A Writer about Public Life” The Aesthetics and Ideology of David Edgar’s Agit-Prop Theatre: Destiny as a Sample

Zeena Salim Hammoudi, Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed, Susan Raheem Rahman

Abstract

The British playwright David Edgar (1948) is certainly one of the greatest and most prolific postmodernist British writers. Beyond his creative literary writings, he has been a significant figure in both the contemporary British theatre and British public life. His works encompass a wide variety of political issues which are reflected through newspaper opinion pages, journal essays, a keynote speaker at many conferences, and via engaging in the political theatre like performing community plays and television plays. In his early community dramaturgy, known as agit-prop theatre of 1970s, Edgar endeavors to address the essential questions and struggles of the working class and immigrants from different British colonies who aspired to be British citizens and equal to their white peers. The world Edgar depicts in his plays is deeply political, and is full of contradictions through which he and his generation were living. Through his distinctive dramatic style, in which he takes his cue from the modernist Brechtian school, Edgar explores the human dilemma after World War II and the fall of British Empire, and shows how moving to the new millenary created complex life. Human existence in a repressive political world is another dominant theme that preoccupies his agit-prop drama.

Introduction

“Drama confronts our private dreams and agonies with the public rituals designed to mark and come to terms with them”(Edgar’s How Plays Work 2003)

Drama of the late 1960s is characterized by many startling changes that challenged the basis of the conventional British theatre, and announced the beginning of the most exciting decade of drama. A new generation of playwrights emerged who violently disagreed about the new forms and aims of the new drama, yet they desire to create a drama that would encourage and contribute to the political and social change. From the outset, the tone of drama of this new generation was “of provocative confrontation, aimed as much at the values of the ‘alternative’ society as of the establishment it opposed. Their plays reflected a profound disquiet about the current state of the nation” (Bull, 1984, p.1-2). The predominant and major playwrights who preoccupied the scene of this new developed drama are: Howard Brenton, David Hare, Snoo Wilson, Trevor Griffiths, Williams and David Edgar... [Their work] was rapidly disseminated the length and breadth of the country. In part, this was because of the potential immediacy of the new drama - able to present at very short notice enactment of a particular situation to an
identifiable audience – and in part because of its mobility – no longer reliant on conventional theatrical venues, elaborate and costly sets, detailed itineraries, and settled companies. (Bull, 1984, p. 2)

It is a truth that David Edgar’s early theatre emerged from the political activity of the 1960s, in particular his involvement with student politics at Bradford in 1968. As a young student at university, he had been on the Left and was attracted to and adapted the notions of Marxist communism as the “traditional organized Left still thought and acted in accordance with a vitiated version of Marxist analysis, based on the primacy of class-struggle” (Bull, 1984, p. 11). Edgar’s idealistic views have, thus, been shaped brightly when he was a student agitator. He demonstrated and commented in many occasions that Marxism could be a vital tool for social and political improvement, yet he was neither a member of the communist party nor shared any of his peers’ thoughts of the communism. "Am I still a Marxist revolutionary? No, I'm not. Do I still believe in the egalitarian agenda? Yes, I do. The great thing Marxism did was it said 'this is connected to this is connected to this'. It isn't just about you. It's about you and somebody else. And I think that is still an important way of looking at the world." (Edgar, 1992, p. 23)

Compiling between the social activism and a broad dash of moral absolutism, Edgar began his writing career in the agit-prop theatre scene of the 1970s with works such as Rent or Caught in the Act (1972), about housing conditions for the working classes. The term agit-prop theatre is an art form that explicitly conveys a political message. It is a political propaganda, especially communist propaganda aims at spreading and sharing the ideals and ideology of the communist party. To give a working definition of the term, agit-prop, Richard Seyd points that:

Agitation [is defined] as the putting across of one idea to many people, and 'propaganda' as putting over many complex ideas to fewer people. Agit-prop, as it developed historically, Concentrated predominantly on the agitational aspects only. (1975, 39)

