HOWARD BRENTON'S DEVELOPMENT AS A PLAYWRIGHT

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I

> Brenton's plays always provoke - whether to rage, or to the shocked recognition of shared values suddenly seen in new perspectives.[1]

Howard Brenton (1942 -) is a post-1968 British political playwright whose work is varied and prolific. Over the last twenty-seven years, he has written more than fifty plays for different media, the theatre, television, radio and film. This output includes short and full-length solo plays, plays written collectively with theatre companies, and plays written in collaboration with other writers. Brenton's work has aroused various responses and raised much controversy. A number of critics and theatre commentators believe that Brenton is the most talented writer of his generation. Richard Boon, who steadily supports Brenton's work, declares in 1990 that "Brenton was and remains the figurehead of his generation."[2] A year before, Boon had already written an article in which he was praising the variety of Brenton's work thus : "Of all our contempo-

rary playwrights, Brenton is surely the greatest polyglot."[3] Philip Roberts considers Brenton as "a serious writer."[4] Ben Cameron, like Philip Roberts, sees Brenton as "a man who continues to produce some of the best work in the political theatre. His works are imaginative, humorous, fanciful, playful, deadly serious."[5] Praising Brenton's dramaturgy, C.W.E. Bigsby says :

> Howard Brenton's achievement lies partly in his stylistic subtlety, which goes beyond simple electicism, and partly in a self doubt which leads him to dramatize characters themselves uncertain of the realities which they claim they serve.[6]

Albert Hunt admires the dramatic power of Brenton's The Churchill Play (1974) thus : "Brenton goes beyond the formula of instant theatre, instant violence, and instant politics and finds a way of making us look again at the past which has shaped the future into which he sees us drifting."[7] Harold Hobson lavishes praise on the same play : "Howard Brenton has a terrifying imagination that makes his The Churchill Play ... a very disturbing experience. It is an experience one would not like to have missed, but it unsettles the foundations on which England unsteadily rests."[8] In Michael Billington's opinion, "The Churchill Play establishes Brenton as a major talent."[9] Simon Trussler pronounces

that "Howard Brenton, of all the dramatists of his generation, seems to arouse the fiercest passions, whether of advocacy or condemnation."[10] Observing Brenton's controversial status as a writer, John Bull in 1984 says :

> Of all the new playwrights, Howard Brenton is the one to have been most embraced by the subsidised theatre, and yet it is an embrace full of paradox. His work has been consistently successful at the box-office, but it has been greeted with a degree of critical abuse that has only intensified as it has become increasingly well known.[11]

The favourable critical response to Brenton's work, seen above, is met with less favourable, less generous or hostile reception of other critics to his work. Lay-By (1971), a play Brenton wrote in collaboration with some other writers was severely attacked by a number of critics; among them is Derek Mahon who says : "Just in case anybody thinks this is the direction in which the theatre should be going ... let me assert that Lay-By was the most notorious rubbish I have yet seen on the London stage."[12] Benedict Nightingale's abuse goes to Brenton's first play to be produced by the National Theatre, Weapons of Happiness (1976) : "The National is right to present work which might upset the politically squeamish; but it is not going to achieve much with a play that

shares the vagueness, the lack of focus and force, of its potato crisp revolutionaries."[13] Yet Harcld Hobson's response to the same play is vastly different: "Mr Brenton ... has in fact a vision of revolution which is quite extraordinary in its creative ambiguity, its richiness, its power to stimulate, to threaten, and to inspire."[14] Brenton's play, The Roman's in Britain (1980) aroused the fiercest controversy and the harshest critical response. B.A. Young refutes the play as "devoid of wit, beauty or drama."[15] John Lahr joins forces with the critics who denounce Brenton's Romans : "Instead of being an antidote to barbarity, the play's artlessness adds to it by making an audience indifferent to the stage suffering."[16] The most vicious attack against Brenton's Romans was that of James Fenton of The Sunday Times : "This play is a nauseating load of rubbish from beginning to end. ... It is advertised as unsuitable for children. It is unsuitable for anyone."[17] Yet many other critics, such as Harold Hobson, Sir Laurence Olivier, Philip Roberts, Sir Peter Hall among many others, defended the play as an extremely serious piece. Edward Bond, the well-known contemporary British playwright, presents to us the most sustained defence of Romans through his redicule of James Fenton for attaking it :

Mr. Fenton's article was one of the

> most ugly, superficial and hysterical criticism I've seen. ... I have been a dramatist for some 18 years. My plays have been prosecuted by the police and frequently attacked by the critics. I make no claim for them except that they have survived to receive more generous, and perhaps more adequate, attention... I don't know what credentials Mr. Fenton has for his job, I have just stated one of mine. ... I can tell him ... that he does not understand the new theatre and so is not fit to write about it.[18]

What we have seen above is only a glimpse of the equivocal response to Brenton's drama which stretches over a long period of time from his early beginning in 1965 up to the present. Perceptive as well as hostile critical responses have continued to appear. These responses and studies mostly appear in the form of reviews, chapters in books, and articles in theatre and literary magazines, and in newspapers. They are concerned with one aspect of his work or another, and not with his total dramatic output to date. When Brenton began writing drama he was a young man in his early twenties. As a fringe writer like David Edgar, David Hare and Trevor Griffiths, Brenton stood for alternative and revolutionary socialist theatre. The young revolutionary writer of the late 1960s is now a middle-aged man in his early fifties. Yet he is still receiving the greatest critical attention.

