

## ARTIFICIAL THEATRE OF JOHN ARDEN IN SERGEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Theatre in early years of twentieth century was an outburst of dramatic energy. The stage was acted as a prologue to the themes of the century. Most of the revolutionary works of modern dramatists belong to the second and third decades of twentieth century. The champion was George Bernard Shaw and through his influence British stage was clearly felt. His biting wit and experience as a man of theatre helped British theatre to success. "The Rule book of unity, London defines its purpose: to foster the art of drama by interpreting life as it is experienced by the majority of people, to work for the betterment of society"(Smart, Twentieth century British Drama 20). The play Look back in Anger by John Osborne that caught the moment with unerring accuracy, not primarily because of its dramatic quality but more in the character of its hero. In Look Back in Anger we meet the presentation of working class and replacement of middle class drawing rooms by the flat and iron board. The playwright and critic Bernard Kops, noted a change in British theatre: "the working class has become articulate and young writers have sprung up all over the country, products of this special time , symptomatic of great social change that have taken place, perhaps the first bubbles of mighty Volcano." (Smart, Twentieth century British Drama 29). There emerged a group of writers who felt sense of common purpose. These writers emerged and experimented about the forms of new drama. The desire was to create dramas that would stand in the vanguard of political and social change. Among them came John Arden with dramas where entries were bold, clear, efficient and bringing new figure on stage. John Arden since world wars had written plays that attracted widest attention. He was born in 1930 in London. Arden used theatre to create and release a response to discover what is involved in human activity what is prevailing outside the theatre. In plays of Arden each character is there in his own right speaking and acting, as well as efficient as he can on behalf of some notion pr an idea as conceived by the author. The colours are primary, the action spring loaded and the result apparent at once. Each new entrants speaks for himself without much regard for how things happen in ordinary life.*

**Key words:** Prologue, Foster, Unerring, Vanguard, Conceive.

Arden is a primitive among dramatists. At first this may have been a defence against the rival success of television. He recognized that other playwrights such as Wesker worked on the assumption that:

New plays should be natural reflections of life familiar to their audience and that the important contemporary issues that they wish to handle are best presented against such a background. But Arden considered this kind of drama was more suited to “the drawing room fireside auditorium of television and judged that: the essential artificiality of the public stage will become apparent again.... People must want to come to the theatre because of the artificiality, not despite it.... I am pleading for the revival of the poetic drama no less.(New theatre Magazine vol. 1 page 23)

Like ballad singers, Arden did not wish to argue, but to offer a fable, full of climatic activity and clear statement, and let the audience draw its own conclusions. But Arden could not be true primitive for he chose his style self consciously, for intellectuality perceived reasons. Behind his simple, strong and active figures lies a concern for general problems of contemporary society. In play *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* Arden is concerned to illustrate attitudes and explore a problem. In last act he illustrates the soldiers staging a public meeting, apparently a recruiting meeting, which would turn into a protest. Arden has set his play strongly and clearly to work in order follow his thoughts. Arden, the dramatist being explicit about a small decision in order to make a general point about his character. Sometimes one character is made to act a stooge to another so that Arden can provide an exposition of some point of view or of past events to complete the play. In Act two, Musgrave calls Annie, the barmaid to him.

Musgrave: [calling Annie] Lassie

Annie: Hello.

Musgrave: These are my men. They are here with their work to do. You will not distract them.

Annie: I won't

He tells her directly to leave the man alone but she is made to question this. So it is clear that Arden wishes Musgrave to make general point more important for the ideas behind the play than the consistency of the character he is talking to. Arden also gives explicit general meaning to his characters, speeches by using certain words repeatedly in different contexts, especially references to the primary colors simple opposites such as light and dark, cold and hot. So in act I Musgrave's description of duty, 'drawn out straight and block gains strength by echoes from other earlier speeches, not all by him. Talk about the weather, army life etc.

