

Power and Resistance: Disappointment of Socialism in Howard Brenton's *Magnificence*

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*The Events of May 1968 influenced the stage of the British playwright Howard Brenton substantially. He paid much attention to the aftermaths of May 1968 in his plays to revision the strengths and pitfalls of the Events. In his play *Magnificence* (1973), he stages contemporary British social history under the influence of May 1968 along with the terrorist attack against then British Minister of Employment, Robert Carr, by representing a group of young socialists squatting empty houses and exchanging their socialist and idealistic ideas with one another. This study, therefore, aims to explore the way in which Brenton's drama revisions the defeat of the socialist ideals of May 1968 Events by dramatizing lack of harmony and conflicting opinions regarding the modes of public resistance among the dissenters. The study also articulates that Brenton's historical drama grants him a license to make use of the recent past, May 1968 and also embodied as Lenin appeared in the middle of the play, to evaluate the present and express strong disapproval of the British conservatism which has completely silenced any dissident voice in the British society. The study applies Foucauldian notions of power and discourse, as well as close reading of the play to fulfill the research objectives.*

Keywords: Historical drama, Howard Brenton, May 1968, Michel Foucault, Socialism

Introduction

After the Second World War, there was a renewal of interest in writing history plays among the British playwrights. This twentieth century historical playwriting, as Harben (1988: 1-2) observes, which is to some extent in affinity with the popular Elizabethan and Jacobean historical theatre, attempts to stage the past in order to re-evaluate and re-interpret it. What the postwar playwrights have tried to achieve is the argument that there is no settled truth in history. History and the writing of it are hence subjective realms in which there are multiple interpretations that can be offered for a single event of past.

Howard Brenton's theatrical career which began in the mid-1960s was under great influence of the civil unrest of May 1968 in France. At that time, he was present in Paris, and thus gained a first-hand experience of the mass strikes and the confrontation between the French police force and the protesters. One of the important outcomes of May 1968 was the emergence of new social movements which was discussed in detail by Buechler (1999) and Scott (1990) in their monographs. Playwrights then were able to stage sensitive and controversial issues of their day, and to question the conventional assumptions of their societies which potentially were ideological. In this regard, Brenton formed serious attacks on the British right-wing policies by practicing a socialist theater. Zeifman (1993: 132) holds that Brenton challenges those policies by demythologizing the historical

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figures and events alongside of his socialist thinking on his stage. Freshwater (2009: 89) notes that Brenton has a predilection for dramatization of uncomfortable situations and "painful confrontations with previously unsuspected truths." A case in point is the encounter of Lenin, a historical figure, with the young leftist squatters in *Magnificence*, the play by which Brenton gained considerable attention in 1973.

Magnificence represents a post-1968 English society where a group of socialist dissenters desperately struggle against the existing injustices of their society. Boon (1991: 77) states that *Magnificence* is "concerned with the aftermath of the *événements*" of May 1968, though it is written five years later. In his other study, Boon (2015) mentions Brenton's use of social-political experience to develop his socialist stage. Brenton shows in *Magnificence*, as it is typical of his other 1970s plays, a staging of the past and the present at the same time to use both against one another (Pennino 2018). Rabey (2003: 109), moreover, maintains that the play's main concern is twofold: the opposition between socialism and English fascism represented by a revolutionary Jed and a Tory MP, and an evaluation of "revolutionary impulses". *Magnificence* is a piece that Brenton re-evaluates and re-thinks what went wrong in May 1968 and how the suppression of the authorities affected deeply his generation; thus, in an essay written in 1975 he expressed his idea on May 1968 and the emergence of radical playwrights as follows:

"May 1968 was crucial. It was a great watershed and directly affected me. A lot of the ideas in *Magnificence* came straight out of the writing of that time in Paris, and the idea of official life being like a screen...May 68 disinherited my generation in two ways. First it destroyed any remaining affection for official culture. The situationists showed how all of them, the dead greats, are corpses on our backs – Goethe, Beethoven – how gigantic the fraud is. But it also, secondly, destroyed the notions of personal freedom, anarchist political action. And it failed. It was defeated. A generation dreaming of a beautiful utopia was kicked – kicked awake and not dead. I've got to believe not kicked dead. May 68 gave me a desperation I still have." (Brenton 1989: 20)