It is a stimulating point of research to investigate the development which Brenton has undergone as a playwright . This comprehensive analysis of Brenton's different phases of his dramatic career has not been attempted in previous studies. Such a study could raise basic questions about this highly controversial playwright. Among these questions there might be : "As an originally fringe writer, has he'sold out', like John Osborne, after becoming older, richer and more established, or has he retained the revolutionary spark inside?" "How far has the changing political milieu in his country been reflected in his drama?" "Have his political convictions to do with his position as a major dramatist, or has this high position to do with enduring dramatic features?" Attempting to answer such questions and some others which could be raised through the examination of this thesis, is the focus of the present research. To select the 'figurehead' of the post-1968 generation of playwrights in Britain to study and analyse his whole dramatic career, is to comment on the whole trend of contempotary British political drama, which is a by-product of the research. More than a quarter of a century could be a long enough period to justify one's attempt to conduct a research about the development of the career of a contemporary writer who is still active and who could be considered as one of the most talented of contemporary playwrights.

When Brenton joined Cambridge University to study English literature, his aim was to qualify himself for a writing career. There, he wrote his first amature play Ladder of Fools (Cambridge University, 1965) which he described later on as "a huge, jockless, joyless allegory."[19] He determined after graduation in 1965 "to stay away from all the career jobs. I announced that I was a writer."[20] Shortly after, he wrote It's My Criminal (Royal Court Theatre Upstairs 1966) and Winter (the Nottingham Plyhouse, 1966). These early attempts which he calls apprentice plays, Brenton does not want to remenber now. After 1966 and up till the production of Magnificence the first Brenton play to receive a prodtion at one of the establishment theatres, the Royal Court Theatre in June, 1973, Brenton began to write professionally for different experimental fringe companies; among them are, the Brighton Combination Company, the Portable theatre, the University of Bradford Group, the Traverse Theatre Workshop, Edinburgh, and the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. This phase of playwriting includes his experimental early plays. These plays are: Gum and Goo (Brighton Combination, 1969), Heads, the University of Bradford Drama Group, 1969); The Education of Skinny Spew (in double bill with Heads, 1969); Revenge (the Royal Court Upstairs, 1969); Christie in Love, Portable Theatre, 1969); Gargantua (Adaptation of Rabelais's novel, the

Brighton Combination, 1969); Wesley (Bradford, 1970); Fruit (Portable Theatre, 1970); Scott of the Antarctic (Bradford Festival, 1971); Lay-By written with Brian Clark, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Steven Poliakoff, Hugh Stoddart and Snoo Wilson, Edingburgh Festival, 1971); A Sky Blue Life (the Open Space Theatre, London 1971); Hitler Dances (written in collaboration with the Traverse Workshop, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1972); How Beautiful With Badges (Open Space Theatre, London, 1972); England's Ireland (written with Tony Bicat, Brian Clark, David Edgar, Francis Fuchs, David Hare, and Snoo Wilson, the Mickery Theatre, Amsterdam, 1972); Measure for Measure (Adapted from Shakespeare, Northcott Theatre, Exeter, 1972); A Fart for Europe (written with David Edgar, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, Jan. 1973); The Screens (Adaptation of Bernard Frechtman's translation of the play by Jean Genet, Bristol New Vic Studic, Mar. 1973); Magnificence, Royal Court Theatre, June 1973); and finally Brassneck (written with David Hare, Nottingham Playhouse, Sept. 1973).

This experimental fringe phase prepares him to write the "English Epic Plays" of the second phase, the first of which is The Churchill Play (Nottingham Playhouse, 8 May 1974). This second phase marks Brenton's move towards writing large-scale productions for large and subsidised theatres.

Other important plays of this sceond phase are: Weapons of Happiness (commissioned by the National Theatre, 1976) and The Romans in Britain (Olivier Theatre, London, 1980). Pravda (A Fleet Street Comedy, written with David Hare, Olivier Theatre, London, 1985) belongs to this phase in terms of its epic stature, not in terms of its period. Actually, Pravda was written during Brenton's third phase which again marks a second shift of direction in the dramatic career of this prolific and divergent writer. The shift this time is towards small-scale drama as opposed to the large-cast, large-scale plays of the previous phase. Important among the plays of Brenton's third phase of the eighties are: Sore Throats (Royal Shakespeare Company at the Warehouse Theatre, London, 1979); Bloody Poetry (Commissioned by Foco Novo Theatre Company, 1984) and Greenhouse (Royal Court Theatre, 1988). These three plays constitute Brenton's loose trilogy which is entitled : Three Plays for Utopia. Among the plays also written during this phase are, Thirteenth Night (Royal Shakespeare Company at the Warehouse, London, 1981), and The Genius (Royal Court Theatre, London, 1983). The ninties witness Brenton's on-going phase which is his fourth and which marks a third shift in his playwriting . It is a shift towards the epic writing. It is a turn-over to his second and great phase which shows his great plays. In this recent phase, Brenton hastens to

shake off the defeatism of the previous phase by writing large - scale epics such as, H.I.D. (Hess is Dead) (London 1989) and Moscow Gold (Barbican Theatre, London, Oct. 5 1990). The rest of this paper attempts to examine Brenton's development as a writer. Such an examination, hopefully may yield some useful commentary on Brenton's socialist drama and, by extension, on drama in general.

