

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

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THEATRE OF ṢALAḤʿABD AL-ṢABŪR: AN
ANALYTICAL STUDY OF ONE OF ṢABŪR
PLAYS."**

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Plays."-Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology
17(7), ISSN 1567-214x**

Abstract

Epic theatre, a term coined by Bertolt Brecht, is a theatrical stream that developed in the 20th century and neglected the Aristotelian three unities, namely unity of time, unity of place and unity of action. Brecht rejected catharsis, empathy and imitation in favour of historicification, alienation and epic. This paper aims to apply the concepts of epic theatre on Ṣalaḥʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's *Now the King is Dead* in order to show how Ṣalaḥʿabd Al-Ṣabūr is influenced by Brecht and the epic theatre. This paper attempts to determine whether *Now the King is Dead* belongs to the absurd theatre or the epic theatre. In order to trace the influence of Bertolt Brecht on Ṣalaḥʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's *Now the King is Dead*, this paper adopts the descriptive approach depending on the content

analysis within a comparative mood to reveal the influence of Brecht on Ṣabd Al-Ṣabūr.

Keywords: epic, alienation, Ṣabd Al-Ṣabūr, Brecht, historification, *Now the King is Dead*

Introduction:

Epic Theatre, a term coined by the German playwright and critic Bertolt Brecht, is a theatrical stream that developed in the 20th century in Germany. In this stream, the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action are no longer applicable. The realist theatrical conventions, such as the fourth wall, were also discarded. One of the main aims of epic theatre was to tell the story in a simple way so the audience can think about the consequences of the events that they see on stage. This term is associated with Brecht as he supported what he called non-Aristotelian theatre, which rejects catharsis, empathy and imitation in Aristotle's terms, in favour of alienation effect. In his description of epic theatre, Brecht gives three important aspects. These aspects are historification, alienation and the epic. Al-RashīdBoushʿīr contends that there is no a contemporary writer who has not been influenced, whether positively or negatively, by the Brechtian experience particularly in theatre and in changing the effectiveness of culture in general (85). Through the Brechtian theatre, the Arabic theatre has found what it has been searching for in his quest for freedom and independence (Al-ʿAshrī, 1993, p. 38).

Research problem:

Notwithstanding Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's reputation, scholars in the Arab world have not given much attention to scrutinizing the Brechtian influence on his theatrical realm. Hence, this paper seeks to discuss the aspects of alienation and historification and show their applicability on Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's last play *Now the King is Dead* (1971).

Objectives:

This paper aims at:

Firstly: Clarifying the concepts of alienation and historification.

Secondly: Investigating the Brechtian influence to Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's *Now the King is Dead*.

Thirdly: In spite of the prevailing view that *Now the King is Dead* belongs to the Absurd theatre, this paper aims at proving that it belongs to the epic theatre.

Approach:

In order to trace the influence of Bertolt Brecht on Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's *Now the King is Dead*, this paper adopts the descriptive approach depending on the content analysis within a comparative mood to reveal the influence of Brecht on Ṣabd Al-Ṣabūr.

Preface:

Brecht uses events of the past or other times and places which is far from the contemporary audience and this is called historification. The audience must view the events with which they can identify and the situations which corresponds with their situations. Moreover, they must feel that change is possible. In effect, past events are used in order to reduce the emotional reactions of the audience. The opposite of identification is alienation and this is what the production should try and achieve in the epic theatre. Alienation can be defined as taking from an incident or character what makes it obvious, familiar or understandable so as to create wonderment and curiosity. The theatre makers should keep the audience apart from the events which is portrayed on stage by all possible means in order not to identify strongly with the characters on stage. Alienation techniques can be found in the representation of the text on stage, the use of music, the text itself, the design and even the approach to acting and characterization.

Historification, per se, can be seen as an alienation technique as the portrayal of the events from the past is removed from the direct experiences of the audience. All these elements are combined to remind the audience that they are sitting in a theatre, witnessing the representation of specific events (cf. Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, 1989).

Music is another technique used by Brecht to interrupt the flow of the story and to ensure that the audience are not drawn into the events. Brecht, moreover, uses language itself as a means to create alienation. His use of language is simple and direct, yet sometimes he uses poetic language to create contrast with longer prose like scenes. The characters' use of language can be flat and the use of regional language is also found. In addition, Brecht achieves alienation through the use of humour and irony. He uses them in places where it would not be seen as dramatically appropriate. Additionally, Brecht uses techniques such as masks, puppetry, signs, visible stage machinery and gestures (cf. Brecht and Willet, Brecht on theatre, 1978).

