

David Edgar's *Testing the Echo*: A Contemporary Insight Towards New Human Issues

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مسرحية ديفيد ادمار "اختبار الصدى": رؤية معاصرة لقضايا انسانية جديدة

الملخص:

اكتسبت قضية الهجرة والمهاجرين اهمية كبيرة في القرن الحادي والعشرين. حيث انبرى الكثير من الكتاب المسرحيين مثل ديفيد ادمار وادورد بوند وهورد باركر لمعالجة هذه القضية. ويمكن ادراك هذا التوجه عندما يتقن المتابع ان النظرة القديمة للمسرح كفضاء ديني يستخدم للموعظة قد تلاشى مع انتشار وتأثير مفهوم العولمة. اليوم اصبح المسرح جزء لا يتجزأ من القضايا الآنية للمجتمع ويتفاعل معها محاولا دراستها وعرضها للجمهور بغية المشاركة بملها. هذه الحالة يمكن رؤيتها بوضوح في المسرح السياسي البريطاني المعاصر الذي يتناول قضايا مثل الهجرة، تنوع الحضارات، العنصرية، واشكال الانحلال الاجتماعي التي فاقت التصورات.

الدراسة الحالية تسلط الضوء على مسرحية "اختبار الصدى" (٢٠٠٨) للكاتب ديفيد ادمار والتي تهدف من وجهة نظر الباحث لتوظيف المسرح كميدان عام يعكس التحديات التي يواجهها المهاجرين.

Abstract

The view of theatre as a religious framework used for preaching has been demolished with the appearance of globalization. Theatre is no longer exclusive to moral themes which are enacted on stage. Recently, it becomes an inseparable part of human life which interacted with the immediate human issues such as immigration, multiculturalism, racism, and unexpected social deterioration.

The present paper is an attempt to shed light on David Edgar's *Testing the Echo* (2008) which manifests various challenges that confront immigrants and the British theatre in the 2000s as well.

Key words: David Edgar, contemporary theatre, multiculturalism, immigration.

Contemporary British Theatre: Development and Function

The views presented by the German theatre director and producer, Erwin Piscator on political theatre give an accurate summary of British left-wing drama during the 1970s onwards. For Piscator, the function of the writer is primarily political. He must put his own ideas aside and devote himself to bring out “the ideas which are alive in the psyche of the masses”.¹ Theatre always responds, more directly and abruptly, to the present moment by conveying messages. According to Piscator “man portrayed on the stage is significant as a social function”.²

Piscator calls for a revolution in theatre. The theatre should reflect reality with its ups and flows. This idea of reflection is given due attention among the pioneers of theatre studies. As far as Bertolt Brecht, a German poet, playwright, and theatre director, is concerned, theatre takes a new dimension. In *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, Brecht argues that “if art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing the proportions”.³ In such concern, Brecht differentiates between social reality and representation of that reality in a work of art. Therefore; breaking the mirror or “changing the proportion” do not mean that the work of art is not realistic. On the contrary, it will “heighten it”.⁴ Brecht shares with Piscator the view of art being political and the artist having social and political responsibility. This in turn requires us to investigate the relationship between art and politics which has had a considerable impact on the notion of ‘commitment’ in British theatre since 1970s.

Brecht’s influence on the art world cannot be denied. In his book, *Brecht on Theatre*, John Willett sums up Brecht’s view of theatre. In his prologue to the epic, Brecht argues that “This theatre justified its inclination to social commitment by pointing to the social commitment in universally accepted works of art”.⁵ Unlike other means of art, theatre represents a miniature of social life.

However, the relationship between politics and art can be expressed in the belief that art advances and affects change. It is not purely aesthetic but political. In his comment on aesthetic autonomy within political commitment, Terry Eagleton, a British literary theorist, critic and public intellectual, points out that art is “conveniently sequestered from all other social practices, to become an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness”.⁶ Similarly, Eagleton argues for art’s function as a revolutionary means of change. The concept of autonomy, Eagleton says:

is radically double-edged; if on the one hand it provides a central constituent of bourgeois ideology, it also marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities which becomes, in the work of Karl Marx and others, the anthropological foundation of a revolutionary opposition to bourgeois utility.⁷

Accordingly, political commitment is debatable among writers as it has a close relation to the role of the artist in society. In aesthetic theory, Adorno claims that ‘commitment’ should be distinguished from ‘tendency’. Committed art should be to the aesthetic works of art solely. Here, every commitment to the world must be abandoned to meet the ideal of the committed work of art. In his seminal study of *The Author as Producer* (1973), Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish philosopher and cultural critic, argues that ‘commitment’ is expressed in one’s art not only by presenting political opinions but also “it reveals itself in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators”.⁸ Both authors and spectators cooperate in such a way to create a kind of organic body.