II

Brenton got started as a professional dramatist with the Brighton Combination Company for whom he wrote Gargantua and Gum and Goo. Brenton justifies his joining the Combination at that time: "Because I wanted to work with a company who were very active, so I could write for them on the spot and act in my work."[21] Here Brenton describes his formative experience with the Combination :

> We didn't really know what we were doing at the Combination, we were feeling our way. But all the elements of the fringe, that we have developed since, were there. There was the idea that theatre should be communicative work, socially and politically active. There was the idea of very aggressive theatrical experiment. ... Also, the idea of group work was there, the idea of instantly

> writing the idea of responding to events- street theatre, multi-media ideas. ... There was that kind of variety. Mixed film shows- it was all there, done very ignorantly and very quickly, and in terrible poverty.[22]

In a talk with Peter Ansorage in 1972, Brenton described how with the company's economic limitations he learnt much of what has become characteristic of Brenton's art ever since :

> Stylistic innovation can be endless. Then doing Gum and Goo ... I learnt how to do a show with thirty shillings in the kitty. ... We did it in a gymnasiam with only two lights. It gave the show a hard vocabulary- the limitations became a kind of freedom. I learnt how to write precisely- with extreme concentration.[23]

Revenge, Brenton's first full-length play, marks Brenton's emergence as a political playwright: "With Revenge I found I could get at the world, begin to create things which were public."[42] Brenton deals in this play with one of his favourate themes which he has exploited most often in other plays, that is, the conflict between criminals and the police showing no demarcation line between them. Brenton describes his experience of writing Revenge, one of the important plays of the early phase:"Politically I had no ideas, I was very immature. But I had instinct that there was a conflict I wanted to get at, between public figures ... like a criminal

... and a religious ... policeman."[25] In 1969 Brenton joined the Portable Theatre which commissioned him to write Christie in Love, a play about the history of evil. In the words of John Bull, this play proved to be "so important in his move towards becoming a political writer."[26] Christie in Love, Brenton's first Portable play as well as his first major success, is about one of Britain's notorious mass-murderers. It deals also with the conflict between criminals and the police. Ronald Hayman sees the play as "an abraisive theatrical satirization of Establishment attitudes."[27] Steve Grant praises the play's stylistic innovations : "It is most notable for its brilliantly evocative design ... and its effective juxtaposition of various dramatic styles- from the baldly naturalistic to the comically grotesque."[28] Christie in Love does include "typical and visual shock tactics."[29] Catherine Itzin comments on Brenton's obsession with attacking social corruption as is shown in these two early plays, Revenge and Christie in Love : "For Brenton, the criminal subculture in his early plays and its confrontation with forces of law and order provided the means of displaying a society devoid of a unifying moral code or political ethic."[30]

Brenton's experience with the Portable Theatre was extremely useful concerning the form and themes of his plays. Like the Combination,

the Portable encouraged new writers to fit their plays to non-theatrical conditions. Ben Cameron observes : "This training shaped the work of Howard Brenton, the Portable finest writer, a man who continued to produce some of the best work in the political theatre."[31] Brenton's writing tended to be more political, topical, aggressive, economical, fast, and with a mixture of styles. Peter Ansorage maintains : "This sense of concentration involving a sort of pressure cooking of clashing styles has been a feature of Brenton's work ever since."[32] Brenton's stylistic innovations are also fringe features. John Bull perceptively comments : "To look at his early work is to look at the attractions and the problems of the post-1968 fringe."[33] John Bull continues to point at some of the drawbacks in the technique of his early plays : "The vision of society presented is bleak, but these early plays do not depend on any depth of characterization or profundity of insight for their success. Everything is stripped down to bare essentials."[34] Such drwbacks are those of the agit-prop theatre which originally started not as an art form but as a tool for consciousness-raising. Catherine Itzin is correct in her view of the real motivation of the fringe theatre: "The anger that informed the very existence of Portable and the anti-establishment ideology that motivated the search for a new theatre was the same anger that characterized the work of Brenton

and his fellow writers."[35]

The Portable's growing tedency towards the use of shock tactics in plays dealing with immediate policital and social public events partly signaled its end especially after the production of its two large-scale plays : Lay-By and England's Ireland, both of which were written by Brenton and other Portable writers. Both plays were too big to be fitted to the small theatres, and too political to be accepted by others. Brenton comments on the difficulity of having these two plays staged:

> We began to try to get shows out. It started really with La-By ... and then England's Ireland. But on both of those cccasions we were forced back down underground again. We couldn't get into big spaces; they could't have us. Particulary with England's Ireland. 50-odd theatres refused to take us.[36]

Although these two plays proved to be fatal to the continuity of Portable Theatre, Brenton would not give up the idea of collaborating with other writers whenever there is a big theme which cannot be dealt with individually : "Yes we'll do it again if there's a public event- a general strike, the next election, a radical shift in the state of Ireland."[37] Lay-By dealt with a real-life crime as is the case with Christie in Love. The crime

connects with a rape incident and the ensuing trial. The critical response to the play was quite divergent. Chris Barlas denounces the play as a stark case of nihilism : "In it there seems to be a strange sort of arrogance. ... One cannot help but feel that there is a certain amount of self-congratulatory back patting on the part of the company and the authors."[38] Opposed to Chris Barlas, Nicholas de Jong is highly praising Lay-By as " A triumphant vindication of team drama, of a play created and welded together by seven writers ... working together by committee and in discussion."[39] Michelene Wandor seems to get the point of the play's authors : "The play homes in on an important political question : What is the nature of rape? ... An abstract society in chaos is seen to be responsible for the event, taking ethical responsibility away from individual characters."[40] The critical response to England's Ireland was more hostile. Jonathan Hammond describes the play as "a wasted opportunity by some bright and talented writers"[41], while Benedict Nightingale sees it as a show which is not "balanced"[42]. John Bull points at some positive aspects of the play: "What is most impressive about the play is not its political stance, but its employment of a succession of differing theatrical styles, frequently overlapping, to demonstrate the confusion beneath the rhetoric."[43]

