

HISTORY AND THE DRAMATIC WORLD IN *OCCUPATIONS*

Being primarily a narrative art, drama has always been closely associated with the description of past events. Whether it is legendary or real, the past appears as one of the basic dramatic themes. The distinction between the mythical and the real past was established by the humanist historians. Since the Age of Shakespeare, playwrights have introduced History - real events - in drama for didactic and moral purposes. Likewise, a Christian and rational pattern emerged from Elizabethan historical plays (1). Since then each period has conveyed its philosophy of History in drama. It seems that since the Age of Shakespeare, the dramatization of History by British playwrights has been carried out with a great deal of expertise, particularly in the last twenty years, as the writers' overt intention has been to express their totalizing vision of the social and political developments of present-day society.

« Real historical drama is both descriptive and critical », says Bernard Dort (2) dealing with Brecht. It is indeed a genre governed by numerous rules, but nonetheless not an easy one to classify. It should involve the description of a set of events and the presence of historical characters. Yet this latter condition is not absolutely necessary. David Storey's riveting play *Cromwell* captures beautifully the spirit of a period although Cromwell never appears.

The range of possibilities for the manipulation of History is very wide, from costume-drama to more serious and exploratory achievements. History can be used as a mere backdrop or a pretext for romantic stories. *The Queen and the Welshman*, by R.A. Sisson, would fall into that particular category. When it comes to using History in order to understand the present, Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* and J. Osborne's *Luther* stick to a narrowly individualistic viewpoint. Here again, although it is more serious drama, History is a pretext for introducing stereotyped lonely men, very much our contemporaries who rebel against a repressive order.

A revolutionary situation does not necessarily create dynamic drama. Didacticism and simplification are the most serious pitfalls. An undidactic play like *State of Revolution* reads like a text-book in spite of its good qualities (3). Dynamic historical drama has to meet certain demands: raising questions about the past and relating it to the present is the most important. In the post-Brechtian era, it seems that relevance to present-day political dilemmas is a necessary condition for the creation of intellectually stimulating drama. J. Arden's *Left-Handed Liberty* and E. Bond's *The Woman* would fit this description along with Trevor Griffiths' *Occupations*.

Occupations combines a historical set of events, which is at the same time a revolutionary situation, and historical characters whose concerns are national and political rather than personal. Yet the shaping principle and inner dynamic at work in *Occupations* transcend both historical and human limits.

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The historical framework is very precise in terms of time and place in *Occupations*. The action referred to in the play is restricted to September 1920 in Turin and involves the occupations of the Fiat factories under the leadership of the Sardinian socialist Antonio Gramsci.

Several things are made clear in the play through Gramsci's words: the movement has spread all over Northern Italy ; the goal of the occupations is not just economic. It has nothing to do with higher pay. What is planned is the setting up of factory councils, that is to say the takeover of the control of production. The finality of the movement is a structural change in the industrial world of Northern Italy. From the information given by Gramsci about the situation, conditions seem to be ripe in the whole country for a revolutionary movement to be successful. Yet it peters out, at the end of the play, in a referendum whereby the workers on strike give up the struggle in exchange for material advantages. What started off as revolutionary ardour vanishes in a set of reforms.

The Italian situation, which is discussed at great length on the stage, is integrated into a wider historical perspective: the Russian revolution and the rise of fascism.

This wider historical framework comes alive through conventional epic means. At the beginning, the soundtrack of a « sung version of the Internationale » can be heard, followed by a recorded speech of the Second Congress of the third International (4). These recordings are heard while other events are taking place on the stage. The same technique is used at the end while the Countess is dying. Slides are projected on the back wall : « Mussolini embracing Hitler », « Stalin », the « German-Russian non aggression pact .» The very last one shows « Red Guards on the factory roof .» (5)

Such is the historical chain of events which is neither a simple pretext nor a backdrop but the raw material, the living matter and the tool which inform the very dialectic of the play. History comes alive through the confrontation of two characters based on real people. Antonio Gramsci, the Sardinian socialist, and Kabak, a Bulgarian Comintern agent, meet in Turin, in September 1920, in a hotel room, the single set of the play, where they discuss the Italian events. Kabak seems to be in Turin to inquire about the revolutionary situation, but the hidden agenda is a secret mission which is gradually revealed: he has come to negotiate concessions with Valetta, one of the Fiat directors.