Taken as a whole, this study, in the three sections below, articulates that Brenton's *Magnificence* serves multiple political purposes including re-evaluation of the socialist principles in the British society in the aftermath of May 1968 and the reasons that a transformation based on leftism never occurred in the 1970s. By using Foucauldian concepts of power and discourse, as well as character analysis, it next investigates Brenton's representation of power relations to cite as the main reason of the leftists' disappointment in the realm of politics in the 1970s UK. Finally, the study explores that terrorism or any form of violent resistance is rejected by Brenton as the hindrance to the effectuality of socialist belief in the political arena.

Discussion

Economic Inequality and Disharmony of Resistant Strategies

Before exploring the play critically, it seems essential to briefly mention the social and political context of Britain in the early 1970s. At the time of Brenton's composing of *Magnificence*, Britain was experiencing grave rapid changes in social, economic and political realms. Sensitive issues like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament started afresh; political activities of British young counter-culture were critical in their continuity; a clash between British soldiers and civil rights strikers in 1972 in Northern Ireland resulted in thirteen casualties – referred to as the Bloody Sunday – are striking cases in point (Rabey 2003: 109-110). As Burns (2009: 222) mentions, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s sexual minorities and feminist movements strengthened along with a resurgence of Irish nationalism.

Apart from these issues, nation's economic problem was a source of inspiration for Brenton to compose his play. In this respect, Britain's first urban guerrilla group, Angry Brigade's attack on the house of then Government Minister of Employment Robert Carr in 1971 was the incident that Brenton dramatized in his play to question violent mode of resistance by the radical leftists. It is chiefly for this reason that the words like "empty houses" and "terrorism" are repeated throughout *Magnificence*. Along with staging this contemporary historical event, as has been stated, the civil unrest of May 1968 was another policy that Brenton adopted in his play to explore the reasons of the failure of a left-wing revolution in the UK. In addition to this, the corruption of a politician and the brutality of police were other concerns for Brenton to dramatize.

Magnificence involves two plots. In the first plot, there is a group of young squatters – Jed, Cliff, Will, Veronica, and Mary – that illegally occupy the empty houses in London. They all belong to the middle classes, and they are socialist dissenters. Brenton stages their ongoing struggle not only with the authorities, but also with one another. As soon as they squat a derelict house, they start to reveal their conflicting opinions about how they should oppose political corruption of the authorities. The second plot begins when the police attack the squatters and Jed is imprisoned as a consequence. In this plot, two corrupt and homosexual politicians – Babs and Alice – are presented, and between the two the latter becomes a target for Jed's revenge at the end.

From the outset, the image of the house is significant in the text. Empty houses presented in the play denote the difficult economic conditions of England in the 1970s when many individuals of middle and lower classes were homeless, as Will explicitly mentions: "Look at this place. Empty. And how many other places, good houses, all over the city...Empty" (Brenton 1989: 42). Yet the image of house has another importance, and this is it can nurture the imaginative and idealist thinking of the squatters. It can provide them an opportunity to "spray slogans and hang banners" in the house, not streets (Boon 1991: 77). As a group of socialist dissidents, they are on a collision course, and lack harmony. To use Gaventa (1980: 6), "decision-making" and acting as a unified group indicate

people's interests, and it is evident that the young socialists simply lack this. Cliff is critical of Jed's aggressive actions; Veronica is hesitant about their role in public, and Will is irritable and aggressive, especially toward Jed. The manner of their squatting is a case in point. After an unsuccessful fiddling with the door, Will seeks to "bash it down" (Brenton 1989: 36) which is in contrast with by Jed's peaceful suggestion of entering silently. Will's violent tendency will be displayed more openly later in the play.

