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STAGING A POSTDRAMATIC PERFORMANCE: SIMON STEPHENS'S *NUCLEAR WAR**

Mesut GÜNENÇ**

Abstract

The second part of the twentieth century has been influenced by in-her-face aesthetics exemplified by innovative and shocking tragedies of the representative playwrights such as Howard Brenton, Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane. In the beginning of the twenty first century verbal and political theatre have been defined by the plays of Martin Crimp, Tim Crouch and Simon Stephens within the context of 1999 Hans Thies Lehmann's ground-breaking study *Postdramatic Theatre*. Stephens latest play *Nuclear War* (2017) represents postdramaticity to its most extreme form. nameless woman character in the play, mourning the loss of a loved man on the seventh anniversary of his death, always staggers around the city and sometimes speaks by the help of a chorus of four actors-dancers and thoughts inside her head, searches connection, affection and sexual fulfilment. On the other hand, Simon Stephens's latest play *Nuclear War* can be analysed within the context of postdramatic traits. Hans Thies Lehmann's deconstructs traditions of pre-dramatic and dramatic theatre and especially his notion of postdramatic traits are well suited to describe postdramatic performance in Stephens's play. Applying postdramatic theory and traits, this paper will analyse postdramatic performance in *Nuclear War*.

Keywords: Postdramatic Theatre, Hans Thies Lehmann, Simon Stephens, *Nuclear War*.

1. Introduction

Simon Stephens's latest play *Nuclear War* (2017) has been one of the most extensively argued theatre texts of the current period. The argument it has discussed that *Nuclear War* is akin to within the context of structurally experiment(i)al, wisely constructed and fulfilled Stephens's another play *Pornography* (2007). These two plays have open and blurring form and dealing with the issue of how much obligation the playwright carries when it comes to his play against major social issues. Definitely, readers/audiences are come up against with the concern of society and they are witnessed how Simon Stephens takes on responsibility and can narrate it in a contemporary play. As one of the members of Thatcher's children, Simon Stephens has witnessed economic and social changes and a golden period in ideological and economic capitalism. He focuses in his plays on experiences which have been shaped in his childhood. For that reason, Stephens and his colleagues, taking responsibility, advance their own individual rebellions and state themselves through different techniques. On the other hand, Simon Stephens clarifies the depressed and devastating side of the life, covering such concern as children using guns in America and Europe, war, bombings, population problems, environmental issues, and terror attacks. Instead of great wars, Stephens

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witnesses terror attacks and psychological discourses; instead of grand narratives, individual actions, rebellions and suicide bombers claim the society.

In handling with these problems, Stephens and his colleagues write their own stories and plays without grand narratives, and encourage audiences to interrogate the happenings of this world on an individual basis. His plays show spectators realities of the world they live in. After 1990s, British Drama has been dealt with oppositions, desires, psychological factors, consumption, media, violence, and war which form and surround character's and individual's life in the plays of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Tim Crouch and Simon Stephens.

Nuclear War is a play which explore a vulnerable woman and "the voices scratched in her head come to life as she attempts ordinary tasks ultimately exploring a theme that's relevant to many Londoners – that of isolation in the urban jungle" (O'Hanlon, *London Theatre*, 2017). As I will clarify in this essay, in order to show the process of frustrating journey through interior monologue, Stephens arrives at a model that purposefully deconstructs conventional norm of the drama, combining experimental performance and audiences as it progresses.

In his plays, Stephens questions dramatic realist traditions in his text and frequently uses sections of narrations in his plays. His last play *Nuclear War* explores the new art form that of contemporary dance, and represents one central nameless woman character who mourns the loss of a loved man, staggers around the city and searches completion. My argument in this article is that postdramatic theatre and its workings are observed in Simon Stephens' play *Nuclear War* and this study researches the play by applying Hans Thies Lehmann's analysis of postdramatic theatrical signs and aspects. In the next sections, the issue of time of the play, criticism about his work and the theory will be studied and the last section examines the play through the lens of postdramatic theory.

2. The Issue of Time

Stephens' latest play *Nuclear War* (2017) was written "in different ways at different times with different purposes" (Stephens, Introduction 2017, 1). *Nuclear War* has a different and distinctive form which reflects contemporary dance of performer's body. In Stephens' words:

Hofesh brought a remarkable energy to the rehearsal room. He was charming and encouraging and seemed engaged with the ideas that underpinned my play. (...) Many of the moments I am most fond of in that show were moments that Hofesh created. His work graced the moments in between scenes. (...) Watching him work fascinated me. I couldn't understand how he could inspire and provoke emotional or intellectual responses in me simply by moving a performer's body in space (2017, 2).