As a theatrical form, the agit-prop has several merits like its being practical and inexpensive to produce, and could be performed anywhere. It also participated in redefining the function and shape of the theatre in the 60s and 70s. Sandy Craig stressed that the agit-prop term covered “street theatre, issue plays …working-class history plays, panoramic documentary plays,” (1980, p. 37). It also involves a wide range of theatrical techniques such as “mime, stylized costume and gesture, character stylization, different levels of address to the audience, monologue, aside, various types of song, use of slogans and captions….The interruption of the action by ‘act’ – magical, comic, or whatever” (Ibid). The basic model for all agit-prop theatre in the 1970s is definitely the traditional Marxist analysis based on class struggle. As consequence,

The revolutionary avant-garde (agit-prop theatre) had already moved beyond this position, and were increasingly to do so as events developed and they discovered just how far their critique could be pushed. They sought nothing less than a redefinition of political struggle as it affected the individual in his everyday life. (Bull, 1984, p. 11)

It is not surprisingly to mention that agit-prop, as a stylized form, has both efficacy and weakness; it could be appropriate to some subjects than to others. Richard Seyd identifies the major problem of the agit-prop. He points that it “provides answers rather than asking questions”. (1975, p. 40). He considers the agit-prop as an effective and perfect theatrical tool of mobilizing support to political and social issues such as the abuse of women, racism issues, and workers’ struggles. It pushes the audience to re-examine and re-think of their own beliefs and attitudes. Yet it cannot fulfill the artistic task of portraying and explaining how and why the individuals operate in this way, showing the contradictions
that resulted out of the social, economic, and political conditions of their society (Ibid). Therefore, by the mid-seventies, many playwrights, including David Edgar, were frustrated with the agit-prop’s inability to cope with serious issues of the postmodern era. Interested in writing for bigger stages and exploring more complicated theatrical form, the agit-prop writers, like Edgar, made a shift from the agit-prop theater as Edgar himself argues:

The move away from pure agit-prop towards more complex theatrical forms seems to me satisfactorily explained in terms of a considered Response by the groups to this failure of economism [the collapse of wage-militancy in the post-1974 period]… the agit-prop, although a good weapon for confirming the workers in their struggles …. It is not suited to the tasks of a period of class retreat. (1979, p. 28)

Despite his close affinity with agit-prop or the socialist theatre, Edgar in 1981, and two years later, presented a sharp criticism of Marxist ideas, more specifically a critique against the Left history, when writing his Maydays, 1983. He has turned against the Labor Party to adapt the ideals of the social democratic parliamentary politics. This explicitly reflects the “contradictions through which he [Edgar] and his generation were currently living; and he has continued to forge a theatre that embodies the social predicaments of modernity as they have developed from the Second World War to the new millennium.” (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p. 3)

Moreover, there are several political and economic factors and events that made Edgar consciously turn away from his agit-prop theatre and rethink of the philosophy of the Left. Among these factors are the miners’ strikes and the struggle against the Industrial relations Act, which demonstrates, as Edgar argues, that “millions of workers became involved in industrial and political struggles who had never been involved before” (1979, p. 67). In addition, the economic growth has not been constant, a diet of economic retrenchment, and the high rates of unemployment, has made the more optimistic adaptors of agit-prop theatre look uncertain of their faith in socialism, and let Edgar to think that the agit-prop did not fit with the fashionable current theatre. In 1979, Edgar maintains that:

I was fed up with seeing agitprop shows that were messy, and also I was increasingly thinking that the politics you could get across were very crude, whereas the world about us was getting more complicated…. I do like agitprop, and I’m very fond of my agitprop plays …. There may again be a period when agitprop will have more relevance than I believe it does now. But I don’t think I’ll ever go back to it, because the sort of subjects I want to deal with now won’t take it. (Cited in Bull, 1984, p. 24)

