

Conclusion

By drawing from political, aesthetic and sociological theory, this thesis has addressed in each individual chapter how British playwrights respond to the issue of being an artist.

With Stoppard, the question of the responsibility of the artist and the relationship between art and politics have been at the forefront of his oeuvre throughout the 1970s. In this period, during which socially and politically committed drama was highly valued, his philosophical and scientific inquiries about the dilemma of the artist and the relationship between art and politics were blended with pastiche and parody. Using such artforms, the playwright can present his message without communicating a particular personal opinion. These, in turn, are theatrical tactics by which the playwright can attack the prevailing political system without being censored.

Though Stoppard has championed both the elements of form and content in literary works, he pays particular attention to the aesthetic form of the work. He considers it to be the writer's only duty. In his later works, however, form is in the service of the content.

In spite of Stoppard's refusal to interpret his plays as a form of political debate, his works from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Squaring the Circle* (1979), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* (1977), *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979), *Professional Foul* (1977) and *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), reveal his political commitment. This commitment is viewed through the heated argument over the role of the artist in society and his relationship to the ruling political institution. In his two plays about artists: *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974), Stoppard straddles the aesthetic-political debate over the function of art and the responsibility of the artist. By using artist characters who have different views on art, Stoppard explores multiple aspects of art and its function within society. After all, his preference is to question it more than to create a fixed ideological position. However, in Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* and *Travesties*, the two aspects of art and the artist as a socialist and communist are revealed. In the characters of James Joyce, Tristan Tzara, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) and Henry Carr, Stoppard discusses the inseparable link between aesthetics and commitment. This is done by comparing the different views of the characters who either believe in social and political commitment or do not, such as Tristan Tzara.

Though he is known for his ambiguous views on aesthetics as well as ethical and political issues, Stoppard believes in the potential of art for social change in a long-term commitment. His faith in art to bring about social change springs from his close relationship with the playwright and revolutionary Czech dissident, Václav Havel. Accordingly, he has become an active human rights supporter, defending justice and freedom. In doing so, Stoppard has become an outspoken opponent of censorship and the jailing of political dissidents who call for freedom of expression, especially in the Eastern Bloc. Clearly, in championing Carr's views in *Travesties*, Stoppard rejects anything restricting art or the artist. He further condemns any act which represses and limits free expression in writing. So, again and again, he returns to this subject through testing the dialectical relationship of his artist characters with the ruling political party.

This theme of using the artist as a character to highlight the responsibility of the artist preoccupied Stoppard during the 1970s and continued in later decades. In *The Invention of Love* (1997), for example, Stoppard again uses an artist as the main character. This time he is concerned with A.E. Housman, the classical scholar and poet. Here, Stoppard discusses the power of poetry and the validity of classical thoughts about the role of art in life. His dream of death and rebirth again as a young man (AEH), newly enrolled as a student at Oxford, is a personal discovery of himself as an artist. The young AEH's struggle to navigate the various schools of thought and diversity of opinions at Oxford at that time – ranging from John Ruskin's love of the Gothic to Walter Pater's appreciation of the Renaissance, to Benjamin Jowett's attempts to advance classical education as training for a life in public service, and later to Oscar Wilde – reveals Stoppard's belief in the difficulty of assigning a particular function to art and the artist.

In *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), Stoppard revisits the question of the efficacy of art on politics and the freedom of expression. It is set in the politically charged years between the demise of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring in the late 1960s and the Velvet Revolution in 1990, which heralded the end of Communist reign and the re-emergence of a democratic and liberal Czechoslovakia under Havel. The play serves as a note on the power of art to challenge oppression and champion freedom of expression. Stoppard uses the figure of the Piper, a mysterious youth of the Greek god Pan (god of flocks and shepherds as well as rustic music) which later turns out to be Syd Barrett, founding member of the rock band Pink Floyd to show the agitated relationship between art and politics.