All the facts as well as the description of Gramsci are based on Giuseppe Fiori's biography (6). Gramsci's political discourse in the play is very close to his writings (7). The detailed information given about the occupations and the splits within the Italian socialist party follow the analyses given by the best specialists in Italian history (8).

Trevor Griffiths therefore offers History on a large scale; collective History, as precise, detailed and close to the truth as it can be. A very important moment of European History is explored and transmuted into highly stimulating and dialectic drama.

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As drama, *Occupations* involves a single set, unity of place and time and perfect classical architecture. It is built on a dual structure, on a system of oppositions and parallels. This concern for symmetry and construction can also be found in *Absolute Beginners*, *All Good Men* and *Country*. *Occupations* is made up of eight scenes falling into four groups of two. Each group of two scenes is a unit: the second scene of each group echoes the first. Scenes one and eight focus the light on the dying Countess. In scene one, she and Kabak, her companion, meet up in the hotel room in Turin. In scene eight, he leaves and she is about to die. Scenes two and four make up another unit. In these two scenes Kabak and Gramsci discuss the Italian strikes: Kabak does the asking and Gramsci the answering. Scene two introduces the Italian situation whereas scene five broadens the perspective with Gramsci expressing his views on revolutionary tactics. Two scenes show Gramsci addressing the workers on strike: scenes three and six. Kabak's mission is outlined in scene five and becomes clear in scene seven. The Prefect D'Avanzo is found dead in the canal in scene seven. In scenes five and seven Kabak's business purposes come out in full light. In these two scenes the reader / spectator also learns that the revolutionary spirit is flagging on the Italian soil because of counter-revolutionary forces.

The pragmatic approach to drama shows that on the stage speech is action. This cannot be better illustrated than in *Occupations* where everything that is « said » refers to something that is being « done » outside the secrecy of the room. The hotel room is the place where it all reverberates. Gramsci's long evocations of the Italian strikes are strongly reminiscent of the narrations used by classical playwrights.

Yet in the present case these evocations are not mere theatrical conventions. They « produce » and reenact the events through the double perception of both Kabak and Gramsci. This classical stage trick, aimed at meeting the requirements of decency and likelihood, becomes, in *Occupations*, strangely unconventional. It shapes the complex interplay of the two characters' responses to the situation. A distance is therefore established between the audience and the events which are both produced and mediated by Kabak and Gramsci. The two men fulfill a dual function: they are both the observers and agents of a set of events which they analyse and in which they participate. As dramatic characters they also have a double status: in addition to being politicians, they are involved in emotional and personal situations.

The private and the public planes are closely bound up in *Occupations*. Whereas an irreversible course of events is taking place in European History, the point of no return is also reached on a strictly human level: a woman is dying of a terminal disease. First and last character on the stage, Angelica, the Russian Countess, Kabak's companion, is staying with her maid in Turin where she will die alone after Kabak's departure.

Kabak appears as a mysterious, secretive and sarcastic character. His face is supposed to reflect no feeling at all. The image he projects of himself is that of the businessman. Indeed he is always engaged in very practical activities: he keeps phoning people all the time, he has business appointments and, most of all, he buys people's services. His « gestus » is giving money to people in return for some kind of « service. » He is seen giving someone a sum of money no less than three times in the play. Kabak seems to be in complete control of himself and others. Yet he is also nervous. He drinks heavily and, surprisingly enough, he can be desperate and vulnerable: he cries (9). Kabak never ever appears as a villain. On the contrary the strength

of his conviction and his clear-mindedness arouse sympathy. On the chessboard of revolution, Kabak serves a cause and coldly sticks to it. As a man, his suffering, although it is handled with restraint by the author, should not be played down. The Bulgarian is caught up in an emotional network which gives life and poignancy to the secrecy of the hotel room. An emotional chord vibrates between Kabak and the two ladies, and what goes on within the triangle takes various shapes and can be called « love ». This strong undercurrent of emotion finds its counterpart in Gramsci's own life. Gramsci's sister is dying in Sardinia (10); it seems that however different Kabak and Gramsci may be, they both share a similar human experience. Moreover « love » is also the underlying principle of Gramsci's action, the only possible basis for a relationship between the leader and the masses (11).