Joe Kelleher, a Professor of Theatre and Performance, envisions theatre, in *Theatre and Politics* (2009), as a political arena where the people are represented. Theatre reflects us “in ways that make us give judgments on the quality and fidelity

of those representations and to make critical judgments too on the lives that are so represented”.⁹ Consequently, the play stirs up conflict in the immediate social body, that is, the audience. This theme of an organic relationship between theatre and the audience brings to mind Brecht’s V-effect. In other words, the actor interferes from time to time to distance any emotional contact with the action presented. He or she is reminded that they see a real play not imaginative picture.

However, the period from 1968 to the mid-1970s onwards witnessed the rise of a politically committed theatre. The majority of plays in contemporary British theatre at that time were overtly political. Thus, a great deal of ‘agit-prop’ plays (agitation-propaganda) emerged. These plays reflected the function of theatre and playwrights during that time.

Therefore, theatre is associated with the political intentions of the ruling political party since it depends entirely on the state, in the form of government subsidy. Conversely, we have a situation where a radical drama is “being subsidized by the state it wishes to destroy”.¹⁰ As a left-leaning drama in Britain, it inevitably associates itself with its main source of nourishment.

In the 2000s, British theatre manifested its ability “to respond quickly to current events, much more so than television and cinema”.¹¹ This attitude can be seen in Martin Crimp’s wonderful satire called *Advice to Iraqi Mothers* (2003) and Caryl Churchill’s factual piece, *Iraqdoc*, which relied on exchanges between Iraqis and Americans in an online chatroom. Moreover, the emergence of Verbatim theatre¹² in the early years of the 21st century shows the importance of theatre in “dealing with The Big Topics”.¹³ In his chapter on “Theatre in the 2000s”, Andrew Haydon argues that:

British theatre enjoyed something of a qualified ‘golden age’ in the 2000s, both artistically and economically. While it could be claimed that by the end of the decade there had not been any single revolutionary moment – no *Look Back in Anger* or *Blasted* – a

number of changes in the way that theatre was being watched, thought and talked about, were indicative of bigger underlying shifts, facilitating an ever-increasing plurality in the work available.¹⁴

Accordingly, in the first decade of the new millennium, British theatre seems preoccupied with various issues such as war on terror, social fragmentation, cultural segregation and the huge number of immigrants. However, the ever-increasing migration to the United Kingdom made British playwrights think seriously about the issue of national identity which is in flux.

As a unique form of art, British theatre responds abruptly to this phenomenon which finds its expression in the old tradition of one nation to new ideas of multiculturalism. So, the tensions between the old traditions and new adopted ones made those playwrights raise questions about immigration. No doubt, the new comers have their own values which, on the long term, affect the host ones. Though it is conceivable, the clash between these cultural values can be met in a culturally viable atmosphere.

Edgar's Testing the Echo (2008)

In three thematically-linked plays, *Destiny* (1978), *Playing with Fire* (2005), and *Testing the Echo* (2008), Edgar tries to tackle issues surrounding nationalism, racism and how the politics of identity and belonging are affected by waves of immigration. *Testing the Echo* is concerned with multiculturalism and the attempts to reformulate an appreciation of vast challenges of mass immigration. Here, Edgar tries to test issues surrounding citizenship in contrast with those appear on surface.

Edgar's *Testing the Echo* is picturing eight multi-cultural characters from different regions: four males and four females. Depending on the strategy of Citizenship test in contrast with those about immigration, asylum, and refugees, Edgar engages into a heated discussion about the clash of languages, cultures and religious faith arising from the idea of British identity and citizenship. It's about

becoming official and accepted in the UK as a British citizen. By testing existent values, Edgar writes his play in such a way to encourage those who want to reconcile British culture with echoes of a previous life, or the audience's testing their own beliefs as echoed back at them from the stage. It is evident that the newcomers tried hard to assimilate in a new space where all values meet together.