The shifting setting between Prague and Cambridge, England, leads the characters to fall into a heated discussion over many different themes. Among them is the erosion of freedom and the importance of music in securing society. Stoppard manifests this through delving into the lives of people living under a totalitarian regime. The characters include Jan, a young Czech PhD student at Cambridge and rock music fan, who is appalled by the repressive regime in his home country, and his British Marxist professor, Max, who unrepentantly continues to believe in the Soviet ideal. Jan is not only deprived of freedom of speech but also his favourite music group, the Plastic People of the Universe. The band is placed under increasing suspicion by the authorities for its refusal to conform to the oppressive social norms dictated by the regime and the members are jailed. In so doing, everything which stimulates people's thinking, such as books and music, is banned under the regime. Through exploring the relationship between art and politics, Stoppard takes the arrest of the Plastic People of the Universe at a concert in 1976 as a trigger for social change which leads to the overthrow of the Communist Party in 1989. As in *Travesties*, the politicians are always afraid of art as a means of raising awareness by instilling particular ideological viewpoints. Because of this fear, the technological advances of surveillance and censorship are everywhere. The British TV series *Big Brother* is worth mentioning here.¹

Near the end of *Rock 'n' Roll*, Jan's argument about the function of words reveals the power of art. The potential connotation of words becomes an obsession for the ruling political party. This reminds us of the heated argument among Lenin's Comrades over Bela's cartoons, in Barker's *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming*, where the power of words is connected to tanks and planes. So, in Prague, any sign of free expression, such as music and newspapers, is subject to censorship by the ruling political party.

During the 1980s, the theme of censorship and the lack of freedom of expression is dominated and represented by the artist figures as main characters who find themselves in conflict with adverse external forces. Barker's *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* (1981) and *Scenes from an Execution* (1984) are true expressions of the artist who finds himself under the burden of two sister institutions: the state and the church. As a playwright, Barker does not believe in

¹ Pieter Wagenaar and Kees Boersma, "Soft Sister and the Rationalization of the World: The Driving Forces behind Increased Surveillance", *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, v. 30, n. 2 (Jun., 2008): 184-206. See also Sunette Lötter, "Broadcast indecency: should Big Brother be watching?" *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, v. 36, n. 3 (November 2003): 346-364. To highlight the term of "Big Brother", see Jérôme Bourdon, "Self-Despotism: Reality Television and the New Subject of Politics", *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, v. 49, n. 1 (Spring 2008): 66-82.

social and political commitment in drama. Instead, he emphasises the idea that the artist is committed only to his imagination. Like Stoppard, Barker uses theatre to discuss and test different ideas without taking any particular side. But while the political theme can be grasped with Stoppard, in Barker's case it is somehow difficult. His emphasis on the individual response rather than the collective left his theatre open to accusations of 'elitism'. Barker's insistence on the importance of imagination in writing made his works somewhat challenging for the audience.

As it is earlier noted, during Margaret Thatcher's time, British theatre was not only subject to funding cuts but also to censorship if the plays produced did not meet the requirements of the market. Thus, British theatre underwent a fundamental shift not only in terms of funding but also in theatre discourse and its relationships with the public sphere. So, using the artist as a character was not only a way of showing the potential dilemmas the artist faced during this decade but also a means of attacking the political system in its endeavours to contain free expression. The journey of Barker's character, Bela, in *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* reflects Barker's belief in the artistic freedom of the artist. Bela, and later Galactia, in *Scenes from an Execution* are artists who commit to their imagination in art. They try hard to reflect what they feel and see regardless of the political party's desires. It is important to them to report the truth without beautifying it. Moreover, Barker's choice of Bela as a cartoonist is significant. In contrast with other types of arts, cartoons have an immediate impact on the viewer. The sensitive nature of this art form, as it carries severe criticism, means that the cartoonist should be careful, especially when dealing with iconic or religious figures.