III

The second phase of Brenton's theatrical career is the phase of the "British Epic Theatre". It is a phase which witnesses Brenton's shift of direction from the fringe writer of small-scale theatres to the establishment theatre. After the difficulty of having Lay-By and England's Ireland staged, Brenton and other Portable writers faced a real dilemma which they felt the necessity to overcome. They thought of having their own theatre; their lack of means was a permanent obstacle. Brenton believed, like the others, in the public role of theatre which must deal with historical and political themes, and topical issues whose production needs big cast and fluied and cinematic techniques. Brenton's real need for exploiting the possibilities of big spaces to accommodate his public plays which deal with social and topical issues is greatly responsible for his change of direction. Ben Cameron marks Brenton's shift : "In 1972-3, he served as Resident Playwright at the Royal Court Theatre, a pragmatic move rather than a shift in ideology."[44] Brenton's move carries in it the ambighuity of Brenton's position as a fringe writer and that of the whole fringe trend. He was keen to get the advantages of both worlds : "I want to get into bigger theatres, because they are, in a sense, more public. Until that happens you really have no worth as a play-

wirght."[45] He believes that his message must be heard by the largest number of people : "I'd rather have my plays presented to nine hundred people who may hate what I'm saying than to fifty of the converted."[46] About his experience as Resident Playwright at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972-1973, Brenton says that he got "a regular salary ... Just having plays seriously considered."[47] During that year he worte Magnificence (1973), his first play to be staged at the Royal Court in its downstairs auditorium, which marks the real shift from the fringe phase to the "British Epic Theatre" phase.

Brenton's move to the established theatres which enables his public plays on topical and social issues to be staged, and to be seen by many kinds of audiences, does not represent a betrayal to his early fringe concepts and socialist convictions. Instead, this move relates to a modification of strategy in the light of the fringe theatre's achievements since it has started in the late 1960s. Brenton declares the failure of the fringe theatre to effect a social and political revolution. On the contrary, things got worse in 1970 when the Conservative Party came into power. Brenton stepped into a political - strife stage when he rejected what he called "Utopian generosity." In 1975 he laments bitterly the situation thus :

> I think the fringe has failed. ... Naive gentleness goes to the wall ... The truth is that there is only one society - that you can't escape the world you live in. No one can leave, if you're going to change the world, well, there's only one set of tools, and they're bloody and stained but realistic. I mean ccmmunist tools. Not pleasant. If only the gentle, dreamy, alternative society had worked.[48]

Brenton's opinion was backed by other fringe writers specifically, David Edgar, David Hare and Trevor Griffiths. Hare in 1978 also laments the fact that over a decade has passed without reaching the desired effect :

> Consciousness has been raised in this country for a good many years now and we seem further from radical change than at any time in my life. The traditional function of the radical artist-"Look at those Borgias; look at this bureacracy,"- has been undermined. We have looked. We have seen. We have known. And we have not changed. A pervasive cynicism paralyses public life.[49]

By time the audience are getting more sophisticated They do no longer accept the shock tactics of the early fringe theatre. John Bull remarks that the Portable, as a representative fringe company, gradually, loses people's favour for an over-use of agit-prop style :

> For Portable, the politics arose from the drama. Inasmuch as they had a political platform, it was a consistent vision of nihilistic disintegration, relying heavily on 'uncool' dramatic shock tactics. ... As a result, bookings on the conventional circuit became more and more difficult, and the fringe audiences became, as Brenton realised, too sphisticated.[50]

The fringe companies seemed to have exhausted their usefullness. If political theatre is ever to continue, the playwrights should entertain some change of direction. John Bull again perceptively marks that change :

> The cultural climate is changing. The unexpected victory of the conservative Party under Edward Heath in 1970 was a salutory corrective to the dreams of an alternative society, in which it was thought change could be effected by by-passing the system. Committed agit-prop groups were forced into considering the issues that arose from industrial unrest ... and to leave behind them the heady rhetoric of alternative strategies.[51]

In his search for new forms and new ways through which he establishes contacts with the audience, Brenton shifts into the epic technique. Brenton comments in 1973 on the previous fringe practices which could be replaced by epic writing: "There's never been any theory in the English

fringe; I think it lacks it. Artaud's got a lot to answer for. His kind of stupid idealsim is no good, while Brecht made hammers and nails that could actually be used."[52] Brenton in his second phase may not consider himself to be wholeheartedly following the tradition of Brecht. Brenton has a curious mixture of hate and respect for Brecht. He declared in 1987 that : "I always disliked him. To be frank, he frightened me ... And he was a communist on humanity's side."[53] On a previous occasion in 1975 Brenton says about Brecht : "I'm an anti-Brechtian, a left anti-Brechtian. I think his plays are musiam pieces now and are messing a lot of young theatre workers. Brecht's plays don't work, and are about the thirties and not about the seventies."[54] Yet he adapted two plays by Brecht : The Life of Galileo (1980) and Conversation in Exile (1983; adapted from a translation of Brecht's dialogue by David Dollenmayer) John Bull comments on Brenton's departure towards the large-scale plays of the epic stature : "His ambiguous acceptance by the theatrical establishment has allowed him to utilise the facilities of the large theatres in a move towards a reformation of 'epic theatre', but he has never ceased to question the point of the exercise."[55]

