

PS II/ EPG II: The Drama of Injustice

Final Exam

Imagine that you are a playwright who is associated with a politically active theater company. Recently, the company has held productions of *Murmuring Judges*, *The Exonerated*, and *Guantánamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'*. You have argued with the company's director that all three of these plays have serious faults. Hence you have been commissioned to write a play about the political issue that you feel most strongly about. What kind of play would you write and what would it be about? In what ways would it differ from the three other plays?

In the following, I will outline how I would design a play dealing with contemporary issues. First of all, I would attempt to write a documentary play. I believe that many writers have noticed a desire for truth in their audiences, and this provides an exceptionally powerful motivation for any writer. The documentary play genre promises to fulfil this desire for truth.

As I considered "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom" to be the most successful of the three plays we read, I tried to find out why this was the case. Because of its more traditional form, "Murmuring Judges" fulfils audience expectations concerning characters and dramatic effects, but it also disappoints for two reasons. It is neither sufficiently dramatically pleasing, nor is it political enough. By contrast, "The Exonerated" is too personalized and one-sided in its arguments. Therefore, my play will attempt to come close to "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom" in its form and type. However, I would choose the conflict in the Middle East as a general topic for a documentary play. Not only do I feel strongly about the conflict itself, but also I think that it illustrates a great number of problems that are relevant on an international level. This conflict and its effects have affected the past and will affect many generations to come.

The main stage for the conflict is clearly Israel, Palestine and the neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, this "microcosm" relates to countless other areas of conflict.

In my play I will use the transcripts of interviews with:

- An Israeli soldier who took part in the war against Lebanon in 2006
- A Hezbollah fighter who fought on the opposite side
- An Israeli living in Haifa or another city that was under attack by Lebanon / the Hezbollah
- A Lebanese civilian from the southern border who suffered under Israel's attacks
- Government officials from Israel, Syria, the U.S., Lebanon and Palestine (Hamas AND Fatah)
- Soldiers who were POWs in Israel or Lebanon or Palestine
- Journalists from Western and Arab countries

In the play I will also include video material of media coverage of the Lebanon war and the recent violent conflicts in Gaza, West Jordan, etc.

My main point is to avoid the one-sidedness of "Guantanamo" while adopting the play's technique of simply juxtaposing contrary statements without explicitly drawing connections between them. The task of making links between the reported experiences should not to be undertaken by the actors, but rather by the audience. The experiences reported on in my play will therefore be personal, but will be expressed in a sober style. (For instance, no poems will be included, cp. "The Exonerated".)

It is not my intention to make the audience feel for the characters more than is unavoidable when they listen to reports by soldiers who are probably, but not necessarily, traumatized. On the contrary, one of the major points of my play is to further the audience's rational understanding of different viewpoints, rather than to have them identify with the characters. Government officials, in particular, will not be portrayed in a setting in which their cynical attitudes and inhumane reasoning is put on display. "Guantanamo" has this weak spot: although it is entertaining, it is not informative or even particularly enlightening. My play will feature comments by individuals who make decisions on the basis of their personal convictions and who are willing to explain these convictions honestly.

Of course, selecting or, even more problematic, conducting the necessary interviews will be a major problem in creating a play that is supposed to be as neutral as possible. Therefore, my approach will be to comment several times on the

reasons and circumstances that led me to use the material which is included. This commenting is done during the course of the play.

The play will not be very subtle. In my opinion this renders it quite different from the larger part of "Guantanamo". "Murmuring Judges" does not really want to be subtle, and "The Exonerated" is clearly not so. Yet these two plays are clear about the messages they intend to convey. By contrast, my play will be obvious about why it contains certain messages. The answer to this question should then, hopefully, be obvious: one of the best ways to approximate the elusive thing named "truth" is to approach it from as many different angles as possible. Hare does this in "Murmuring Judges", but he shows different positions regarding justice with a more or less explicit emphasis on the ones considered "preferable".

My choice is to emulate epic theatre's demand that audience members decide for themselves about issues rather than laying down a path for them to follow. And this entails more than the decision about with whom to sympathize in the decade-long conflict. It is also about how to perceive the issue in the future. Too many people are content to label Palestinians, Iraqis, and Hezbollah fighters or Israel as insane and blood-thirsty. Alternately, they declare intervening Western countries to be aggressive, neo-colonist and fascist.

My play will try to break with these ready-made labels and elaborate on how they come into being. For this purpose, video material of different broadcasts will be integrated into the play at specific moments. For example, an al-Jazeera report on Lebanese civilian casualties will be included after the Israeli soldier's report on his experiences. A Fox newflash about the Gaza-conflict will follow the report by a resident of Gaza. This juxtaposition functions to demonstrate to the audience that an issue is not only "that's how it is" but also "how you are shown it". Our viewpoints about political issues depend on the news we are exposed to. Naturally, a play with these ambitious goals must be careful not to float constantly between the "real" and the meta-level. Otherwise, it runs the risk of losing its audience somewhere in between. However, it might be prudent to remind viewers that everything they see on stage is taken from non-fictional sources. Yet the fact that the material was selected for a specific purpose should not be obscured.

Concerning acting style, I will have actors go with a representational style as in "The Exonerated". This does not necessarily have to conflict with the emotional distance the audience is supposed to maintain from the action. For this reason,

characters in my play are more the "vehicles" of the stories they report and less individualized characters that come alive. While "The Exonerated", in my opinion, relied too much on the audience's sympathy, "Murmuring Judges" forgot that a rather traditionally constructed play needs strong characters in order to carry viewers along and kindle their interest. In my play characters should not become stereotypes or ciphers. However, it is acceptable if their individual characters are subordinated to the importance of their reports. I

I would consider splitting the play into two acts in order not to overwhelm the audience with the sheer mass of presented material. The first act will then be comprised of reports by the two soldiers and the two civilians. These reports will give the audience a somewhat "down-to-earth" perspective as they are provided by individuals who are directly affected by the conflict. Act two provides an alternate theoretical or "high above the conflict" perspective. It will explain, defend and evaluate the reasoning and decisions of government officials and journalists. The video material should be embedded in both acts as a kind of bottom line; it reminds the audience of the essential tension between experience, mediation and reception. This element was missing in all three plays, I believe. I admit to not being sure how to integrate it successfully into any of them, or in my own, for that matter.

Moreover, an issue as complex as the wars in the Middle East is perhaps too vast and too difficult to capture in a single documentary play. Then again, this subject matter exemplifies what some of the most prevalent problems today: a lack of tolerance, conflicting ideologies, political and social imbalances, economic inequalities, disrespect for human life (excessive violence) and political manipulation. These issues are by no means simply the exports of countries located somewhere southeast of Turkey, but are common goods of the whole world. In my play I would like to make the audience realize this. If plays like "Guantanamo" achieve their goal, the way is paved for other documentary plays to present new truths. If the audience's wish for truth is sincere then it will accept that truth is often relative.

Still, even subjective truths can be constructed in a more or less rational, objective and cautious way. Thus reflecting on the way that we normally constitute the truths we act upon is definitely worth the effort. My play shall therefore try to contribute to this effort.

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