Such a response reflects well the end of Edgar’s close affinity with the agit-prop theatre, though he has been genuinely influenced by the agit-prop plays. It is apparent that his working as a journalist contributes a lot to his political maturing which has led him to consciously turn to new political drama that “eschews tub thumping at the same time as I was going round the country tub thumping”. (Cited in Bull, 1984, p. 25)

1.1 Methodology

The methodological basis used to carry out this study relies on a multivariate analytical approach to facilitate the understanding of Edgar’s agit-prop drama. The research methodology encompasses the study of thematic preoccupations that his play, Destiny, addresses implicitly in its lines. Likewise, the methodology involves an analysis of the major theatrical devices used in his agit-prop plays which, as political theatre, adapted modern Brechtian stylistics. Truly, theme and structure of Destiny, as a sample
of agit-prop drama, are taken into consideration when analyzing and exploring the subject of the current study.

2.1 Discussion

2.2 Thematic Scope of Edgar’s Agit-prop Dramaturgy

It is evident that writing 40 plays and winning many awards have made Edgar earn a reputation as one of England’s prominent and leading modern dramatist. Though in 1968 he was undergraduate studying drama, and started writing in the 1970s, he proved to be the most prolific and major writer of his generation. The roots of his early plays would be attributed solidly to the agit-prop traditions. Those plays had been written from left social position reflecting his political viewpoints like industrial instigation, government legislations and etc. The source of his work is “obviously related to his original writing-career as an aspirant investigative journalist, but it also helps to shed light on Edgar’s dramatic aims.” (Bull, 1984, p. 152)

In the seventies decade, the fashionably radical current of English drama has been related to the socialist philosophy of communism. The scope of Edgar’s agit-prop plays is thus to explore the conflicts of a “socialist philosophy at large in a confusing world of late capitalism”(Ibid). Describing himself as “a child of my time - specifically that vague 1968”, David Edgar demonstrates the significant role of drama in human life and the interplay between private life and public life. Such as facts represent the abiding themes of David Edgar’s theatre as he seeks audiences within the laboring class whom their struggles and history constitute the substance of his early plays. Hence, Edgar’s commitment to democratic socialism is driven by humanitarian principles, and aiming at a system of social justice, better living for the working class, and a world devoid of capitalist exploitation. The Edgarian values and practices that uphold his writings, and represent the major themes of his agit-prop plays, are “social justice, emancipatory movements, class analysis, and critique of capitalism” (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p. 63).

Coming of age in the 1960s, Edgar belongs to generation who has been genuinely affected by Soviet communism and Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism. Edgar’s characters express his ideas, especially the ideas that carry the zeal of political struggle. Accordingly, Edgar concentrates his focus on the rhetorical construction of the characters’ expressions, both as a content and as a form, “how something is said is almost as important as the saying itself” (Ibid) because he writes his political and theatrical speeches, that are connected by the technical purpose of rhetoric, to persuade his audience. (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p. 65)

The recurrent themes of Edgar’s agit-prop plays, involving Destiny (1976), revolve around investigating and analyzing the “repressed fascist sentiments of the postimperial condition” (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p. 110). As a play of its time, Destiny addresses the political predicament and dilemma arising from immigration and British citizenship; especially the discrimination against migrants in Britain and its legislation that can be traced back to the end of the World War II, particularly the 1960s which witnessed the end of British colonialism. After the fall of the British Empire, a great deal of immigrants of the former parts of the Empire in India and Pakistan arrived to Britain and faced a number of problems concerning their new life in a new community.

The arrival of those new citizens from former colonies created a wide range of struggles: economic, political, and social. Such struggles the anxieties felt at that time, led the government to debate over immigration law, and issuing acts. The Commonwealth Act of 1962 restricted the immigration of the non-white to Britain through passing many laws such as restricting British citizenship only to persons with at least on British parent, and many other sever acts, all aim at ending the “non-European immigration into Britain less than twenty years after it had begun”. (Judth, 2006, p. 336)