The issue of art and the responsibility of the artist still preoccupies Barker. This theme is further explored in *I Saw Myself* (2008). As in *Scenes from an Execution*, the artist character, Sleev, wants to confess her scandalous sexual history by weaving a great tapestry after her husband's death in the war. In so doing, she provokes the fear and hostility of all those around her who have never dare to admit it. Like Galactia, Sleev insists on her right to depict her personal experience and individual vision of war, without paying attention to the collective experience of others. The emotional truth Sleev tries hard to convey represents Barker's view of artistic freedom. For Barker, theatre is a place where individual imagination is released. It is not to provide a message or any utilitarian value. In her article, "I Saw Myself: artist and critic meet in the mirror", Mary Karen Dahl argues that "Art and artist do not hold up a mirror to nature: they make the world. [...] *I Saw Myself* uses an extended staged metaphor of weaving to embody the artist's creative process – a process that requires confrontation, negotiation, self-

scrutiny and sacrifice to determine not just what story to tell, but who will tell it – who will literally *take centre stage*”.²

In his latest play, *In the Depths of Dead Love* (Print Room, 2013), Barker clearly reveals his philosophy on the responsibility of the artist as one who does not involve himself in political and ideological issues. Unlike other writers, Barker’s aim is not to persuade or influence people’s attitudes through his message. As the play centres around a failed and exiled poet, Chin, who presides over a bottomless well that is used for suicides, the producing theatre – The Print Room in London – has been accused of what protesters call ‘yellow face’ casting. The production lacks any East Asian actors despite the fact that it is set in ancient China. So, it is seen as a form of marginalization of Asian actors in the UK. Though radical change is connected with cultural diversity, Barker works with metaphors in the sense that though the play is set in China, it does not mean a particular place but everywhere. For Barker, the artist’s artistic freedom gives him the right to choose to do whatever he wants.³

The theatrical productions of the 1990s were a negative reaction to the legacy of Thatcherism. A remarkable event which emerged from the 1980s was the increasing number of female playwrights who shared, with male playwrights, a resentment of Thatcher’s free market policy. This policy made it difficult for female playwrights to become established within British theatre because of economic and social reasons. Moreover, male playwrights and directors dominated the key responsibilities in the main theatrical institutions. Consequently, female playwrights began to protest against their marginalization and under-representation. This dilemma led several British female playwrights, such as Pam Gems, Caryl Churchill, Charlotte Keatley and Timberlake Wertenbaker, to discuss the perilous situation of women in British theatre. In a number of plays written between the late 1980s and the 2000s, Wertenbaker used theatre to show how intellectual female artists are sometimes marginalized by society and by male artists. In Wertenbaker’s case, using the artist as a character helps to bring about a discussion of gender issues. In order to do this, Wertenbaker went back through history to show that the marginalization of women has deep roots and still continues. She, like Barker, uses history or historical incidents to comment on modern and contemporary issues such as the crisis in British

² Mary Karen Dahl, “I Saw Myself: artist and critic meet in the mirror”, ed. David Ian Rabey and Sarah Goldingay in *Howard Barker’s Art of Theatre: Essays on his plays, poetry and production work* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 129.

³ Barker comments on the use of characters and settings in the play by referring to the importance of imagination and artistic freedom which do not admit ‘literalness’, < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jan/20/howard-barker-interview-in-the-depths-of-dead-love>> (accessed 01 March 2017).

theatre and the role of the artist. Her adaptation of the classical myth of Philomele in *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), for example, is a case in point. Also *Our Country's Good* (1988) is Wertebaker's masterpiece in showing the theatre as a place where the lost voices of women are heard. However, the marginalization of female artists takes on a new form in her later plays such as *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991) and *The Line* (2009) by discussing the relationship between male and female artists. In both plays, Fiona and Suzanne are struggling to find their own path, far from the patronage of male artists. No doubt, Fiona and Suzanne can succeed, but what Stephen and Degas are aware of is that in such a materialist atmosphere creativity will be affected by market ethics. So they remain stuck to the traditional values of art. Stephen, like John Clare in Edward Bond's *The Fool* (1975), seems discontent with the modern values of materialism to create effective art. In both plays, one can see characters who resent living with those who are illiterate or those who glorify materialism over creativity. Instead, they prefer to look for those who can understand and invest in the work of creativity. But as the nature of living demands, every activity is a consumptive process which means that the creative artist should take the preference of the audience into consideration.

