The spectator of the dramatic theatre say: Yes, I have felt the same. I am just like this. This is only natural. It will always be like this. This human beings suffering move me because there is no way out for him. This is great art; it bears the mark of the inevitable. I am weeping with those who weep on the stage, laughing with those who laugh. (Hayman, *Contemporary Playwrights: John Arden* 4). Arden’s concept of the dramatist means that his dramas has been almost exclusive political, but his politics have changed and his involvement over time in his plays merely concerned with how people live, soon however, through historical parables, Arden expanded his visions and began to connect local issues to the world issues and historical processes. He began to deal directly or indirectly with the pacifist and socialist concerns like, Militarism, colonialism, economic and social justice that became the main themes of his plays. His plays took a more militant partisan approach towards these problems condemning the imperialist, capitalist, exploitative, mentally and viewed the Irish situation as a prime result of this mentality.



John Arden intellectually rejected authority and the political position, which completely mirrored him as revolutionary. In all his works, he inspects social institutions and social relationship from a revolutionary point of view. At the time when *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* was written he presented himself as a pacifist. The revolutionary comprised of Arden's political and social ideologies were present in the style, themes and plots of Arden. But the public and critics who came to watch his dramas were confused because that period of dramas were merely as a means of entertainment and not for political or social ideas. He offered them a unique blend of style and technique and happens to be one which checked the basic assumption of theatre, and went to the public hold about what make a good theatre. John Arden's language is so definite, bold and determined and therefore it created confusion about his exploratory and questioning purpose. He defined his engagement in writing as follows:

All the time I write I find I am writing, partly indeed to express what I know, feel, and see but even more to test the truth of my knowledge, feeling and vision. I didn't fully understand my own feelings and vision. I didn't fully understand my own feelings about pacifism until I write *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*: nor about the old age until I write the *Happy Haven*. Even yet both plays seem to leave much unresolved questions they raise. I see myself as a practitioner of an art which is both public and exploratory... (Brown, *Theatre language* 206)

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