Written as a protest against such background, Destiny strikingly shows “how British subjects (recent survivors of a devastating war against fascism) could turn toward fascism and racism as a result of lost empire and the tensions born of newly arrived commonwealth citizens” (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p.111). Destiny has achieved a great success and sustained Edgar’s reputation as a leading theatrical analyst of the political scene in UK. It was received positively and got high praise and many rewards as the best new play relevant to contemporary life. The major theme of this play is to criticize the rise of the neo-Fascist National Front in the 1970s. This extreme right-racist group tries to win in the election in the English Midlands and achieve success and respectability. Explicitly, Destiny is written as a reaction of his study of the ideological roots of British racialism practiced against the colored people. In fact, Edgar was a member of the Institute of Race Relations whose ruling council had in 1972 toppled the bankers and businessmen, who made their fortune
from the Third World. As consequence, he managed successfully to dramatize the psychology and doctrine of British fascism against immigrants. He made his voice hearable against anti-immigration British people who associate immigrants with disease, drugs, gambling, drinking, and any social breakdown in the society. It becomes obvious that Edgar intends his play to:

afford an understanding of the ebb and flow of fascist tendencies within nationalism, especially prescient now, in a time of European xenophobia and fears of terrorism associated with a ‘clash of civilizations’. It also continues to capture how individual subjectivity is shaped in relation to ideas of identification and belonging, with the political theatre of David Edgar. (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p. 112)

The struggle of having no personal identity and feeling of dispossessed represents the current state of both the native people and the new citizens of UK after the fall of the empire. Edgar’s agit-prop theatre, as theatre of its time, explores the failure of the major political parties to either satisfy the needs of natives who feel disaffiliated and dispossessed, or defend the rights of the new citizens. Hence, his agit-prop plays richly depict how people search for an identity and affiliation, and feel a need to be part of their country. Destiny is apparently engaging with this matter.

“At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom” (Destiny, 2005, p.5), with these words of Jawaharlal Pandit Nehru, the play opens on the Eve of Indian independence in 1947, and introduces the celebrations of Indian people for getting liberated from British occupation. The first short scene, accordingly, represents the prologue to the rest of Destiny, and introduces four characters. Three of them are representatives of British rule of India, who prepare themselves to leave India to their native England, and the fourth is servant Khera, an Indian dumb, who seemingly knows more than he shows. These four characters are looked to as historical types: the liberal ruling elite, Colonel Chandler, the sergeant Turner, who prepares matters for the British withdrawal from India, Major Rolf, and the Indian Khera; those characters function primarily as tools that lead to the rise of fascism and racialism in the play.

“And I’ll be quite frank about the blacks. I hate ‘em. And no-one’s doing bugger all about it” (Destiny, 2005, p.41–2). The plot revolves around the elections of parliamentary accompanied by breaking out of strikes of immigrant workers against fascist and racial legislations. It has begun as a series of political observations not as a series of actions. Thirty years after the Indian independencestart scene two with the funeral of the ‘dignified’ Colonel Chandler, who later becomes a Tory MP. His seat in parliament is taken by his nephew Peter Crosby who is, like his uncle, aristocratic and liberal. Firstly depicted as a businessman interesting in Stock Market, Crosby undergoes a radical change through the play. He is changed from a moderate and tolerant politician, who seemingly is attracted to the national Forward Party and calls for not harassing and repress the colored and immigrant people, into a very aggressive and anti-immigrant. He even makes the slogan of his election campaign as “against any further coloured immigration” (Destiny, 2005, p. 83).

After returning from India, the sergeant Turner has become the bourgeois’ seller by opening an antique shop. He was increasingly threatened, by the Jewish Monty Goodman, to lose his business and work as the owner wants to develop his estate. Goodman, who is in reality not good man, threatens Turner, if he refuses to leave his shop that he will agitate the Caribbean workers against him. When Turner asks him about the reason of destroying his livelihood, Goodman replies that “Cos we, we make our money out of money. We covet on a global scale. We got cupidity beyond your wildest dreams of avarice. And you, the little man, the honest trader, know your basic handicap? You’re suffering a gross deficiency of greed” (Destiny, 2005, p. 28). At the end, Turner adapts the values of the National Forward Party, and becomes the candidate of the right party in the play.