In the beginning of the play, the presence of disciplinary power can be seen. Foucault (1977: 89) maintains that from the French Revolution onward, power mechanism has profoundly changed, and the disciplinary or bourgeois form of it emerged. This form of power, as Foucault continues, is at odds with monarchy or royal power which exercises from top to bottom; instead, it operates from the bottom to the top (1980: 94). Of the main features of this form of power is the use of disciplinary means of punishment including surveillance, monitoring, prison and the discourse of law. The essential function of discipline is to reduce the encounter of power with its subjects; thus, an indirect exercise of the power over the subjects can be practiced (Foucault 1977: 215). It is based on this characteristic that the neighbors inform the police about the presence of the squatters in the play, and the group's protest inside the walls, not on the streets.

As they enter the house, their lack of harmony reveals itself. In fighting against power discourse they do not have a clear and collective resistance strategy. On the other hand, power uses many discourses to be exercised in a society. According to Lotringer (1996: 224), these discourses not only produce power, but also make it more stable and integrated; hence, resistance should have the same operational effectiveness as power does. As an illustration, Mary has prepared a banner to hang out the window which is questioned by Veronica who prefers to write slogans on the inside walls:

"Veronica: What are we going to do with it?

Mary: Ang it out the window.

Veronica: For all the World to see?

Mary: That's the idea." (Brenton 1989: 39)

In order to understand Brenton's representation of characters' difference of opinion and their disharmony, it is useful to classify them into three groups: 1) Jed and Cliff, 2) Will and Veronica, and 3) Mary. Firstly, Jed and Cliff have taken the responsibility of everyone's safety and of maintaining their secrecy. In this respect, Cliff barricades the door inside, then he observes the street activities from the mere window opening outside when Jed asks "Barricade the front door, eh Cliff?" (Brenton 1989: 39). They are "virtually silent" and are "the characters with the least to say" (Boon 1991: 39). Quite opposite, Will and Veronica are energetic, talkative and are likely to be effective in the situation.

The second character classification is Will and Veronica that mostly dominated the first scene of the play. To begin with, Will is the only one whose attitude toward resistance to the British government tends to be aggressive and violent: he is an exact stage adaptation of an outrageous protester of May 1968. In the opening scene he forcefully takes the paint spray from Veronica so as to write

"ANARCHY FARM" on the inside wall (Brenton 1989: 38). In other words, he is an anarchist and a fighter who later in the play will be the first one to physically attack the bailiff, Mr. Slaughter, and his constables to not be evicted from their squatness. At the moment of the bailiff's attack to evict the squatters, Will laying his ear on the ground requests "please, Mr Bailiff. Make the blood flow," and to Veronica he says "Pricks and kicks I can understand" (Brenton 1989: 46). His mode of resistance, as it seems patently obvious, is a physical and violent confrontation with the law enforcement. On the contrary, Veronica is regarded as a newcomer and a stranger to the group. In her current political activity, she is in two minds about staying or leaving the group. She most of the time drowns herself in a verbal debate with other members of the group to be somewhat in charge and be superior. Although she encourages others to stand still and adopt an effective strategy of resistance, she, at the same time, questions the ulterior motive of the group's political activism: "...we social activists...we're just a passing phenomenon, which leaves fag butts on the floor" (Brenton 1989: 60). Therefore, this pair mostly seeks to be superior one physically and the other verbally.

Finally, apart from any other members of the groups is Jed's pregnant partner, Mary. She usually sits or stands on the center of the stage, and silently watches others' activities. As mentioned above, her mode of resistance is to engage the public with themselves; for instance, her hanging of a banner out the window. She is almost ignored by others; they take no notice of Mary's definition of political protest (her banner hanging). Similarly, in the second half of the play, Jed rejects her to not take his vengeance on Alice. Briefly speaking, Boon holds that, despite the fact that as a dissident group they are energetic and self-indulgent, they write slogans and hang banner inside the house, indicating their inward-looking and hesitancy towards "magnificent" political gesture (Boon 1986: 215).