The end of Brenton's fringe phase and the biginning of his second epic phase is marked

by Magnificence (1973) which is considered a transitional piece which marks his shift from the small-scale to the big-scale dramatic production. It is, in Oleg Kerensky's words, "Brenton's first play to be staged in a full-size London theatre as distinct from an attic or basement."[56] Brenton describes Magnificence thus : "It was half and half. It was in a sense, half a fringe play, and half a big, formal theatre play. And you can't help that, you're just growing up."[57] Richard Boon marks the importance of Magnificence in the development of Brenton's career : "The Royal Court production of Magnificence in generally held to mark the moment of transition in Brenton's career, and so in many ways it does."[58] The plays deals with the theme of the futility of aggression and terrorism as tools for effecting a revolution by portraying the defeated efforts of a group of young people whose aim is to get their society changed. There are some relevance between the characters of the play and Brenton, as he maintains here : "It was written about people exactly my age whose minds bear similar shapes to mine and my friends ... and whose language is very like how we speak."[59] In this play Brenton begins to examine his own position as a fringe writer whose idealism and shock tactics fail to effect a social change. The words of Cliff at the end of Magnificence voice Brenton's modified view about political drama. Cliff's words to his dying friend at the end of the play are :

> 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 friend, is the waste.[60]

Cliff carries the message of the play about the futility of wasting one's efforts or one's life, as Jed has done in the play, in vain. Brenton comments on Jed's futile terrorism : "Jed's attitude leads to acts of terrorism which are futile. So what began to emerge was a kind of tragedy, a tragedy not of pride or of fate but of waste. There should be a strong sense of waste amongest the characters- a waste of effort and of thought."[61] Peter Ansorage finds a clear relevance between the play and what the fringe writers stood for in their early phase:

> With hindsight it is tempting to read Magnificence as an unconscious critique of the whole fringe movement. The attempt to create a different style of life, the increasing reliance on violence, theatrical terrorism, the final sense of political confusion- that mere anger and aggression lead to impotence- these thematic strands seemed to encapsulate the whole dilemma of fringe theatre. Just how ironic in fact was the title of the play and how 'magnificent' was the rebellion enacted by fringe theatre between 1968 and 1973? A myth or a reality?[62]

But the failure to attain their goal through their anarchic and unstudied ways caused the waste;

this is a realization in the play that Brenton maintained. Catherine Itzin observes : "The play was... significant in marking a philosophical turning point for Brenton, whereby previously anarchic anger became directed- towards identified enemies."[63]

The Churchill Play (1974), is Brenton's first epic play of the second phase. It is a four-act play, "as it will be performed in the winter of 1984 by the internees of the Churchill Camp somewhere in England."[64] The play is set in a political concentration camp, called Churchill in the year 1984 which "is invested with special dread by George Orwell."[65] The play starts with a dazzling scene when Churchill springs up out of his coffin which is guarded by four servicemen. When the lights come up, the audience discover that what they have seen was no more than an incident in a play that the prisoners of the camp were playing in front of camp visitors. Brenton, in the words of Ben Cameron, deals with history as "a rich mine to be tapped, a wealth of associations that can easily be exploited for new and shocking effects."[66] Brenton who revolts against his childhood national myth, says about his concept of demythologizing history in this play : "The idea that Churchill is universally admired by people who went through the war is not true."[67] Ronald Hayman, in 1979, believes that The Churchill Play "is the best of

the full-lenth plays he has so far written."[68] Hayman praises the play's daring comments on politics and history. He comments on the opening scene of the play thus : "The resurrection image grows out of the fear that fascism is not dead, and in Brenton's play Churchull is implicitly blamed for the indifference to human liberty which will lead to the existence of concentration camps in Britain."[69] The play's topical theme relates to the English occupation of Northern Ireland, the prevalence of inflation, the industrial troubles and violence of 1972 and the repressive laws issued by conservative-labour coalition government. Benedict Nightingale observes that the play constitutes "a remarkably sharp attack on a great English totem. Churchill's legacy, it suggests, is likely to be the Churchill Camp."[70] Brenton's topical themes are supported by their epic treatment. Bull sees that the play signals Brenton's move towards epic plays : "From now on, Brenton would tackle the problem direct, writing big shows for big stages."[71]

On the strength of the success of Brenton's The Churchill Play, the National Theatre, in 1975 commissined Brenton to write an epic play which came to be Weapons of Happiness (1976) which won the Evening Standard Award for Best Play in 1976. For Brenton that was an irresistible offer as he observes here :

> It would be beautiful to have a play there. One might as well make use of its facilities. The best of English theatre is subsidised. ... I want to write big formal plays of Shakespearean size... You just can't write a play that describes social action with under ten actors. With fifteen you can describe whole countries, whole classes, centuries.[72]

Brenton tried hard, together with David Hare who directed the play, not to let the chance offered by the National Theatre slip out of their hands. Brenton says :

> David and I regard ourselves and our cast and production team as an armoured charabanc full of people parked within the national walls- we've brought our concept in with us because we want consciously to use the National facilities to show our work off to its best advantage. It's like being given the greatest orchestra in the world to play with ... I desperately don't want to be culturally stacked and filed away in some neat slot, and the joy of the theatre is that it's so uncontrolled : if I fail here I can go and work in the street theatre...[73]

Weapons of Happiness expresses the bitter sense of failure which the leftists felt at the dictatorship of the Stalinists in Russia. This anger extends to include the compromise, hypocrisy and betrayal of post-war socialism. The action of the play protrays

the unsucessful occupation of a potato-crisp factory by some revolutionary young workers. Bernton brings to life Joseph Frank, a Czechoslovak communist who was assasinated by Stalin in 1952, and lets him work in that London factory. This disillusioned former idealist is sharply contrasted with the naive and inexperienced workers whose romantic idea of communism would not lead them to effect a successful revolution. Their ignorance of history and revolutionary theories turned their ears deaf to Frank's advice not to waste their efforts and lives. Brenton does not supply in the play a solution to show how the success of a revolution can be attained. Kerensky Oleg points to this aspect, saying :