Hofesh's energy and works fascinated Simon Stephens and led him to see more Hofesh's work and more dance. After this impression, Simon Stephens and Hofesh came together with the help of Ramin Gray (Artistic Director of the Actors Touring Company) and these meetings led to *Nuclear War*.

Simon Stephens explains formation process of the play: "Nuclear War is a piece I wrote in 2014 when the notion of nuclear war was a strange combination of nostalgic memory of paranoia from my childhood" (Williams, 2017). On the other hand the time and title of the play coincide with tension between North Korea and US, moreover Dominic Cavendish asserts this situation "you can't call your play "Nuclear War" at a time of rising anxiety about the sudden onset of Armageddon and have it contain only the most tenuous, abstractly tangential relation to nuclear war". (Interview in *The Telegraph*, 2017). However, both Cavendish and Stephens clear up that the provocative title of the play subtle a metaphor:

Nuclear War is a piece I wrote in 2014 when the notion of nuclear war was a strange combination of nostalgic memory of paranoia from my childhood and a poetic possibility, not a feasible political tactic. The play has nothing to do with geopolitics, international relationships, machismo ball-swinging or public displays of phallic symbols in the streets of a capital city. ... Man! It's a fucking metaphor (Williams, Interview with Simon Stephens, 2017).

3. Reviews of The Play

Current theatrical and academic reviews and conversations have been taken up in relation to Simon Stephens' *Nuclear War* (2017), which was staged at the Royal Court Theatre. Domenic Cavendish writes in the *The Telegraph* "that aside, what can one say about Nuclear War? That it pursues a theme, familiar in Stephens' work, of loneliness and urban alienation and that, taken as a poeticised and physicalized cry of sadness and desperation it is, in its opaque way, powerfully effective" (Review, *Nuclear War*, 2017). Andrzej



Lukowski explains the controversial title for confusing mind “though the title could only have been more zeitgeisty if it had been called ‘Snap Election’, this short (45min!), experimental new play from Simon Stephens has absolutely nothing to do with current global sabre-rattling, or, indeed, nuclear war in any obvious sense.” (Review, *Nuclear War*, 2017). Michael Billington reviews the play focusing on its title: “the title evokes global catastrophe. What we witness is individual angst. We sit on mismatched chairs around a central space in the Theatre Upstairs as Maureen Beattie, heroically committed and accompanied by a four-strong chorus, delivers Stephens’ text” (*The Guardian*, 2017). Luke Jennings examines the structure of the play via postdramatic perspective: the play’s “structure endows director Imogen Knight and her five-strong cast with unusual freedom and responsibility, and as a spectator of the 45-minute piece, you’re as engaged by the experiment as by the fragmentary drama that ensues” (2017). In general, critics agreed that the play has distinctive effect on audiences with its provocative title, obscure scenes and alienated mind.

4. A Brief Analysis of Postdramatic Theatre

The second part of the twentieth century has been witnessed in-er-face aesthetics with distinctive and devastating tragedies of such playwrights as Edward Bond, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and Simon Stephens. In the beginning of the twenty-first century verbal and political theatre have been replaced with the plays of Martin Crimp, Tim Crouch and Simon Stephens within the context of 1999 Hans Thies Lehmann’s ground-breaking study *Postdramatic Theatre*. The expressive term has been explained by Hans Thies Lehmann as *Postdramatisches Theater* in 1999. However British drama and community could not understand new theory until 2006. Karen Jürs-Munby adding translator’s introduction, translated into English from German *Postdramatic Theatre* in 2006. New term is actually an alternative term to postmodern drama to clarify the new signs and aspects that enable new type of performances. Postdramatic performances challenge the conventional text; dialogues and characters no longer dominate the performance and instead of them directorial freedom of audience’s participation is observed. Glenn D’Cruz lays bare that Lehmann’s postdramatic vocabulary brings order to the house of contemporary theatre discourse by focusing on theatre practices as opposed to general cultural theories, or an expanded account of performance (2018, 33).

Lehmann’s new theory represents various pioneering works which portrays dramatic writings and performance until twenty first century theatre. On the other hand his new theory contains both European and American works which previously described as postmodern. His new term breaks down the structure of character in the centre place and forces and activates the audiences into creating new comments about the role of the stage. It redefines performing concepts, mimesis and language. Lehmann’s term has caused confusion for that reason he defines concept of postdramatic theatre as:

postdramatic theatre is not simply a new kind of text of staging –and even bless a new type of theatre text, but rather a type of sign usage in the theatre that turns both of these levels of theatre upside down through the structurally changed quality of the performance text: it becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information (2006, 85).

Postdramatic theatre, the post side of drama, contains a post-theatre rejection of the idea and therefore evaluates theatre as a literary theory.