At the same time, the exercise of power cannot be ignored completely, with regard to the squatters' inward-looking and political resistance inside the house. It seems that fear of being confronted and suppressed by disciplinary power can be one of the reasons of their squatting. In this respect, Deleuze (1989: 26) holds that modern societies can be interpreted as disciplinarian, and power relations are exercised merely by powerful forces in the society, which would result in creating an authoritarian society. There is constant observation made by the disciplinary power, which provokes the group's fear of being in view; in effect, Veronica's desperate statements loudly announce the similarity between a person and a fox, and a world that is suddenly deprived of vivacious lives on the surface:

"Homeless in the city. And where are they? Why aren't there tents all over the Hyde Park? Human foxholes in Kensington Gardens? But the people are there poked in somewhere. Like to hide litter, ramming it into the cracks in the walls. Ramming people, into cracks in the walls." (Brenton 1989: 42)

Veronica, here, refers to the futility of Will's writing slogans on the wall. The people, in her view, are not really present in public. She virtually declares to the audience that "don't let write messages and slogans" (Brenton 1989: 42) because for her opposition should be aroused with reference to the issue of "homelessness" (Boon 1986: 215).

To draw a conclusion, Brenton first represents Will's anger toward British society and its authorities. He, then, puts Veronica's ideas forward. Owing to the fact that she is a newcomer, she mentions both the futility of the group's initial acts, the occupation of the house, writing slogans, and hanging banners in the house for the future generation to understand them. In other words, she is doubtful about the group's political aims. As Sheridan (1980: 183) notes, just as power contains plurality of modes and discourse, resistance ought to be as such; in this connection, each squatter adopts a different aim and mode of resistance, which not only organizes them as a group of political dissidents, but also, at the same time, hinders their efforts to constitute a cohesive group.

The Modern Forms of Disciplinary Power: Law Enforcement

Two law enforcement agents, Mr. Slaughter and Constable, appear on the stage to evacuate the squatters from their place. These two authority figures belong to the discourse of law. What is significant here is Slaughter's language and attitude toward the squatters as well as the meaning of his name which is killing people or animals in a wide scale. As agents of power, they regard the squatters as disruptive and "inefficient behavior" (Gaventa 1980: 7). Brenton shows that how the discourse of law should be defined and implemented throughout the society, and how individuals are understood by the existing laws. Here, the image of the police in public's eye is also another Brenton's concern. There can be seen here a direct tie between the use of language and laws. Fletcher (2003: 85) writes that the discourse of law can justify carrying out violent acts and encounters. Hence, Slaughter assures Constable:

"The Bailiff charter, mate. (Fiercely) I am going to pull this off. One last stroke. Ousting our friends up there. I am going to bust that lot, cleanly, utterly. A matter of wounded pride...Don't worry I'm a professional. A good dustman. Just pick up the bin up, and *bang*." (Brenton 1989: 58)

The primary objective of law is to provide and secure the social orders. Foucault points out that, from the Middle Ages to the present era, the exercise of power in the Western societies is by the discourse of law (1978: 87). He adds that the essential function of law is to legitimize sovereignty and authority; in other words, law has to make impact on individuals to maintain the order of the ruling class. Slaughter and Constable are authorized to forcibly evict young socialists. Before their attack, the group realizes that there will be war against them, so they begin singing: "Warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants, evil gentry. They are blind and all is dark before them" (Brenton 1989: 50). The reaction of police Constable to their singing is interesting; he tells Slaughter that they are "like a churchload of old women, singing, All Things Bright and Beautiful" (Brenton 1989: 50), which in a sense undermines them.

Brenton's first-hand experience of May 1968 in Paris provoked him to stage Slaughter's wave of violence against the squatters. The law enforcement's exertion of violence is to marinate domination and order for the benefit of the lawmakers

and authorities; it is also a way of concealing the existing injustices and silencing the dissident voices (Foucault 1978: 88). As follows, from the exchange between Slaughter and Constable about their jobs, audiences understand that all of their previous evictions were done by violence and physical force: "I've got murder in my heart...That's a way of putting it. Murder..." (Brenton 1989: 58). In the end, in Jed's words, "the Bailiff and his boys" in no time attack the squatters (Brenton 1989: 70).