However, the play touches these facts indirectly, yet its representation has been significantly effective. In their comment on Edgar's contribution to contemporary British theatre, Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt propose that Edgar represents the 'model' political playwright who uses theatre as public discourse to show the immediate issues of the nation. They state that:

topical and specific socio-political problems are taken up to be embodied, imagined, and worked through in dramatic form. Edgar uses theatre as a powerful tool of public discourse, an aesthetic modality for engaging with and thinking/feeling through the most pressing social issues of the day.¹⁵

Thus, his commitment to social and political issues of society makes him employ theatre to advocate change. Like Howard Barker, he raises thoughtful questions without necessarily giving answers. His audience are given a chance to anticipate the message. In an interview with Misha Berson (1981), Edgar points out that "I've increasingly felt that theatre's real potential is that it can do two things at once: it can present a thought-out, academic analysis of events, and simultaneously it can show in a recognizable way how human beings relate to these events."¹⁶

Testing the Echo deals with the issue of immigration through the complexities and challenges of language, culture and faith which a global community relates to a cohesive notion of being accepted in the UK. Within the cast of eight actors, extensive use of doubling and many short, intercut scenes have shown to explore many different faces of citizenship. Though there is no central character, the

narration is driven by the organising figure of Emma, the teacher of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) class which is taken as a key route to the Citizenship Test.

From the outset of the play, the importance of language is highlighted to create the hatred environment between the two civilizations. Significantly, the first line is in Arabic as a young Muslim man, Mahmood, is thrown into a room, protesting in Yorkshire-accented English about his situation. From the very beginning, religion is employed to refer to the struggle which may be ensued later:

Jamal

And you pray.

Mahmood

You what?

Jamal

You pray now.

Mahmood

Pray? Why?

Jamal

Why?

Pause.

Because you are not Maz or Micky now. No more just an echo of shit English person and shit English life. (Edgar,2008:10)¹⁷

Mahmood doesn't speak Arabic and doesn't understand what happens until Jamal speaks to him in English. Importantly, Edgar uses translation to communicate meanings. Even Amal uses religious discourse to introduce herself. When she is told by the Mayor's assistant to state her name, she said:

(Arabic, quoting Sura 9:72-3 of the Qur'an) Wa'da Allah al-móemeneen wal momenat janaat tagry men tahteha al-anhaar – ['God has promised the men and women who believe in Him gardens watered by running streams –] (Edgar,2008:15)

Religion becomes her identity which is fear-aspiring according to the western view of Islam. So, to be accepted in this environment, she has to be loyal to its values. These values do not necessarily be identical with her original ones. As Halima said, “To be citizen you must pass course and say oath to the Queen”. (Edgar, 2008: 31)

Earlier in the play, the first scene witnesses the tension between the religious faith and social traditions and values, the first represents Muslim and the latter represents British characterized through Jamal and Mahmood, which are taken seriously by Edgar to comment on the events of recent years. Moreover, Edgar introduces the activity of learning English via Emma and her students through discussion of British public life, history and values in contrast with the cultural background of each character. Subsequently, this discussion goes further to create a kind of understanding between the immigrants and the host in a positive atmosphere.

The characters are introduced one by one to set the mood of the play and to nurture the struggle between the new comers and Emma. A close reading of the characters' reactions behind coming to the UK shows different reasons. Halima introduces herself and the reasons to go abroad:

Halima (Somali) Wayan imi dalkan mayna yeelay wayood leehidin dowlad. Way wanaagsan tahay weliba in aad leedihiin free of speech and assembly and religion, oh yes please. Laakini ulma wagaagsana sida dowlanimadda. I am from Somalia. [I didn't come to this country for community and diversity. I am all in favour of free of speech and assembly and religion, oh yes please. But they are not so good as government. I am from Somalia.] (Edgar,2008: 14)

While another character gives another reason, which is quietly different from Halima's. Jasminka's economic situation forced her to go abroad. She shares with Halima a sense of freedom:

Jasminka (Albanian, Kosovo dialect) Edhe pse pagesa nuk eshte e mirë, unë erdha në Bromley te'punoj dhe Keidesem për femijet e zoteriut Henderson, por ai po më vardiset. Pra unë e nderpreva punen. E tash une po evijoj coursins e gjuhës Angleze, cdo te'marte te-cilene udhehegin femrat te'cilat me(14) 15mesojnë mua personal empowerment dhe gjithashtu te-tregoj se kush jam five foot five inches, 30-C bust, and I do not do kissing, Greek or anything without a condom. Pra unë mendoj, nese mundem mei theme këtogjiera pse unë nuk mesoj me shumë ge ta marr posaporten e Britanis së Madhi and sod this for a game of soldiers. [I come in as au pair in Bromley but the pay is bad and Mr Henderson doesn't keep his hands to himself. So I end up working. But I go to an English class on Tuesday run by group of ladies who teach me personal empowerment and how to say that I am five foot five inches, 30-C bust, and I do not do kissing, Greek or anything without a condom. And I think, if I can say all these things, why don't I learn a bit more and get a British passport, and sod this for a game of soldiers.] (Edgar,2008:15)