> There is no serious discussion of how and when workers' control can be practical. Nor is there any exploration of the consequences of violent revolution, and whether it must inevitably breed further violence, political despotism and economic inefficiency, as it has done in the Soviet countries.[74]

The third major epic play which Brenton wrote in 1980 was The Romans in Britain, which deals with the theme of imperialsm. It suggests a parallel between the Roman domination of Anglo-Saxon Britain and the British occupation of Northern Ireland. The dialectical argument is suggested but it is not elaborated because the treatment of

the theme of imperialsm is intended to offend and to shock rather than to analyse. The rape scene which raised a hysterical contovorsy over the play, was part of the authors' harsh and aggressive style. John Bull observes that the play "played to packed houses in the context of an unprecedented torrent of media abuse and the unsuccessful prosecution of the Director under the Sexual Offences Act. Brenton's foothold is secure, but his ability to offend remains undiminished."[75] Richard Beachman in 1981, likewise, comments on the reception which the play had had: "When The Romans In Britain ... opened last October in the Olivier auditorium of the National Thearte it led to prodigious contoversy, the greatest out-pouring of comment and the most intense popular interest that British theatre has engendered in years."[76]

The style of Brenton's epic plays is fluid and expansive. Brentcn reflects the confusion in society through the use of a succession of mixed theatrical techniques, that is why he calls these plays to be epic and not Brechtian. These plays are also void of psychological analysis of the individual actions of the conventional social drama. They are more concerned with topical and social themes of an immediate bearing. Brenton describes his epic plays thus :

They are "Jacobean" in a mix of the

> tragic and comic taking great pleasure in the surprises and shocks of entertainment the huge stage can arm the playwright with as a showman; they are epic in that they are many scened, full of stories, ironic and argumentative and deliberately written as "history plays for now."[77]

He believes that the style he uses is "an epic style which has nothing to do with Brecht."[78] In 1975 both Itzin and Trussler who interviewed Brenton thought of his epic plays to mark a shift in his dramaturgy : "It seems your later, longer plays are much more dialectically ballanced- almost more Shavian, in the way that people bounce ideas and arguments off each other..."[79] He answers them thus : "On a performing ... stage the play has to have its own world, which must connect with the world outside, on the street. And therefore you have to write with greater clarity and force and dignity."[80] The epic style in Brenton's view is quite connected with the size of the stage which accommodates the performance. Ever since Magnificence has been produced by the Royal Court Theatre Brenton with limited exceptions maintained his connection with the establishment theatre. Richard Boon keeps a record of the theatres which performed his plays since Magnificence : "Since 1973, he has written regularly for the Royal Court, the RSC, and most significantly, for the National Theatre."[81]

Some of Brenton's contemporaries followed his lead in moving towards the mainstream stages, writing big-scale epic dramas on public and social themes. Examples of epic plays written by other post-1968 political writers are Occupations by Trevor Griffiths, Destiny by David Edgar and Plenty by David Hare. "Each of these writers, albeit in differing ways and to some extent for differing reasons, followed Brenton into the mainstream of "official culture", working on the large public stages- subsidised West End."[82]

For the mainstream theatre, Brenton,in the words of John Bull, "remains what has always been, the wolf within the gates."[83] For others he has "sold out". The ambivalence dominates his work. In Itzin's words : "He was aware of the need for and the advantages of both worlds and was at the end of the seventies, still struggling to reconcile the conflict."[84] Despite his growing importance as a playwright who is cosistently produced by the establishment theatre since 1973, Brenton was the only one among his contemporaries who intiated the hareshest attack on Margaret Thatcher after her first election in 1979, in his play A Short Sharp Shock (1980) written with Tony Howard. Bull comments on Brenton's irreconciliabilty :

Although Brenton now writes largely

> for the subsidised theatre, he still occasionally revisits fringe territory. A Short, Sharp Shock for the Government,... was a savage lampoon on the new Conservative administration... perfectly in keeping with earlier fringe activity, and very much a companion-piece to Fruit, written ten years earlier to 'celebrate' Edward Heath's election victory.[85]

IV

Brenton's first phase starts in the late 1960s up to 1973; his second phase begins with the production of The Churchill Play in 1974 up till about the end of the 1970s. In terms of politics, every phase is instigated by an important political event. His fringe phase has been caused by the events of May 1968 which had a very strong effect on the fringe writers. The second political event which signaled the second phase of Brenton's career is the 1970 victory of Edward Heath's conservative government. This event formed a turning point in the practice of the fringe, and let Brenton move towards big-scale plays with topical and public themes treated more dialectically and more persuasively. The third political event which led Brenton to take a second shift in 1979 is Thacher's first election as Britain's Prime Minister. This second shift marks Brenton's third phase of his theatrical

career. This phase covers all the plays he wrote in the 1980s. As a political playwright, although he prefers the word "political" to be replaced by the word "public" because it is "resulting from feeling the public nature of the theatre,"[86] Brenton sees his worth to be relating to how far he helped in effecting a socialist revolution. In 1979 the victory of the Conservative Party overthrew all his hopes and the hopes of others to do that. He faced an utter defeat and a real crisis. On top of that the conservative spirit which prevailed everywhere, not only in Britain but also in Europe and the States, stifled all free expression and experimentation. Richard Boon comments on that decade : "The theatre generally could hardly be expected to escape the major shift in ideology."[87] Theatre subsidy was immeasurably cut down for oppositional drama though it was lavishly spent on musicals, and classical revivals. "The situation hardly encouraged experimentation, or the large-scale, large-cast exploration of big and complex themes in new forms. ... Brenton, Edgar et al. have ... suffered."[88] A turning point in Brenton's career coincided with Mrs. Thatcher's election in 1979.