The influence of Bertolt Brecht on Ṣalaḥ 'abd Al-Ṣabūr's last play *Now the King is Dead*:

In his book *Ḥayatīfī al-shi'r*, 'abd Al-Ṣabūr shows that he is fully aware of contemporary trends in the theatre and criticism including Brechtian theatre (1977, p.217). When we read Ṣalaḥ 'abd Al-Ṣabūr's last play *Now the King is Dead*, we find that he has written it under the influence of Brecht because the techniques of the epic theatre are greatly used. Hence, this play falls into the category of epic theatre. The events take place in an imaginary context of a royal palace in which a king has died and his spirit has called for his wife to lie beside him in his bed, but she has refused. The poet has fought the king's men and fulfilled the queen's desires of having a child. The play is a symbolic one where there is a conflict between the word and the sword. The whole play is an allegory of

Nasser's era in modern Egypt and the queen symbolizes Egypt. The whole play portrays the human aspiration for freedom as well.

A) 'Abd Al-Ṣabūr's treatment of history:

Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr's treatment of history starts from the very beginning even before the action starts. When the three women appear, the first woman says:

The manager also said, quoting the director, who had quoted the author to him, that the king in question ruled for ten years, and that his official chronicler or historian, you will meet him soon, has proved in an excellent piece of research, supplemented by an impressive list of references which include the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Mokhtar al-Sihah . . . to quote only a few and adorned with lithographs documenting the development of the king's signature, as well as, lithographs of his identity card, his family card,...etc. The wise historian proved that the kingdom . . . has never known another king (1986, p.43).

In the text ancient Greek and Egyptian myths are interwoven. The queen is regarded as a hostage in distress of many folk-tales and Virgin Mary under the palm tree. At the end of Act II that shows the conception of the child, Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr uses allusion and versifies the Qur'anic text that describes this part of Mary's story by the queen:

How wonderful it would be if the spirit of the universe

Could visit me here and breathe its mystery into me

Until it filled me, as a ripe fruit filled with honeyed juice!

And when my time comes,

I would go to the palm tree,

And shake the trunk towards me....

If this could happen, we wouldn't need blood to settle our differences maturity.

I would only have to point to the baby, and he would speak. (Abd al-Sabur, 1986)

When the play starts the women freeze like wooden marionettes in their postures and the king selects the first one to dance and after finishing, she stands again as a doll. Afterwards, he calls the second and she springs to life. The shift of the women from motionless to dynamic positions and vice versa reminds us of the Greek myth of Pygmalion. In the same vein, they look like puppets and this is one of the techniques used by Brecht to create alienation.

Ṣalaḥʿabd Al-Ṣabūr uses irony in many positions. For example, when the king accepted the white velvet from the tailor, he asked the historian to search for another slogan for the state.

King: The general purport should be

Something to the effect

That we choose white a symbol of the happy and

Loving extinction of the self

Into a state of total harmony

We have sunk the self into the common good and

Merged into each other until we grew white and

Angel-like

Eternally dying into the universal white absolute,

The Royal white absolute. (1986, p. 60-61)

Here, he juxtaposes "the universal white absolute" with "the royal white absolute" and this creates a comic effect which is much clearer in Arabic as the two words (kulīyah/malakīyah) sound similar. There is another clear-cut irony which lies in the fact that the king's apparent strength is afflicted by sterility since he is unable to give his wife a child.

B) Achieving alienation:

The play starts with three women who try to direct the audience's attention to the work itself by giving them information about the author and the director. They, also, end the play making the structure of the play a circular one. Those three women "do not exist as the equivalent of great chorus but also impersonate some

characters on stage and this in turn makes them hover on the borderline between reality and fiction" (Shalaby, 2013, p. 131). They are real people. They are the narrators who give the gist of each act. Those three narrators help achieve Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* or distancing effect and this technique helps them keep a direct contact with the audience throughout the play. We see them explain some dramatic concepts and this is another aspect of the Epic theatre. They explain, in Act I, Aristotle's concept of "pity and fear" aroused by tragedy and the purgation of such feelings. Then, in Act II they discuss Aristotle's concept of "mimesis." Finally, in Act III they discuss the concept of "climax" and "anti-climax." Walter Benjamin argues that epic theatre is basically gestural and that interruption of action creates more gestures (1989, p. 20); this, of course, manifests Ṣabd Al-Ṣabūr's interest in making the audience think of the theatrical experience itself.

As the king is unable to give the queen a child, they act as if they have a baby and have hallucinations about a baby that does not exist. The king kisses the imagined baby's heel and this, in turn, reinforces the alienation effect. In the same vein, the use of puppets enhances this effect, too. In the play, the vizier, the judge, the poet, and the executioner wear the same blue costumes as a proof of their loyalty to their king. Ṣalaḥʿabd Al-Ṣabūr told the director to put cardboards on their backs to indicate their roles in the palace; these cardboards reflect the influence of the epic theatre.