However, a key confrontation arises between Halima, Nasim and Emma as in Scene (47) when Emma “(hands out cards) Indeed. So what makes Britain British? Cards with pictures” (Edgar,2008:74). The answer to her question is supposed to be an English breakfast which contains sausage and bacon- pigs. This question is intentionally raised to stir Halima's protests. As we know, sausage and bacon- pigs are viewed as unclean in the Muslim faith and therefore it is haram, forbidden, to even discuss them. Halima and Nasim feel that Emma is putting them in impossible position, forcing them to go against their religion, and so become angry. An apparently innocuous discussion about the peculiarities of British life turns into an

angry confrontation, and Emma's solution is to invite them to leave if they do not want to take further part (Edgar,2008: 75).

Again, religion and the insult of religious figures are used to introduce the main characters who menace standard British life in the eyes of the host. In scene (55), Nasim cries "I march against Denmark cartoons in London. I say, 'Death to the insulter of the prophet.'" (Edgar,2008: 86). Nasim seems loyal to her religious ideals. She stands against anything that touches her religious faith. In the same scene, Nasim reveals later to Emma, "I am nine in Egypt when the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. I wish of anything I had been adult then in England the UK." This religious obsession made the host fear of the immigrants, the fear of stirring mobs. In her soliloquy, Nasim shows the difference between two cultures:

I was nine when the fatwa against Salman Rushdie happened. I was carried to the Midan al-Tahrir in Cairo on my father's back. He said we were protesting for our brothers and our sisters in a place very far away called England. Where our people are attacked with petrol and called 'Pakis', and our Prophet, peace be upon Him, most cruelly abused. We protest to say to our people, there in England: you are no longer underground. You are not alone but part of worldwide family. To show how many of us there are.

Pause.

And d'you know what my father said to me? If you ever doubt your faith, if you're ever lured by materialism and impurity, if you're ever tempted to give up the fight for justice, brotherhood and the sacred land, then remember how we felt that day.

(Edgar,2008: 88-89)

In a later classroom scene, a discussion of human rights and how it relates to the wearing of the jilbab, Emma sets an activity whereby the students must debate

the issue; giving a red card to those who must do so according to their own beliefs. Again, Nasim believes that she is being discriminated being given a black card and asked to say things that go against her beliefs. It will result in her making an official complaint about Emma, one that she will have to formally defend herself against to when confronted by her boss, Martin, and others in a tribunal (his later account of the confrontation from Halima and Nasim's perspective plays against dialogically against the scene as the audience saw it, in a similar way to the testimony at the Inquiry in playing with fire.) This confrontation leaves Emma a dismayed and disenchanted. With all the best intentions and no obvious fault on her part, she finds herself at the sharp end of very complex and contentious issues of British society and religion.

As a counterpoint to the ESOL classes, Edgar chooses to stage a dinner-party as a device to introduce the views and experience of Emma and her white, British, middle-class peers as they start a debate over a meal. At first, the conversation deals with a number of fragmented scenes. They discuss their disdain for social profiling. The subject turns into Sharia law, and the 'problems' caused by the conflict between society and religion. Emma will at first defend the Islam, pointing out the equivalence of other religions like Christianity and sexualities. This reaches a dramatic climax in scene Thirty-five as the debate between the guests becomes more heated, and Edgar intercuts with an increasingly fractious conversation between Emma and Nasim as she (Nasim) again voices her discomfort at being taught by another tutor, Toby, who has a 'streak in his hair' – i.e. alluding to his homosexuality. Emma cannot countenance this intolerance against her own values and the clear guidelines of the college (and wider British society) against any discrimination 'on the grounds of race, religion, gender, abetment or sexuality.' (Edgar, 2008: 57) – At the same time, under Edgar's cross-cutting, held to account for the various intolerances of the Islam by the dinner guests. Again, Emma finds herself in an critical position. Emma finds it hard to respond to Nasim's

interpretations of different political, social and religious issues, just as Nasim found it hard to respond to pork sausages and banned jilbabs.

It is made clear that the reasons these people have come to Britain and are now trying to become citizens have little to do with love. They come for economic or family reasons, or to escape persecution, but are ill prepared for free choice and human rights, western concepts that are outside their experience.