The tendency towards private humanist and psychological drama which was largely suppressed during the late 1960s and the 1970s, began to prevail

in the 1980s. Though kept his rebellious spirit, Brenton in the 1980s wrote small-scale plays. Among these plays are : Sore Throats (1979), 'An intimate play'; Thirteenth Night (1981), "A dream play"; The Genius (1983); Bloody Poetry (1984); Dead Head (thriller series on BBC2, 1986) and Greenland (1988). These plays are not epic in size as their themes and forms are more localized. Brenton's other contemporaties suffered the same transformation by turning to private drama. Richard Boon in 1990 observes their change of direction saying : "Whilst all these dramatists have continued to increase the diversity of their work, notably with forays into film and television, and indeed remain, in various capacities, near the heart of the established theatre, there remains a sense of an initiative lost, of the hard-won high ground having again been surrendered."[89] Richard Boon continues to say, "Yet, faced with a real enemy, with what they see as the most dangerously reactionary right-wing government of recent times, their work seems to have lost momentum and their voice some of its authority."[90] In 1988 John Peter of the Sunday Times had already observed that : "British drama hasn't found a language to deal with in the 1980s, when the issues are starker, politics tougher, and the moral choices more extreme."[91] Mrs. Thatcher's second election in 1983, then her third election in 1988 aggravated these dramatists' sense of defeat.

Brenton and Tony Howard's A Short Sharp Shock was a chance for the fringe agit - prop drama to be revived, but none of the other writers picked up the line. Only Brenton together with David Hare wrote Pravda (1985), an epic play which satirizes the newspaper industry, and Caryle Churchill wrote Serious Money (1987) a large-size play which wages an attack on the City and the conservative values of a free-market economy. Though Brenton boasts of these two plays to exist during the 1980s and to satirize the establishment audience, the leftists denounced them as mere thrillers.

Brenton's two plays Bloody Poetry and Greenland together with an earlier play which also belongs to his third phase on the strength of its private theme and small-scale size, form what he calls Three Plays for Utopia. The Royal Court Theatre in 1988 had a whole season for Brenton's trilogy, Three Plays for Utopia, two of them are revivals, and one, Greenland is new. They are loosely connected as they are different in theme and approach. The season began in April and ended in June. Richard Boon states : "Finding a new voice for the eighties, and a desire to describe a new politics, born out of defeat and rooted in the psychology of the individual, are two of Brenton's dominating concerns in the later work of the decade."[92] Sore Throats marks Brenton's shift to domestic drama as its cast is small, and the action takes place inside

one small room. It deals with the collapse of a married life of a middle-class couple. The play's seeming naturalistic form soon betrays Brenton's larger concerns. Ben Cameron comments on Sore Throats :

> In Sore Throats Brenton achieves a new poetic and thematic power. ... Secrets become recrimination, key themes are immediately aired- the role of obscenity as a form of social rebellion, the obsession with sexuality, the primary importance of money, and an inability to separate these.[93]

It was a departure in 1979 in Brenton's playwriting to inspect the ambiguity inside the characters instead of inspecting it in the whcle world. The characters are given more chance to speak and expose their minds as Judy, the wife in Sore Throats, did. Her despair is transformed by the end of the play into a realization of hope for change. Like Magnificence, it is a transtional play in that it heralds a new shift.

Bloody Poetry, the second play of the Utopian trilogy, is a play which deals with the history of the private lives of Byron and Shelley . Shelley's sense of defeat might echo Brenton's in the 1980s. Mark Lord criticizes Bloody Poetry as distoring the fame of those romantic poets : "In order to render Shelley and Byron's revolution as having

failed as completely (and internally) as Brenton and Hare's, Brenton has robbed his characters of even their modest successes."[94] Brenton in 1987 wrote about the first two of his Utopian plays:

> Bloody Poetry is a companion piece to my play Sore Throats, They are personal plays. What Byron and Shelley and their friends and lovers tried to do was to invent a new kind of family life. They failed, but I love them for their failure. It's a Utopian play. The characters are all, in their different ways, emotional and sexual voyagers. They had a conviction, which they couldn't really define, that there is a different way of living ... just out of reach. There's a third play to write out of this. I'm trying to write it now.[95]

Greenland is the third play of Brenton's "Utopia". Brenton wanted to focus on "the psychological journey of the characters from one world to another."[96] Brenton's characters in his trilogy are modern characters, as he describes them :

> They belong to us. They suffered from a reactionary, mean England, of which ours in the 1980s is an echo. They were defeated, they also behaved, at times, abominably to each other. But I wrote (the play) to celebrate and to salute them. Whether they really failed in their "Utopian dreams" is not yet resolved.[97]

Thus in Brenton's Utopian plays the focus is on

the interaction between the private and public life of the individual while the political and historical issues recede to the background. Brenton's aim was "to provide 'survival kits' for the left in what have been bleak times. The Court's "Utopia" season sought both to acknowledge leftist despair and crisis and to attempt to articulate a way forward."[98] About his "Utopia" Brenton says : "In a utopia I am interested in what people's minds are like."[99]

V

With the turn of the decade Brenton shifts to a new phase, his fourth and on-going one. Again his shift is connected with some political change in Britain and in Russia. The conservative hold on power seems to be less rigid after Mrs. Thatcher had resigned her office as a Prime Mininster in 1990. In the Eastern Block a big change has taken place, and the opposition has found some sense of direction. The secialist theatre might prize itself in the hope of regaining the experimental public theatre of the 1970s. Brenton rushed into writing large-scale, large-cast plays : H.I.D. (Hess is Dead) (1989) and Moscow Gold (1990, in collaboration with Tarq Ali). Both plays show Brenton's

departure from the psychological private drama of the 1980s to the epic drama of the 1970s.