Losing his seat against Peter Crosby, Major Rolf also turns to be a fascist and racial against the immigrants believing that Britain is in need of a strong, even if military, class war against colored workers. He even considers standing and tolerating with the non-white immigrants as a betrayal to his lower middle-class:

Who, on all counts, have been betrayed. Their property no longer secure. Their social status, now, irrelevant. And in the place of what’s important to them, national destiny and hope, we’ve given them . . . And for those – the people that I come from, that despair is a betrayal. (Destiny, 2005, p. 23)
Rolfe stands for a person who has obviously exploited the idea of patriotism and calls for strong military. Yet, after the end of war and Empire, his sense of national identity has been dispersed, and he experiences the humiliation of his national decline (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, p.117). It is not surprising that by the end of the play, he has become a rich businessman, and considers supporting the National Forward Party financially when they win in the parliament elections.

Taking up the British citizenship, Khera leads the Asian workers’ protest against discrimination and inequality in wages and promotion. Eventually, he succeeds in establishing a union to support the immigrant workers, and he manages in the position of leadership. Therefore, throughout establishing these four characters as pivotal to the action (Peter Crosby acting as surrogate for his uncle) and also as contrasting social types who react and participate in the political situation in Taddley according to their specific context and experiences, Edgar emphasizes the through line from the fall of empire starting in 1947 to the moment of reactionary racism and incipient fascism in 1976. (Reineltand Hewitt, 2011, p.117)

2.3 Edgar’s Adaption of Dramaturgical Techniques to His Agit-Prop Destiny

To keep the socio-political elements in his plays, Edgar truly relies upon the playwriting strategies of Brechtian epic theatre. Brecht employed a special technique to make his audience think and be conscious of the fact that they watch a play not a real life. Like Brecht, Edgar clearly adapted a number of techniques to his agit-prop such as juxtaposition of scenes with obvious images and actions, use of song or music to provoke an objectivity in the play, and representing complex thoughts through utilizing images, signs, symbols, and gesture; as well as Edgar involved the strategy of borrowing from other theatrical styles for the purpose of parody and satire for instance the use of Victorian melodrama to depict his critique of the capital system. Janelle Reinelt, in his The Political Theatre of David Edgar Negotiation (2011), states that even when Edgar shifted away from agit-prop, he remained skillful in these techniques and still depends on them to “communicate complex information economically and to historicize the events of narratives by juxtaposition and episodic structure” (p. 19). Reinelt further adds that Edgar has retained and refined in his dramatic works all the features of Brechtian epic theatre which involve “episodic structure, historicizing the incidents, use of Gestus, and alienation or distanciation effects” (p. 19).

It is no surprise that Edgar’s journalistic consciousness is apparently part of the play’s power and success. He relies on non-naturalistic verse narratives that definitely exemplify the characters’ transportation to England and place their lives against a specific historical canvas. For instance, the verses given to Colonel Chandler, Major Rolfe and Turner and Khera which all outset with time adverbials such as “In ‘48.”, “In ’47.”, “In ’48.” and “In ‘58.”, reflects Brecht’s dramatic form of epic theatre with its “sequential scenes rather than continuous narrative” for the purpose of “alienation over illusion, and political urgency” (Lennard and Luckhurst, 2002, p. 333). Adapted a typical epic theatre strategy to his play, Edgar starts his play with narrating events that occurred in the past, as well as managing to perform events on stage like pickets, strikes, and election confrontation. Therefore, in Destiny he had developed a dramatic form that moved beyond agitprop techniques without forsaking political point of view and advocacy, managing to embed social realist techniques of characterization within a broad epic structure of juxtaposition, historicization, and irony – in short, he had created his own version of the Brechtian form. (Reineltand Hewitt, 2011, p. 111)