The clash between the agents of law enforcement and the squatters ends in disaster. The fight between Will and Slaughter eventually leads to Mary's loss of her child. The group is dispersed and Jed is sent to prison for a period of nine months. Yet during the clash between the police and the group, Veronica's burst of desperate expressions is significant; she draws the audience's attention to futility of their political activity and aim:

"(Near tears). Liberation City? (She draws back the tears.) I loathe us. I loathe all the talks we had. That we'd really do it. Come down to the people whom it really hits...I loathe our stupid, puerile view of the world...I loathe what we've descended to here...ten days with fleas and the tin opener lost, never for once questioning...in any way...for us it's come down to sitting on a stinky lavatory for ten days...'Mobilize the people?' We can't mobilize a tin opener..." (Brenton 1989: 65-66)

What Brenton dramatizes in *Magnificence*, regarding the first half of the play, is to arrive at this conclusion that the current modes or strategies of resistance after the events of May 1968 are of no potential effectiveness in the present British context. One compelling reason is, as Gaventa puts it, "the sense of powerlessness" experienced by the British young socialists (Gaventa 1980: 17), due to their continual defeat and suppression which made them entirely ineffective in adopting a coherent resistant strategy.

Petrol Bomb: Terrorism against the Power Agents

After serving his prison term, Jed's attitude and his political position changed sharply. The second half of the play is about Jed's revenge. From a peaceful dissident, he transforms into a revolutionary hardliner. His obsession with revenge separates him from Mary and other characters in the play like Cliff and Will. Jed's characterization closely resembles him to a revolutionary street protester of May 1968 in Paris (Rabey 2003: 109). As a comparison, Will has changed into a "drug-raddled parody of his early idealistic self" (Boon 1991: 77); at this time, all his idealism is at an end. Jed forcefully attempts to accompany Will in this radicalism. Will resentfully asks Jed: "What were you trying to do? Elevate the whole of Brixton Goal? Turn it upside down? Shake all the nasty creepy crawlies out?...Sorry...I felt moved...at seeing you again" (Brenton 1989: 86). The radicalism of Jed is rejected by both Cliff and Will. Even in the fifth scene, Brenton represents Lenin to persuade Jed not to pursue his evil plan of terrorism, and yet Lenin's leftism is rejected by Jed's radicalism (Brenton 1989: 85). Brenton by representing Jed's radical transformation puts the radicalism and violent resistance seriously into question. Brenton is also critical of the British

ruling class and power authorities that have silenced the dissenters and suppressed any dissident politics that is inconformity with their ideological stances. As Bull (1984: 50) observes, Brenton's play is a rejection of radicalism and terrorism as well as celebrating a lost idealism promoted by May 1968 socialist protesters.

What is apparent, prison increases his anger and obsession with vengeance. The function of prison is also questioned in the text. Prison, here, is ineffective in a way that a lawbreaker transforms into a revolutionary terrorist whose obsession is to assassinate a corrupt Cabinet minister – Alice. The image of prison in the play has not properly functioned as a deterrent and modifier in Jed's behavior. It obviously nurtured his terrorism which eventually leads him to his tragic destiny at the end of the play (Boon 1991: 79). Here, Foucault explains how an effective prison system might create radicalism in a prisoner's attitude:

[...] this was organised around the prison system, and the bourgeoisie erected an ideological barrier around those who went to prison or who had been in prison (an ideology about crime, criminals, theft, the mob, degenerates, "animals") which was in part linked with racialism. (1980: 17)

After his release, Jed forces Will to accompany him for his vengeance. The previous violent behavior of Will is now affecting Jed, and because of that Will calls him "Speedy Gonzales" (Brenton 1989: 86). Speedy Gonzales is an animated mouse character whose high speed and dexterity enables him to deal with complex situations. This is how Will refers to Jed's radical extremism. Moreover, in order to force Will to join him, Jed presses Will's wrist hard and puts off his shirt as a practice to seizure of Alice in the last Scene. Here, Jed exercises power over Will to control his body physically; this is the very basic definition of power: to have control over a subject (Foucault 1977: 57).