This « love », on Gramsci's part, is made palpable in scenes three and six when the socialist leader addresses the Fiat workers. In these two scenes, Trevor Griffiths resorts to another theatrical convention: the audience is called upon to play the part of the Fiat workers. Gramsci addresses us whereas recorded voices give the strikers' responses. Yet this is more than a gimmick. Direct, warm communication is established between the socialist leader and the audience. For a while, the distance between the spectator and Gramsci's revolutionary project is abolished. Yet the stage does not become a tribune; it remains the place of shifting viewpoints and perspectives. *Occupations* explores all the possibilities offered by the « dramatic » and the « epic » approaches to playwriting. The distance between the audience and the stage goes from zero to the infinite, from emotional involvement to objective analysis.

The constant dialectical back and forth movement from the public plane to the private one, from the objective to the subjective viewpoints, from the dramatic approach to the epic form, are materialized on the stage by pools of light, brightly-lit areas contrasting with dark ones. The whole play is punctuated by the clicking on and off of the lamps by Kabak in the hotel room. The lighting scheme of the play is one more means of increasing or abolishing the distance between the dramatic world of the hotel room, the events taking place off-stage and the audience.

In the secrecy of the well-furnished « bourgeois » setting, a collective drama is scrutinized while a personal tragedy is enacted. Two men, both agents and observers of the flow of history, discuss revolutionary tactics while a woman is dying. *Occupations* starts with human suffering and ends with death. Does this imply that the overall philosophy of the play is fatalistic, sentimental, pessimistic with regard to any kind of human project? Although the dramatic world of the play is set within the limits of human life and human frailty, part of its political discourse arouses a sense of recognition.

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Occupations transmutes history into drama. It also transcends human limits to become what Maria Piscator calls « un instrument d'histoire » (12).

The overt intention of *Occupations*, as stated in the preface, is to examine May'68 in France through the distancing means of the past (13). A comparison can indeed be drawn between May'68 in France and September 1920 in Turin. In both cases the Trotskyites try to outflank the straightforward Communist party members, but revolutionary ardour, in both cases, peters out in a return to « bourgeois order ».

The multiple viewpoint approach which runs throughout the play informs its very discourse and overall philosophy. Basically, *Occupations* offers a multifaceted view of revolutionary tactics. Kabak and Gramsci keep referring to Lenin and Trotsky in the course of their discussions. The message from the Third International, signed by Zinoviev and Lenin is an encouraging one for the Italian revolution: « The decisive struggle is approaching. Italy will be Soviet. » (14) The Central Committee's analysis of the Turin occupations shows that the Italian Socialist Party is by far the most advanced in Europe. Gramsci, for his part, quotes Trotsky and advocates the necessity of political organization (15). The two characters discuss their opinions and theories in the light of other opinions and theories. They refer to other points of view which they confront with their own analysis of the facts. Each character operates as a distancing means for the other; each one brings himself and the other into perspective. The spectator views the events taking place in Turin from the Russian point of view and at the same time the events taking place in Russia filtered through the Italian conflict.

This confrontational pattern works at all levels, with splits and oppositions between the workers and the Socialist Party leaders and within the Italian Socialist Party itself. Gramsci states the Italian Socialist Party's position as regards Moscow:

« In Italy, there is always a considerable distance between form and content. We subscribe to the Third International and do nothing to further its aims. » (16)

The Italian specific situation cannot be compared to the Russian one. In Turin, the trade union leaders are only too ready to negotiate (17). Gramsci calls the referendum a « massive act of class collaboration » (18) and yet, he sees the whole movement as a leap forward. Seen through Gramsci's eyes, the failure appears as a result of bad timing and bad organization, as a mishap along the line of revolutionary change. Throughout the play, Gramsci appears as a convinced revolutionary, but he also develops a realistic and sceptical attitude towards the outcome of the strikes. Kabak, for his part, is sarcastic about what he calls « a bloody Italian farce. » (19) He has other preoccupations and has come essentially for business.