The confrontation between Emma and Nasim is settled by a dinner party held by Martin, a former student activist. This party, where all characters gather together, represents the meeting point among different cultural diversities. Emma's experiences are "a reminder that freedom and democracy are not natural ... but instead are Western cultural constructs".¹⁸ The rejection of these concepts by the new comers can be understood if we know that we cannot expect other people automatically to embrace them. Similarly, it is unwise to expect a devout, newly arrived Muslim to argue against being allowed to wear the jilbab, even as an intellectual exercise. All of the characters taking part in the ceremony will have their lives changed for the better as a result of gaining British citizenship, and their varied situations and intentions happily complicating simplistic notions of the 'problems of immigration' propagated in national discourses about multiculturalism and identity.

At the end of the play, Martin comes to realize that the UK is not an exception concerning human rights. It can be oppressive and regressive according to its superior benefits. In his soliloquy, Martin bewails bitterly. I quote it in full because it reveals the duality of western civilization:

What am I describing? An oppressive and aggressive state, whose agencies are not subject to the rule of law. Persecution of ethnic and religious groups. Capital punishment, liberally applied. Hostility to free speech, pluralism of opinion. A belligerent and rapacious foreign policy.

So why did I and the best part of two million others march through London to protest against its overthrow?

Now, what am I describing? A state which doesn't yet exist, whose principles include all the above, plus rampant homophobia, the subservience of women, pursuing global domination by campaigns of foreign conquest by a mighty leader subject only to the will of God.

So why did I march side by side with people who want to bring such a state about?

The answer comes: because although we hate these things with every fibre of our being, the thing we hate even just a little bit more is America.

But of course this isn't true. In fact, like anybody of my generation, I love America. The movies. Jazz. San Francisco. Greenwich Village. For Christ's sake: Bob Dylan and Frank Zappa are American.

In fact, the only bit I don't like is the middle.

The bit that hates gays and burns books and loves the death penalty. Believes that women should be subject to their husbands. And that it should conquer foreign countries, and be led by men who think they do God's will. ((Edgar,2008: 97)

To conclude, the homophobia lost its sense when Martin discovers that he himself lives in a world where struggle for survival depends on the fittest. The social media which described Islamic religion as terrorism is the one which deteriorates not only religion but also everyone comes from the east. Still, religion is the stimulus behind the European rejection of immigrants. The fear of cultural and religious background for the immigrants made Edgar commit to British principles of life. Importantly, Edgar, in Scene (66) returns to Muslim character, Mahmood who recites:

'Who fights in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him we shall bestow a vast reward.' Or 'Whoever kills an innocent, it is as though he has killed humanity entire.'

(finding a passage in a marked page of the Qur'an) 'Prophet, make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites. Hell shall be their home.'

(Another marked passage.) 'God has promised the men and women who believe in Him gardens watered by running streams, in which they shall abide for ever.' (Edgar, 2008:101)

As already shown, theatre is employed as a public arena to present the immediate issue of society which concerns British society. In Edgar's case, the issue of immigration is introduced to the audience. It is just like a message and the audiences are free to respond to this message. So, theatre here is just like a place where people give their opinions about immigration. These opinions are going to be taken seriously by those in charge to take right decisions. Accordingly, in 21st century, theatre emerges as a powerful means of voting towards different issues that have close relation to the fate of a particular society.

¹ Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre: A History 1914-1929*, trans. by Hugh Rorrison (New York, 1978), p. 47.

² Ibid., p. 187.

³ John Willett (ed), *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 204.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 179.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (UK: Blackwell, 1990), p. 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cited by Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), p.62. For further analysis, see Walter Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973).

⁹ Joe Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.10.

¹⁰ C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Contemporary English Drama* (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1981), p. 16.

¹¹ Andrew Haydon, "Theatre in the 2000s", ed. Dan Rebellato *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), p. 45.

¹² Verbatim theatre is a form of documented theatre in which plays are constructed from the precise words spoken by people interviewed about a particular event or topic. Documentary theatre - Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_theatre

¹³ Michael Billington et al, "The State of British Theatre Now: An Interview with Michael Billington", *Atlantis*, v. 26, n. 1 (June 2004): 93.

¹⁴ Andrew Haydon, "Theatre in the 2000s", in *Modern British Theatre 2000-2009*, ed. Dan Rebellato (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 40.

¹⁵ Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt, *The Political Theatre of David Edgar: Negotiation and Retrieval* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 4-5.

¹⁶ Misha Berson, "The Politics of a Playwright: Talking with David Edgar", *The Threepenny Review*, n. 7 (Autumn, 1981), p. 25.

¹⁷ <http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/testing-the-echo-iid-150784/do-9781784600938-div-00000077>

¹⁸ Richard Hornby, "Shavian Dark Comedy", *The Hudson Review* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 348.

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