In tracing Brenton's development as a playwright, we observe that every shift in his career coincides with a turning point in the political history of Britain and in the world as well. His unshaken socialist conviction could be the cause. In 1987 he describes his aim :

> I want a socialist government in this country. I think it's down to 'red' writers to hammer plays with socialist concerns into the centre of the theatre. The theatre is an institution. It's like any other institution in Britain, be it a university, hierarchical, and patriarchal. But underneath it there's a red theatre. I am a member of the red theatre under the theatre's bed.[100]

He believes that change is unavoidable but it must come from outside the ruling class. He also believes that playwrights are responsible to create a radical theatre. In his endeavour to achieve that kind of socialist theatre which deals with social, political and topical issues he wrote adaptations and plays in collaboration with others. Among his important adaptains are, Measure for Measure (1972), The Life of Galileo (1980), Conversations in Exile (1983) and Danton's Death (1984). Michael X. Zelenak in 1987 comments : "Adapta-

ions have become a significant part of Brenton's oeuvre, accounting for more than one-quarter of his total dramatic output."[101] Among his important collabroations: Lay-By; England's Ireland; Brassneck, A Short Sharp Shock and Moscow Gold. Richard Boon in 1989 sees that the effect of Brenton's collaborations "has been to allow him access to areas of interest that may otherwise have remained untouched."[102]

Each of Brenton's four phases marks a stage in the development of a political playwright whose work forms a reaction against the political and social changes in his country and in the world as a whole. His fringe period (Gum and Goo, Christie in Love, Fruit), represents the idealsim of a half-politically conscious revolutionist. The second phase (The Churchill Play, Weapons of Happiness, The Romans in Britain) represents a socialist revolutionary who has politically come of age graduating form the "arbitrary undirected violence ... to an option in favour of socialist politics and the response of the left ... including the response of terrorism with its ambiguous victories."[103] Brenton's third phase (Utopian Trilogy) represents the defeated efforts of a revolutionary socialist in need of a clear personal vision through which he could continue the fight against the social and political pressures around him. "The self, and its power to survive, adapt, and transfrom," can be considered as Brenton's

focus in his plays for the 1980s. Brenton's fourth and on-going phase (Hess is Dead, Moseow Gold) represents a revived socialist spirit and a renewed belief in a socialist change through dealing with topical issues in large-scale plays. In spite of the fact that Brenton's revolutionary spirit invades all his work in some way or another, his plays, since the early 1970s when he deserted the fringe groups, have been consistently seen on the mainstream stages. "His continuing production in the 1980s by the National in particular has not conferred on him a 'respectability' that would have seemed unlikely in 1969, but also confirmed his position as one of the country's leading playwrights."[105]

Since his early beginning up till the present, Brenton has occupied a unique popular and critical position among his generation of playwrights. Unlike John Osborne, Brenton has retained inside the revolutionary spark to inspire and guide his steps, even after he has become an established writer. His prolific output and its divergent critical reception argue in favour of this supposition, and against the supposition that he betrayed his socialist convictions when he joined the forces which these covictions originally meant to defeat. Brenton's attackers like to think of him as a time-server who exploited the large resources of the mainstream stages to write big-scale plays only when the spirit

of the time then favoured expansive dramatic writings. Then when the conservative spirit invaded all facades of life under which the theatre had to give in, he changed coat and hastened to write small-scale plays of private themes and psychological bent. With the approach of the 1990s a new spirit seems to have invaded social and political life in Britain, and in the Eastern block. Brenton has been the first playwright to exploit the early, and uncertain, beam of that spirit.

Taking the lead might not necessarily be betraying one's priniples especially in the case of true artists, who must keep their real worth which endures the test of time. A figure like John Dryden could be recalled for being accused of his literary shifts and ambiguity of ideals. Yet his talent which manifsted itself in more than one literary form (coupled with solid achievements and enduring fame) tends to ignore the man and his ideals, and focuses only on his contribution to English literature. The name of Shakespeare might be cautiously handled to support the argument, not in matters of stature, place, age, and ideals, but only in so far as the elements of good drama are concerned. Has the writing of good drama anything to do with ideology, beliefs, convictions or worldly wisdom? According to Anthony Burgess, "It is conceivable that Shakespeare's main aim in life

was to become a gentleman and not an artist."[106] Shakespeare's plays : Histories, comedies, and tragedies, are apparantly written to support the Elizabethan Myth . Yet, Shakespeare's life and convictions are not important for the evaluation of his dramatic masterpieces. If his drama is stripped bare of the Elizabethan concerns and beliefs which Shakespeare consciously wanted to cope with, what remains is its permanent quality : a true concern for humanity. Brenton's original intention was to write plays for the present to fulfil what he believes to be the public role of the theatre, i.e., to effect a socialist change. Whether he wrote plays to fulfil that goal, or to confer on him fame and wealth, the fact remains that his plays have attracted popular and critical attention for more than a quarter of a century. The topical aspects of his plays would not detract from their real worth as plays which deal with man's basic ambiguity in front of forces greater than his ability and ingenuity to cope with. In Ben Cameron's words :

> It would be misleading to cite his social convictions as the source of his dramatic power. Brenton above all is a man of the theatre, a poet of extraordinary originality and freshness, a craftsman trained by early experiences in the theatre to work with minimal technical

facilities, a scholar well versed in theatre history. Brenton himself may emphasize the political message of his plays as their defining characteristics, but an American audience unfamiliar with the specific political incidents or structures will be immediately drawn by Brenton, the poet.[107]

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