

**COVID-19 POLITICIZED:
A STUDY IN DAVID HARE'S BEAT THE DEVIL**

Salih M. HAMEED¹

Prof. Dr, University of Babylon, Iraq

Hadeel Aziz AL-HILU²

Prof. Dr, University of Babylon, Iraq

Abstract

The theatre is a communal activity: a play is written by a playwright, directed on a stage by an artist, and performed by a number of actors for audience who attend a theatre house. Such incorporation never abides by the strict rules of quarantine and social distancing enforced by national and world authorities. Hence, the closure of theatres and people's shunning such activities. But neither artists nor playwrights have easily given in: they have creatively sought novel techniques of presentation irrespective of different locations of director, actor, and audience.

The well-known English playwright David Hare is one of a number of playwrights who have resorted to employ the advanced applications of technology, especially in the field of computer and its utilities, to help in bringing the "theatre" to the audience's places. In this one-act play, Hare exploits his personal experience with Covid-19 to storm his harsh critiques of the political system; hence, the use of the "personal" to criticize the "political." The analogy between his own "sickness" and the "failure" of the political systems to successfully deal with the Covid crisis and its disastrous effects recalls Hare's interest in criticizing the authorities' improper treatment of domestic issues, which poses as a distinctive motif of early plays. This paper is indeed an attempt to explore Hare's dramatic and ironic employment of the Covid disaster.

Key words: Covid-19, Drama, Politics, David Hare, Criticism.

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¹  salih_mahdy@yagoo.ca, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0467-6385>

²  basic.hadeel.aziz@uobabylon.edu.iq, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2649-016X>

Introduction:

It goes without saying that drama identifies performance or any similar performative modes. Nevertheless, performance is characteristically an activity that is based on "action": it is, by and large, an element without which a play is anything but not drama. Ever since the medieval Times whence performance, in its simplest form, was "strictly a metaphor for" religio-social behaviours: by no means, such socio-ethical behaviours were presented in the modes of art, which is "most like life as it is lived in the real world." (States, 1996, p. 5) Be it a liturgical ritual church service, or just a Christian means of teaching moralities, miracles and mysteries of Jesus Christ and/or saints, such performative mode requires a communal group work. When played in churches, and city streets, or elsewhere, those activities could not have evoked and survived without potential participation of humans as players and audience. Given the truth that performance is communal, communality, therefore, simply necessities that physical presence of the players, the managers and the spectators at one particular place, not yet identifies as a theatre, or a stage.

The physical presence of these people together is by its own nature the corner stone of the "action" or "activity": such 'togetherness' secures the possibility of the performance and the success of the message delivery, primarily intended to present. Notwithstanding the place where events are performed, and the teachings addressed, no one activity could be possible without human participation, irrespective of what role and duty assigned them.

From the fourteenth century onward, no performance or dramatic event was ever played without humans' physical presence regardless of the roles allotted. Despite lots of devastating wars, fatal plagues and hazardous natural phenomena, such performances continued to be played: they were seldom interrupted (except for specific times). The popularity of those events and the increasing interest of huge populations of various nations of the globe, secured the continuance of the performance, but, surprisingly enough, only did the Covid pandemic manage to fully interrupt the performance of all dramatic events. Literally, all life activities have come into an utter standstill: the lockdown has utterly rendered life, in its broader sense, a thorough cessation. The panic the pandemic entails and the strict rules and regulations issued about the Covid, including utter isolation and social distancing even within home environment: husbands and wives live "together alone", any physical closeness between them is more than "rule-out"; it is indeed "off-limits."

Chapter II

Fortunately, enough, the early years of the Third Millennium have witnessed tremendous advancements in technological inventions, especially in the fields of technological communication systems. Such revolutions in communication seem to have helped the world find diverse means that could ease virtual nearness between people during the pandemic lockdown years: speedier contact devices have been developed to help people communicate. Hence, the Video Zoom, the Skype and other meeting systems. It is, however, evident that the

technological experts have elaborately developed the *démodé* communication devices. Theatre workers who have ceaselessly been frustrated with the inevitability of isolation and entire lockdown have equally envisioned the contemporary communication advancements their haven; therefore, some interested playwrights have faithfully endeavoured to adapt recent communication systems to defy the lockdown. Among the various playwrights who experimented the use of recent technologies are: Richard Wilson (in his Trilogy of *Apple Family*), Bradley Hayward, Don Zolidis (in *10 ways to Survive....*), and Katie Bender (in *King Family Zoom*). They have resorted to adapt the Digital Theatre techniques to help present their virtual works.