Compared to earlier playwrights, who also tackle the subject of art and the artist, we see that Wertebaker has her own unique path. Unlike Stoppard and Barker, for instance, Wertebaker's plays provide an authentic account of the situation of women artists. Moreover, the dilemma of art and the female artist is seen through larger social contexts. In other words, the core of the dilemma is scrutinized by Wertebaker through a multitude of lenses as she engages with issues like marginalization, family, sex, class, race and the post-colonial ideologies of the medical and educational system.

While Barker's theatre is described as 'elitism', Wertebaker uses theatre to promote the identities of women and to increase awareness of the issues facing women artists. However, in Barker's case this is less visible only in the character of Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution*. Wertebaker sees theatre as an arena in which the powerless and voiceless can express themselves.

Unlike Stoppard, whose plays testify to the fact that he was committed to agitational propagandist theatre even though he never admitted this fact, Wertebaker, like Barker, never used her plays to espouse a particular ideological viewpoint. Accordingly, on a number of occasions, Wertebaker refuses to put her works within the rigid parameters of a purely political or feminist stance.

It is true that under capitalism and communism, the responsibility of the artist is devoted only to the ruling political party, as Stoppard's plays have shown. But whereas Stoppard wants the message to predominate, Wertebaker invites her audiences to participate and question their own values. In other words, audiences are given a means to comment on various social issues by engaging them in a thoughtful critical process. In a similar way, Barker exploits theatre as a vehicle through which people communicate their own ideas and beliefs.

Passing through the irrational and alienating effects of the disastrous outcomes of the two World Wars, entering into the Cold War period made playwrights think deeply about the efficacy of political commitment to any political system. However, the potential threat of a Third World War on the pretext of the 'War on Terror' prompts a need to produce political plays that explore the ethical questions of using the artist as a character. The new challenges manifested by the threats of nuclear war and terrorism have imposed a new responsibility on the artist which goes beyond the aesthetic function of art towards embracing the immediate problems facing society. Due to the importance of this theme, theatre is a crucial forum in which society can engage in this vital topic. In hindsight, Konstantin was right when he said in Chekhov's *The Seagull* that theatre should employ new forms to engage the audience with new issues other than domestic ones.

The positive aspect of British theatre is the immediate response to the different issues in the world. This was clear in Martin Crimp's wonderful satire called *Advice to Iraqi Mothers* (2003) which was written during the US-Iraqi war. Likewise, Caryl Churchill wrote a factual piece, *Iraqdoc*, which relied on exchanges between Iraqis and Americans in an online chatroom.

As an Iraqi student in the UK, and one who has experienced the outcome of war on the Iraqi people, from the first Gulf War in 1991 to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I have seen the effects of social media on Western people. The term 'War on Terror' makes people unable to discriminate between those who are innocent and those who are criminals. They are misled by propaganda that Iraq represents 'the axis of evil'. In our digital age, where we live under the threat of global war, the role of the artist and the question of art's responsibility will also change. In a world governed by capitalism and personal interest, the artist should be authentic and neutral. It is true that under democracy the artist is free to criticize. Yet this freedom should be moderated, especially when it is involved with racial and religious hatred. The issue of the artist's freedom of expression has never been so urgent or so relevant to contemporary society: how should we legislate for the artist's freedom of expression? Did the cartoonists from *Charlie*

Hebdo go too far in their satirical depictions of the Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him), and is legal or state censorship the answer? How we balance freedom of speech, with the need to respect the religious beliefs of others, is a huge and difficult question, which is beyond the scope of this thesis to address.

Although the main dilemma for the characters of artists is to explore the artist's role and responsibility, this subject will remain a fruitful area for further research and discovery.