Postdramatic theatre practices a new discourse about performance in Europe and America and focuses on Bertolt Brecht, Gertrude Stein and Antonin Artaud. Lehmann points out that Brecht puts an end to the dramatic tradition, however, “despite his antagonism towards Aristotle, Brecht could not deconstruct the existence of the story and the text. Postdramatic theatre has common features with Brecht’s ideas, so Lehmann calls postdramatic theatre as post-Brechtian theatre:

Postdramatic theatre is a post- Brechtian theatre. It situates itself in a space opened up by the Brechtian inquiries into the presence and consciousness of the process of representation within the represented and the inquiry into a new ‘art of spectating’ (2006, 33).

Lehmann, analysing Brecht’s key terms such as *Verfremdung*, *Gestus* and *Epic*, points to productive spectators as Brecht aimed. Duska Radosavljevic explains this new theatre: “for Lehmann, postdramatic theatre is not just a matter of artistic experimentation, nor is it a matter of negotiation around the binaries between text and performance or traditional theatre and the avant-garde” (2013, 17). Postdramatic Theatre, as supported by Heiner Müller and Robert Wilson, is closer to dance, performance, ceremony, and ritual and dream imagery. Postdramatic theatre claims that text can be minimalized and that theatre can take place



apart from text and fable. Thus, postdramatic theatre aims to move away from dramatic text applying performance, happenings and Robert Wilson's theatre of imagery.

Apart from director, each artist, dancer, musician and player has a different and free place in postdramatic theatre. Postdramatic performances frequently combine elements "such as movement, music, language, lighting effects and dance without giving priority to any single signs of the performance" (D'cruz, 2018, 31). Body searches sound, rhythm and harmony instead of animating a character. Contrary to traditional drama, the text has properties of both visual and aural objects. Media and artists start to have close relationships and spectators doubt meta-narratives and theories, and interrogate establishes system of theatrical features. Real meanings of words cannot be reached easily as words have visual features. Thus language is both an object and a musical subject. With the help of imagery and simulations, spectators face different worlds and interpret events differently on the scene. Instead of conventional characters, Lehmann focuses on performers' presence and physicality. To Lehmann, the performers' presence and physicality are the main aspects of postdramatic theatre. By prioritizing physicality and the body as the main aspects of postdramatic theatre, Lehmann deconstructs the unity of character. Subverting the unity of character, he expresses "auto-sufficient physicality, which is exhibited in its intensity, gestic potential, auratic presence and transmitted tensions" (2006: 95). Physicality represents body on the postdramatic stage. The body on the stage illustrates policy, economy, culture and society, representing reality and requiring the spectator's presence. This presence makes a connection between fiction and fact, representation and presentation, the stage and the outside.

In his book, Lehmann contemplates to form new discourses related to theatre instead of deconstructing epochal periods and categories. He aims "to read the realized artistic constructions and forms of practice as answers to artistic questions, as manifest reactions to the representational problems faced by theatre" (2006, 21). At this point, new technologies and new culture provide people and audiences with the opportunity to get new perspectives and perceptions that suggest reactions, interactions, social, ethical and cultural relationships. In the light of these relationships, no dialogues, long silences, crying, screams, absurd repetitions, sexuality, rape, deformed bodies, incomplete texts, and even animals can be observed in the postdramatic scenscape. New technologies and perspectives form different postdramatic scenes, and these different postdramatic scenes constitute "performance text" (85) which direct "linguistic material and the texture of the staging interact with the theatrical situation" (86). Stephen's play defines performance as beyond the use of character and represents new directorial and performative attitudes. In the following part of the study Simon Stephens' play *Nuclear War* will be analysed within the context of postdramatic theatre.

5. The Play

Malgorzata Sugiera sorts out that audience can watch themselves "as subjects which perceive acquire knowledge, and partly create the objects of their cognition" (2004, 26). In contemporary theatre audiences might have the chance to observe and create their own characters and in postdramatic theatre audiences should take place of characters because text are written for active participation and communication. Simon Stephens' last play *Nuclear War* (2017) that was staged at the Royal Court Theatre, and challenges the traditional dramatic conventions and as the most distinctive feature, deconstructs the character in the text. *Nuclear War* is not actually about a nuclear war, however it does suggest a sickly vision of an atomised and estranged society presents one central woman character. The character is a nameless woman who mourns the loss of a loved man on the seventh anniversary of his death. She consistently walks around the city, remembers her memories for her sexual fulfilment but at the ending of the play the woman returns to her house alone in an alienated way. The nameless woman is psychologically distorted and she hopelessly tries to find human contact while roaming through the city. She uses buses and the subway, spends time in coffee houses and is astonished and questions the people she sees around herself. Obviously she is unhappy. She struggles to express her emotions, while still feeling the loss as something distinct, agonizing and new.