Moreover, one of the striking technical strategies Edgar adopts in Destiny is the utilizing of visual representation as a critical part of his theatrical discourse, as in the first scene of the play, on the back wall of the stage, he calls for a painting representing the racial oppression of the Indian Mutiny of 1919. Treating serious subject matter, Destiny has been written in a social-realist form that makes it lack the “further dimension imparted by a more-instrumental view of language, capable of carrying us beyond documentary earnestness towards the Shakespearian scope its theme deserves” (Earnshaw, 2007, 232). Edgar himself stresses this point when he states that “the social-realist form has significant limitation when it comes to representing the contemporary world to itself”. (Edgar, 1987, p. ix)
It is worthy to mention that not only Brecht’s political theatre has a strong impact on Edgar’s dramatic art; George Bernard Shaw has apparently and deeply influenced his social realism. “Shaw’s ideas may have begun as jokes, but they did not end there” (Edgar cited in Lernard, 2002, p.314). Edgar has been affected by the effective Shaw’s theatre of ideas or his ‘discussion plays’ (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011, 24). The term, ‘the drama of discussion or ideas,’ mingles the contemporary moral problems with the comic, ironic tones and paradoxes. Shaw combines the discussion play with the mode of the English comedy. There is a focus on the dialogue of the characters who he endows them with special ideas that make them brilliant speakers. Yet the life of mind and intellect makes them lack the warmth of human beings. The dialogue, being the most important element in the play, conveys “consistent ideological implications about the consequences of capitalism as well as other contemporary problems, such as militarism, the equality of women, the relationship between husband and wife, and religion.” (Spiazzi and Tavella, 2009, no p.)

Undoubtedly, it is not surprising that Edgar resembles Shaw in his attitudes towards theatre of ideas. Like Shaw, Edgar prefers to write additional material as a background for his dramatic depiction such as writing prefaces or publishing accompanying articles and essays for his plays. As a consequence, Edgar relies on discussion scenes to convey his thoughts on and opinions on certain issues and subjects. This, of course, shows a deep connection between Edgar’s theatre and Shaw’s theatre. Moreover, “Shaw was able to address the contradictions and difficulties that all thinking socialists come up against, but rarely feel to articulate.” (Edgar, 2009, p.27)

**Conclusion**

In the conclusion, it is striking to acknowledge that Edgar has made his unforgettable touches in the political theatre especially the agit-prop theatre. According to him, theatre is used as a powerful weapon to explore human plights and struggles in their societies. He considers theatre as of an aesthetic modality for engaging with the most pressing social issues of his day. His agit-prop play, *Destiny*, provides its audience with a profound understanding of the impacts of the fall of British Empire and the consequent immigration on British citizens, who turn to be brutally racial and fascist against the Asian immigrants and third world workers. Edgar further demonstrates in his play the fact that the racial discrimination against immigrants is not only practiced by British White people, but rather is developed through acts of legislation of 1960s like the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 that imposed limitations and restricted non-white immigration to the UK through a system of employment coupons. It then becomes obviously that Edgar, as a political and socialist critic, wants to deliver a warning against a serious fascist presence in British politics. In *Destiny*, Edgar attempts to critique the hesitation of the major parties in Britain, the Tories and Labor party, and depicting the increasing strength and power of the fascist side represented by the National Front (NF), which Edgar recognizes it as Nazi organization for its brutal and racial principles and its repeated attempts to expel the immigrants outside Britain. As a representative of its day (the mid-seventies), *Destiny* is engaging in persuading and drawing the attention of people to fascism and its destructive consequences. Although he abandons agit-prop theatre in the 1980s, he stresses, in more than one occasion, that its influence and dramatic devices have strongly affected his second generation plays.

**References**


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Author Information

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<tr>
<th>Zeena Salim Hammoudi</th>
<th>Susan Raheem Rahman</th>
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<td>English Department- College of Education for Human Sciences- University of Dayala</td>
<td>English Department- College of Education for Human Sciences- University of Dayala</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed**

English Department- College of Education for women-
Tikrit University, Iraq