Brr, oha cold winter, snow, dark... cold night .... Black spades carry the day. Jack, king and Ace. We throw the red Queen over... our black Jack Musgrave... an old red rag stretched over four pair o'bones.... You know what they used to call'em in them days – soldiers, I mean?... bloodred roses, that was it... you bloodred bloody roses , you! Oh brr , bitter and bleak.(*Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* 9-14)

From statements Arden changes from prose to verse form of short lines and clear rhymes when Annie is asked by Mrs Hitchcock who knows well enough- to tell – what a soldier good for, she speaks in general terms:

Because we know he'll soon be dead  
We strap our arms round the scarlet red

Then send him weeping over the sea.... (*Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* 17-18)

Arden is seeking not only clarity but also the memorable word, the word that can grow in the mind of hearer. He made special attention and requires special delivery for such words. Using artificial means and not the strict imitation of ordinary speech or the impression of a man discovering truth for himself.

Arden's choice of setting dramatic structure is calculated to keep attention alert instead of sitting the action in a single room, or moving it between two contrasted scenes. Arden chooses scenes that provide a series of different views and different confrontation, a canal boat, a pub and a church yard. At first soldiers are on move carrying heavy luggage, and the Bargee, the only person they encounter in the church yard. Once in the pub a series of meetings arranged by Hitchcock with the attendant Annie takes place. Then at sunset in

Churchyard soldiers are alone for argument with the colliers menacingly around. Arden in this play adds some important scenes not only bring attention back to the principal character and complete the theme but to ensure the audience should left finally with the definite question and also changing of rhythms and involvements illustrates the overall dramatic purpose.

MRS HITCHCOCK: It's time you learnt your life, you big proud sergeant.

Listen Last evening you told all about this anarchy and where it come from- like, scribble all over with life or love and that makes anarchy, Right?

MUSGRAVE: Go on.

MRS HITCHCOCK: Then you use your logic- if you can. Look at it this road; here we are and we'd got life and love. Then you came in and you did ....

Arden's theatrical language is so define, strong and persistent that there has been some confusion about his exploratory and questioning purpose. Audiences expect him to take sides. The clarity of every statement is the cause of these difficulties of interpretations and of the peculiar excitement of Arden play. The critic Philip Hope Wallace responded to the first performance of Sergeant Musgrave's Dance in a manner that is close to Arden's expectations. The play is long and challenging, he wrote (text 206)

Arden has convictions above how his characters should be have the consequences of their actions, but not above the problems raised by his plays in their widest manifestations. There are two dangers in the writing of play. First the characters are like to be simplified by an author who condescends towards them as mere illustrations of his theme and secondly he alienates his audience by sitting on a fence, raising strong issues and declaring himself mental. Another consequence of Arden's strategy is that he may not be open-minded as an explorer should be and he advocates certain answers himself. Arden seems aware of the difficulty of appearing neutral or disengaged in dramatic conflicts. When introducing the last scene of the play where violence have broken out but using ballads gives a point of view not an allegiance in the dramatic confrontation and violence has broken out on both the sides and last statement of the play is the sound of ambulance bell as the authority decried in the ballad steps to save the pain.

In this play dialogue breaks into soliloquy in various ways each appropriate to speaker and each reaching further and more precisely in to the grounds of their motivations. No action is avoided and sub-textual implications are never cloaked or mere suggested. Each speech shows individual potential and awakens the audience to listen in a new way. The presentation of characters in Arden ensures that the audience is drawn closely to each of the major characters in turn not sympathize with them so much as to listen with attentions an deflected to see and to understand how they work.

Arden's zest and good humour have echoes of Brecht's insistence on 'spass' or fun. His transparent and pungent characterization, his episodic structure and simple, cartoon like staging, are also reminiscent of Brecht. By making the theatre language more artificial, the author has given it bright strong colors, furious movement, naked clarity in each aspect. Artificially he has tried to create carnival extension of normal behavior and from the audience alerted attention on large issues. The trust is that theatre brings truth in realization and made audience bring truth in understanding. John Arden tries to simplify the every moment, cutting out half lights, sub textual

suggestion, minor issues and complication in order to make the whole more baffling. But Arden find themselves in dilemma for to ask less of production or response faced by a world that no one can fully understand, he hope to capture in the artificiality of theatre something of the complexity and perplexity. He wishes to display involvement. Rather than offer comment or guide or means of perception. He believes that theatre like politics, is an art of practicable, because practice in this world and age is almost always at fault.

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