Gramsci, the sceptical thinker, and Kabak, the sarcastic and detached observer, are stripped of any romantic trammels. Neither of them indulges in any utopian discourse. The distancing process at work in the play imposes no fixed values and challenges any definite ideology. All the assumptions conveyed by the Moscow messages are almost immediately undercut and disproved by the specific Italian conditions. This dialectic running within the play raises questions about revolutionary tactics. The revolutionary situation described in *Occupations* involves the « leadership » and the « masses ». The class struggle is referred to only once or twice and never emerges as a major theme. Interestingly enough, the « masses » are never present on the stage and nowhere to be seen. In scenes three and six, when Gramsci is supposed to face the workers, they are just heard in the distance by the means of a soundtrack. The audience is called upon to impersonate them. The stage is used as a tribune but it does not function as such: the spectators sitting at the receiving end know who they are, and no confusion is possible. The « masses » are absent and, obviously, no definite change will come from them. In scene six Gramsci invokes Trotsky and the disillusionment « fragmentation, and dispersal » (20) of the proletarian vanguard.

The May '68 ideologies show that the class struggle is no longer to be considered as the driving force of History. Although *Occupations* constantly distances itself from

any fixed political discourse, it seems that the real battles of the future will not be fought on that particular level. Kabak and Gramsci « occupy » the stage with their intellectual debate whereas dramatic speech refers to action happening off-stage. In the present case the two men's discourse could be relevant to any revolutionary situation. The questions which are raised could apply to any balance of forces existing in any society. Kabak and Gramsci deal with political patterns in the broadest sense. This is the way the play elevates itself much above historical and human limits. As a consequence it conveys no sense of fatalism. Yet it moves towards the definite vision and striking image of the Countess dying. Would this crudely symbolize the end of an era? As she dies she sees « the iron brain of Comrade Lenin hammering out the future » (21) and she asks a most ambiguous question: « Will anything stop them? » (22). Whether this question is a value judgement or a prophecy remains obscure. No definite answer is given concerning the future of society. Of course, no solution was required at the outset. Trevor Griffiths wanted the spectator to go through an unlimited and ever renewed reflection upon the power structures at work in society. Yet, somewhere along the line, a human project can be carried out.

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It is possible to say that Trevor Griffiths subscribes to a New Left view in *Occupations*. Yet it is not a play that offers a clear-cut message. September 1920 in Turin belongs to the past and, to some extent, so does May'68 in France. But History never remains on the level of abstract ideas in *Occupations*. It is hewn and shaped and moulded in order to serve a higher cause than the didactic aims of a particular party or viewpoint. What it achieves - and what all great drama should achieve - is the creation of the « new spectator », the « unfinished consciousness » Althusser looked for in Brecht's plays (23). This awareness and sense of recognition, which Trevor Griffiths stimulates in such a powerful way, derives first and foremost from the art of playwriting. The craft is the driving force that informs the philosophy and the political vision. Only serious exploratory writing makes History and drama come alive.

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NOTES

- (1) Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (London : Methuen, 1965), p. 16.
- (2) Bernard Dort, « Brecht devant Shakespeare », in *Théâtre Public* (Paris : Seuil, 1967), p. 94.
- (3) Robert Bolt, *State of Revolution* (London : Heinemann, National Theatre Plays, 1977).
- (4) Trevor Griffiths, *Occupations* (London : Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 17.
- (5) *Ibid*, p. 74.
- (6) Giuseppe Fiori, *La Vie de Antonio Gramsci* (Paris : Le Livre de Poche, 1977).
- (7) Antonio Gramsci, *Œuvres Choies* (Paris : Editions Sociales, 1959).

N. BOIREAU
HISTORY AND THE DRAMATIC WORLD IN *OCCUPATIONS*

- (8) Kostas Papaioannou, *Marx et les Marxistes* (Paris : Flammarion, 1972).
Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, *L'Italie contemporaine, des nationalistes aux Européens* (Paris : Armand Colin, Collection U, 1973).
- (9) *Occupations*, p. 48.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- (12) Maria Piscator, Jean-Michel Palmier, *Piscator et le théâtre politique* (Paris : Payot, 1983), p. 147.
- (13) *Occupations*, op. cit., p. 9.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- (17), (18) *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- (21), (22) *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- (23) Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris : Maspero, 1965), p. 151.