The woman is supported and accompanied by four strong characters. The play is devoid of any other characters, plot or setting. Stephens clarifies his untraditional ways for the formation of character.

A simple speed read of *Nuclear War* will throw up the same problems for any reader. There are no character names. There are deliberate blurrings of character and action. It is unclear which words are stage directions and which words might be utterances. In this piece, specifically, it is unclear which words are prompts for an image or language to be spoken (Introduction, 2017, 5).



The woman character does not have an identity, she remains nameless. Stephens evidences that no identifiable character is needed for theatre. The absence of character is clarified by Stephens in the play with fragmented speeches and italicised texts “italicized texts denote thoughts scratched onto the inside of her head” (2017, 12). In the play the only specific design is observed with dashes where speaker begins and stops speeches. As Martin Crimp has used in his *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and *The Country* (2000), Stephens uses dashes for “lines preceded by a dash might be read to be choric in some sense” (2017, 12). Apart from dashes Simon Stephens uses repetitions deliberately like in *4.48 Psychosis* in the play:

I can't

-hear the words on the radio.

I can't

-hear the music that they're playing.

I can't

-hear the sound of the telephone.

I can't

-hear my footsteps as I walk out of the door.

(...) (2017: 13).

I see the yellow in the crockery of the cafe that I sit in.

I see the yellow on the coat of a passing little girl.

I see the yellow of the sun scotching the globe of the world.

(...) (14).

The sense of anaphora adds a poetic quality to prose. Like Sarah Kane's last two plays and Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, Stephens lets director and actors form their interpretation and freedom “the freedom to decide who should speak what words and when and in what order” (Stephens, 3) and also aim to share responsibility of the play by spectators:

It struck me that insisting that collaborators enjoy a freedom to interpret demanded that those collaborators engage intellectually with the same level of responsibility as I did and do. Rather than abandoning an intellectual responsibility to my text I was insisting upon that responsibility being shared by everybody in the whole rehearsal room (Stephens, 2017, 4).

Absence of character is presented to readers and spectators with language. They should understand the depth of language. (Lehmann, 2006, 18). Direct relationship among character, language and spectator, is lost in postdramatic theatre. Lehmann argues that “... postdramatic theatre is obviously the demand for an open and fragmenting perception in place of a unifying and closed perception” (2006, 82). Stephens' play presents neither a clear character nor a specific structure. Central absence of the character is never staged through a definite and unified presence. Director Imogen Knight, using Stephens' offer for maximum freedom and forming mismatched chairs and a chorus of four actor-dancers, deconstructs hierarchical structure and creates a “synaesthetic perception” (Lehmann, 2006, 86). On 24 April 2017 Holly Williams reviews the play to support synaesthetic perception: “the audience sits on chairs on four sides of the room. Lee Curran's lighting is a tangible presence, often thick, warm, in uneasy yellows or synthetic sunset shades; it's used like paint to colour moments”. Non-hierarchical structure, language, lighting and colour deconstruct traditional walls between spectators and the stage. Stage directions and established hierarchy are not observed in *Nuclear War*. The themes, content and any specific meanings are subverted in the play.

In postdramatic theatre, dramatic theatre is completely abandoned and instead of traditional character, the postdramatic performance is staged by undetermined speakers or “text bearer” (Poschmann 1997 qtd. in Barnett 2008, 18) “who has no other responsibility than to deliver the text: that is not to interpret” (18). D'Cruz describes the term as “a postdramatic replacement for dramatic theatre” (2018, 102). Instead of systematic narration and character, language becomes an independent feature for the play so “all of these words may be spoken by the performers but none of them need to be” (Stephens, 2017, 12). Instead of performers, spectators try to solve and get message of the performance.

Contrary to dramatic theatre, spectators become active “witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning” (Munby, 2006, 6). Stephens aims for active spectators that can have the roles of characters in the play.



Stephens' play also manifests coldness which is accustomed to traditional text-based theatre, yet at the same time, warmth is created with active spectators. In his theory Lehmann clarifies that "through the participation of living human beings, as well as through the century-old fixation with moving human fortunes, the theatre possesses a certain warmth" (2006, 95).

6. Conclusion

Like in so much of Stephens's works, there is an addiction to loneliness and shame along with cruelty of a society which lost its capability for empathy. In this forty five minute performance Simon Stephens analyses transgression, which causes alienation in society, and creates solipsistic individual. This solipsistic individual tries to escape from the place in which she lives. She travels on the tube, sits in a cafe and walks down in a high street. An alienated and nameless individual, sexual, physical desires and memories are illustrated in *Nuclear War*. This play, containing nameless characters, blurred meanings and non-hierarchical structure, deconstructs dramatic conventions and presents postdramaticity to its most extreme form by explanation all of these words may be spoken by the performers but none of them need to be.

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