The two political figures in the play are Babs and Alice represented as corrupt politicians by Brenton. Babs attempts to transfer power to his younger counterpart, Alice, in the fourth scene. This power transference is the process of creating a new direction in the British politics which, in Boon's view, a Tory as Babs is going to be supplanted "by the new English Fascist" – whose embodiment is Alice (Boon 1991: 87). Brenton represents this new form of politics, the English Fascism, in his other plays as well; a case in point is *The Churchill Play* (1974) in which the late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill is responsible for the formation of a highly Fascist society that marked the end of individual liberty and freedom of expression. The young Alice is the new public face of the ruling class, and since he is related to housing program, he becomes Jed's target for revenge.

Ultimately, Jed seizes Alice in his garden as calling him "Mr Public Man" (Brenton 1989: 100). After handcuffing him, Jed puts a mask with a gelignite bomb over Alice's head. Jed equips himself with a bomb to take revenge. This is due to the fact that he wants to remove Alice completely—not only physically, but also publically. He would like to strike fear by a blast, so he uses a gelignite bomb to destroy the smiley face on the TV (Boon 1991: 78). As Brenton points out in an interview, in May 1968 one of the utterly devastating consequences of bombing is to observe blood-spattered streets with no individual care to collect the severed

bodies (Hayman 1976: 57). As a result, Jed tries to destroy a media image which is an ideological means of power.

Jed and Alice's struggle is also significant in a sense that both sides attempt to empower one another. Alice by his art of speech and manipulation confidently tries to stop Jed's from his action. Yet the bomb accidentally goes off and both die instantly. At the end of play, Jed's revolutionary terrorism is rejected and rebuked by Cliff, a character who is mostly silent throughout the play and speaks the final words for Jed:

"Jed. The waste. I can't forgive you that.

A pause.

The waste of your anger. Not the murder, murder is common enough. Not the violence, violence is everyday. What I can't forgive you Jed, my dear, dead friend, is the waste." (Brenton 1989: 106)

In sum, Breton in *Magnificence* stages the revolutionary socialism of the young generation after the events of May 1968 and, as Patterson (2003: 95) states, his commitment to this kind of theatrical practice. Brenton by using contemporary historical material represents two antithetical discourses of dissidence and power. He blames a group of young socialists for their lack of harmony and agreement in having common political aims, particularly Jed whose act of terrorism somehow marks the failure of socialism in being effective in the British context (Boon 1986, 1991). He also attacks the authorities in power, particularly the corrupt politicians that have silenced any dissident voices in Britain (Rabey 2003). *Magnificence* is a drama of longing for a unity in having the right, effective mode of resistance to power when, for the young generation of the British, the right-wing policy was no longer considered effective.

Conclusion

The student uprising in Paris in 1968, known as the Events of May, had major impacts on the British theatre, specifically the stage of the prominent playwright Howard Brenton. It, moreover, inspired Brenton to historicize this stage to treat with historical awareness of his society, to launch attacks against the power institutions, and to express approval of socialism. In his socialist-historical drama *Magnificence* (1973), apart from his criticism of the British conservatism, he also questions the left-wing policy of public resistance of his contemporaries. In his play, by staging a group of young socialist squatters occupying illegally the empty houses of London, Brenton criticizes housing policy and the unpleasant economic condition of British society in the early 1970s. Side by side with the squatters, Brenton stages the law enforcement, Mr. Slaughter and the Constable, as well to show the bitter confrontation of the British government with any voices of dissent.

The play is divided into two halves: the first deals with oppressive and physical aspects of power such as the police force and the second mainly focuses on Jed's revenge and the smiling face of power in the media, embodied as the corrupt MP Alice, is bitterly critical of the disciplinary forms of power theorized

by Michel Foucault in the 1970s – forms such as surveillance and prison. Accordingly, in order to achieve effective modes of resistance, Brenton puts some into trial, from writing slogans and hanging banner, i.e., the peaceful ways of opposition, to more radical and pragmatic approach like Jed's petrol bomb attack at the close of the play. The playwright condemns Jed's terrorism, his violent form of protest, and associates it with one of the abject failures of the socialist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Overall speaking, *Magnificence* shows that lack of harmony and effective decision-making among the socialists, as well as the suppression and application of force by power mechanisms such as the police might be the main causes of the failure of the leftist movements in the UK.

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