On the other hand, a playwright like David Hare who has early caught the Covid 19 illness has impatiently been waiting for the authorities to lift the strict restrictions announced so that theatres would reopen and he might get the opportunity to have his Covid play performed. Commenting on his plan, David Hare speaks in a virtual Popular Broadcasting Service Press meeting: "I've written a monologue and it's purely about my own experience of the illness. I got the illness very, very early." Certainly, Hare, the prominent playwright of his time must have, presumably, thought of his pandemic play "fertile for drama." Unlike Richard Nelson, Katie Bender and Don Zolidis, David Hare has not experimented the digital theatre techniques or the Zoom Meeting dramatic device: he has made up his mind to write a play about the pandemic following his experience with what he calls a "quite extraordinary disease." Once the UK authorities allowed the theatres to reopen, David Hare talked with director Nichola Hytner who nominated Ralph Fiennes to perform an almost 50-minute monologue exploring Hare's unbelievable torture combat with Coronavirus illness.

Chapter III

On 27 August 2020 when the premier of *Beat the Devil* starts to be presented on the Bridge Theatre stage in London, the audience are most likely shocked by an almost bare stage, unlike what they must have expected with the glory and grandeur of performance prior to the quarantine. Albeit the Covid restrictions were remarkably reduced, the audience were no more than one third of the theatre capacity: we are told that due to social distancing, theatres with more than 1300 seats would not host more than 400 spectators. The scene looks disheartening for theatre goers, who are fully occupied with the memories of the glory and fascination of the pre-Covid activities.

Dramatically speaking, it is believed that Hare's use of the monologue as a medium of introducing his play is witty and brilliant. Characteristically enough, the employment of such a medium attunes with the common atmosphere of yet partial isolation. It is true that the monologue is the voice of the speaker, yet it is simultaneously a "monological dialogue". (Kurdi, 2008, p. 519). In other words, it is a dialogue between the speaker's "self" and the "other." The "other" may be the "self" *per se*, or the "other" within, who disagrees with. Hence, the monologue in *Beat the Devil* is a manifestation of the conflict between the "self" and the

"other". By and large, the monologue serves as a testimony of most authenticity: it seldom eliminates its unique 'individuality.'

David Hare's monologue illustrates the character's subtle ability to minutely describe his unique experience (the personal). Synchronously, it manifests how Hare smoothly and naturally explores the engagement of the (personal) with the (domestic). The process of the changeover from the (personal) into the (domestic) glides so dramatically that the audience hardly feel any interruption in the natural flow of events. Although the speaker literally talks to himself out loud, he still addresses either the "self" or the "other" outside. Undoubtedly, there emerges an astute endeavour to keenly 'blend' the "self" with the "other", primarily provoking the audience to intuitively focus on the perspectives of the experience and its aftermaths on either sides, the (personal) and the (domestic). It is so well wrought that the barriers between the (personal) and the (domestic) totally collapse: they are both rendered into (one) perspective.

Precisely, at the very beginning of the monologue, Hare directly invites the audience to take part in the experience; the hurriedness of the audience's involvement is metaphorically analogous with the suddenness one catches the Covid illness. The speaker instantly embarks on the illness symptoms: they seem quite contradictory to doctors' signs: "I am walking and I am trying to wash the taste of sewage out of my mouth. It isn't easy to do." (Hare, 2020, p. 3) And when he seeks help and advice, he is met with the answer: "We don't yet know." (Hare, 2020, p. 3) Ironically, despite all scientific advances, 'Medics' and doctors still feel ignorant of getting the answer for simple questions. This evidently recalls Hare's quote in the epigraph, that "human beings are...put together quite simply. ... The part that is complicated, even we as scientists are ignorant of that." (Hare, 2020, p. 2) It is assumed that the opening scene speedily calls the audience to not get comfortably seated and leisurely meditate on the scene before him\her: Hare, indeed, intends to fiercely seize the already apprehensive spectators to get physically and spiritually involved in the whole event. The monologue is therefore powerful enough to provoke the audience to intensively understand the experience by all her\his senses; s\he will no longer be a passive theatre-goer, but one partner. (Parelkova, 2013, p. 530) David Hare himself in one interview by Matthew Reisz of the *Guardian* declares: "I tend to examine the ills of the world and leave the people with very ambiguous feelings *about what can be done*"] italics mine] since they are involved. (Reisz, 2022)

David Hare's resolution to adopt the monologue as a medium in *Beat the Devil* is quite appropriate with the nature of the disease, not only due to the intensive use of monologue in contemporary drama, but also because Hare well understands that the "inner" monologue has recently become a "flow of the unconscious." (Lanaauskaite, 2018, p. 160) hence, the change of its functions. The very "flow of the unconscious" itself inspires Hare to investigate the cause(s) of his and his people's health deterioration. In other words, it drives the playwright to transcend his (personal) illness and responsibly links it with the (domestic) maladies, a topic he has been famed to deal with since his early political works. *Beat the Devil* is frankly a fantastic blend of the (personal) and the (domestic): the play's intermittent blend of the

speaker's struggle with the Covid terrifying experiences, and the political outrage against the UK authorities' failure of responsibilities corresponds with David Hare's understanding of what the theatre is required to do.