Similarly, at the end of the play, Ṣalaḥʿabd Al-Ṣabūr gives the audience three different endings to choose one of them for the next performance to achieve the communication between the characters on stage and the audience through sharing viewpoints; this discussion between the actors on stage and the audience is part and parcel of the play itself (Bin ʿAṣfiat, 2011, p. 170). The first woman narrates:

And since the author wasn't quite sure which of his endings you would prefer, he decided to show you all three of them. However, he has given us his solemn word that the ending you choose, that is, the one most of you feel happy with, will be the only one we play tomorrow. For as the author firmly says, we are not here to teach you but rather to learn from you. (1986, p. 108)

By doing this Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr tries to make the audience think critically about the play. Ṣabūr does not want to destroy the hypothetical fourth wall or break down the barrier, but he wants to give an active role to the audience since he does not want a passive audience, yet he wants his audience to participate in the play by choosing the end that appeals to them. These different endings suggest that the play "is essentially dynamic" (Brecht and Willett, 1978, p. 79). It is obvious that the ending which the audiences vote for would express the common satisfaction and inclination of the majority. Giving the audience the opportunity to participate in putting a suitable end to his play was a remarkable proof of his concern about the audience's interaction. By doing this, Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr, here, strives to make the audience adopt a critical attitude towards the play. The audiences were always a concern for Brecht and he was always interested in changing the way audiences view the dramatic work and the way the theatre functions. Brecht wanted theatre audience to be "experts" (Brecht and John Willett, 1978, p. 44). Brecht's awareness of the potent power of the people in making a political change made him interested in the audiences' attitude towards the theatre. The similarity which Ṣalahʿabd Al-Ṣabūr has with Brecht, here, is that he wanted to pass judgment of how *Now the King is Dead* could end to the spectators allowing them a detachment from the events they watch on stage.

C) Ṣabūr's use of music:

Music plays a fundamental role in *Now the king is Dead* and shows Ṣalah'abd Al-Ṣabūr's great interest in the techniques of the epic theatre. The play contains musical pieces of various rhythms such as funeral march and dance rhythms. The playwright applies conventional music on stage. Furthermore, he applies silent music that only certain characters are aware of. Music is introduced as a language of understanding between the queen and the poet. It is named the night's enchanted music by the queen. It is used as a signifier of identity, too. When the queen asks the king about his favourite type of music, his character is shown through the music he prefers. He is a big fan of the "dancing music and military marches." When the queen asks the king, "Can you hear the music playing now?" he answers "what music? Where?" (1986, p. 69). Then, she describes a special type of music that has a special effect on her. It awakes her from her dream of the imagined child and she becomes aware of reality, so the enchanted music frees her from hallucinations. The following dialogue demonstrates this influence:

King: ...We were so happy with our imaginary child!

Queen: The child of hopelessness.

King: And yet, I was content.

Queen: And so was I, until the night music took me unawares, and ripped Off my illusions.

When she is here, I have to face her naked.

Oh, my mistress! Music of the night!

Give me back my child!

Oh, give him back to me!

Or

let me have another! (1986, p. 71)

When the same question is asked to the poet, his answer differs from that of the king:

In the babble and the gabble of many tongues and voices,

I can always recognize her distinctive language.
I even sense her presence before she comes, I can
Smell her in the air.
Indeed, I summon her when I wish. (1986, p. 85)

In fact, music awakes the queen from her dreams and helps her create a new real world with the poet. The poet's flute is not only used as a musical instrument, but it is also used as a weapon with which the poet can defend himself.

Conclusion:

This paper has shown the influence of the German playwright and critic Bertolt Brecht on the Egyptian well-known dramatist Ṣalah 'abd Al-Ṣabūr. Drawing on the analysis of 'abd Al-Ṣabūr's last play *Now the King is Dead*, we can conclude the following :

- 1- 'Abd Al-Ṣabūr is greatly influenced by Brecht and his epic theatre. Therefore, *Now the King is Dead* belongs to the epic theatre because the techniques of the epic theatre are greatly used.
- 2- The influence of Brecht is obviously shown in alienation, historification and the use of music, puppetry and cards.
- 3- 'Abd Al-Ṣabūr achieves alienation effect through the three female narrators who comment on the incidents of the play.
- 4- The most striking feature of the play is the three different endings introduced by the three female narrators and this idea is new in the Egyptian theatre.
- 5- 'Abd Al-Ṣabūr was searching for a drama that could fully answer the needs of his audience especially after independence.
- 6- 'Abd Al-Ṣabūr explored local resources and experimented western forms of drama.

7- Ṣalah 'abd Al-Ṣabūr deploys religious materials to discuss issues related to his society.

8- 'Abd Al-Ṣabūr used the past to comment on the present. He recalled the past as a way to change the present.

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