Having successively and cynically explored the beginning of his personal illness and self-isolation, the speaker starts to undergo symptoms unlike what Medics often identify. Surprisingly, his unusual symptoms of "persistent taste of sewage" in his mouth cannot be common: whatever he drinks or eats, he is doomed to suffer this "unlisted symptom" contrary to all Covid patients who normally lose their sense of taste and smell! After a couple of days during which the speaker has been experimenting some Covid signs, and has been "mooching" around the house, he started feeling "really terrible" with more symptoms of what he describes as a "sort of dirty bomb, thrown into the body to cause havoc," (Hare, 2020, p. 6) with the sewage taste still in his mouth. Such aghast symptoms have, nonetheless, driven the playwright to instantly admit that "the prime minister [scares] him because [he keeps] thinking Johnson doesn't quite seem on top of this." (Hare, 2020, p. 8) It is, however, assumed that Hare's recurrent reference to his suffering of sewage taste cannot be purposeless, due to the symbolic implications of "sewage". It is most likely that the "sewage" *motif* refers to corruption. The "sewage" may therefore stand for the UK authority. With more focus on his symptoms, especially when he has slipped into the "mad phase", Hare starts much harsher critique of the government, and gets as vehement as the illness 'madness.'

Having been "struggling with his instincts," Johnson has infuriated Hare to get outrageous and ferocious when it comes to the Prime Minister's engagement with celebrating "his girlfriend's pregnancy, negotiating the final details of his most recent divorce and skipping COBRA meeting." (Hare, 2020, p. 8) It is only after almost six weeks that Johnson "reluctantly" announces the "full measures" of dealing with the disease. The severity of the symptoms and the harshness of the critiques are two parallel lines, and the playwright is aptly keen on handling their effects. His intermittent treatment of each one at a certain time and on one specific occasion is decided only by the appropriate dramatic situation. David Hare must have been fully convinced that whatever has befallen him, as well as the thousands of deaths are entirely attributed to the failure of the "crazy" government responsibilities, irrespective of who to blame most. In a delirium-like speech when "the virus divided [him] into several separate entities", all sleeping in his bed side by side, Hare bitterly wonders how the government has irresponsibly dispatched "front-line staff into work with Covid infected patients without suitable protective clothing equipment." (Hare, 2020, p. 11) In addition, the government has neglected "all danger to workers and residents in the care-home sector, where deaths are set to rise to alarming levels?" (Hare, 2020, p. 12) The deterioration of Hare's health corresponds with the government's lack of duties and obligations: Hare openly shows despair with the authority's measures to deal with the pandemic, he states: the government "route through the crisis is bullshit..." because "the ministers now, very man and woman, toil their way doggedly down the center of the bullshit highway " (Hare, 2020, p. 14)

It is indeed not strange for a prominent political playwright as David Hare to contribute to the history of English contemporary political theatre as much. Irrespective of what has been said about his "Leftist Liberal Convictions", David Hare's belief in, and respect of, the artist's "ethical responsibilities" has entitled him to enjoy the top of the "100 highest-ranking playwrights" for his effective employment of the theatre as a "forum for public debate." (*The Times*, 2005) Be them domestic targeting, as *Beat the Devil*, and *The Permanent Way*, or internationally targeting as *Stuff Happens* and *Via Dolorosa*, David Hare himself announces that "whatever I become, I don't want to be a bourgeoisie salon writer." (Murray, 2019, p. 10)

It is usually acknowledged that David Hare always invites people to have a sense of *Historical Awareness* so that they may understand "what is going around them at the time." (Murray, 2019, p. 11) He, too, frankly admits: "I like Epic Theatre because Epic Theatre says 'in this specific time, and at this specific place'." It is most likely that such testimonial strongly results in classifying Hare among what Jenny Spencer describes as "the New Left legacy in cultural studies." (Spencer, 2018, p. 437) But, this does not necessarily imply that Hare has been committed to "any socialist political agenda." (Spencer, 2018, p. 478)

Like *Beat the Devil*, *The Permanente Way* is a play that discloses the outcomes of the privatization of British Railways by the government of John Major. Again, the playwright embarks on a harsh criticism of the government dysfunctional and flawed systems and plans. In fact, this is another political play where Hare's fury and rage are meant to target the UK authorities for their failure and indiscretion in handling the train crashes (1997-2002) that have victimized the lives of thirty-one persons; however it is not merely the dead, but also the living who have been left to suffer. The playwright looks at the privatisation of the railways as an act of "theft" that should have driven all people furious: it is not a "theft" of the citizens' lives *per se*, but the "theft" of the State budget. Hence, another means of corruption!

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