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“TO TELL OR TO QUESTION?” CARYL CHURCHILL’S SEVEN JEWISH CHILDREN: THEATER AS WITNESS TO THE HUMAN COSTS OF CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

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Abstract

Caryl Churchill's play *Seven Jewish Children*—written as Churchill's ardent response to the refusal of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to broadcast an internationally backed appeal for aid relief for the Palestinian people—was one of the most controversial pieces of political theater to surface in Britain in 2009. The play caused widespread debate, around the politics of balance, objectivity, representation, and authorship. This paper explores the efficacy of political theater as a form of social commentary, where the “call” of Churchill's play found an unsolicited “response” in Richard Sterling's *Seven Other Children*, a play mimicking Churchill's style and content, but drawing on an Israeli perspective. Sterling's stated quest to address issues of balance in political theater poses questions about the purpose of political theater, a dramatic form that, in itself, makes no claim to balance. The paper aligns this debate to Alexander's (2011) thesis that social dramas draw on theatrical form to achieve symbolic power: real life events play out as dramas via media and other propaganda machines geared toward shaping the psyche of a people. The controversy that ensued surrounding both Churchill's and Sterling's plays could be said to have created its own social drama, within the theater and beyond, on the multiple platforms on which social performances are presented.

Keywords

Caryl Churchill, Gaza, political theatre, social drama, *Seven Jewish Children*

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ON THE 24TH OF JANUARY 2009, IN LONDON, approximately 2000 people converged on the doorstep of Britain's world-renowned national broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), to protest publicly against the corporation's decision not to broadcast an internationally-backed appeal by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC, founded 1963), to generate aid for the war-engulfed people of Gaza. The appeal was supported by thirteen British charities, and its message on the plight of the Palestinian people was aired by rival broadcasters, including Channel 4 and ITV. The BBC's director general, Mark Thompson, refused to respond either to the DEC or to subsequent public outrage, insisting that if the BBC was to broadcast such an appeal it "might be seen as evidence of bias on a highly sensitive political issue" (Davies, Thorpe, and Hinsliff [2009]). The protest was one manifestation of widespread surprise and considerable anger, that what many thought to be a proud principle of service broadcasting, of humanitarian concern for innocent victims of war, had been abandoned, using, it seemed, a cynical defense of obligations to preserve "objectivity" as a justification. While objectivity may be seen as a guiding principle, or even a hallmark of a national broadcaster, arguing that the highest moral ground is to be found in a quest for "balance," and not in practicing social solidarity, suggested not that the BBC was acting impartially, but rather that it had taken sides, in anticipation of political pressure. The sense of injustice that motivated widespread condemnation was expressed in clear terms by the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu:

This is not a row about impartiality but rather about humanity. This situation is akin to that of British military hospitals who treat prisoners of war as a result of their duty under the Geneva Convention. They do so because they identify need rather than cause. This is not an appeal by Hamas asking for arms but by the Disasters Emergency Committee asking for relief. (Davies, Thorpe, and Hinsliff [2009])

By declining their request, he added, "the BBC has already taken sides and forsaken impartiality." The words of Paulo Freire come to mind: "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (122).

Responding to public criticism, a BBC spokesperson stated, "We are highlighting the situation in Gaza in every news bulletin and that is one of the reasons the issue is so high on the agenda" (Davies, Thorpe, and Hinsliff [2009]). British viewers had long been familiar with conflict between Israel and Palestine over the years, through regular media coverage, but the events of *Operation Cast Lead*, a three week period in the winter of 2008/2009, had the appearance of all-out war on Gaza. The effects of bombarding the most densely populated place on earth, a walled enclave from which it was impossible to leave, led to the DEC's declaration that Gaza's Palestinian population was in a state of acute humanitarian crisis. The

conflict itself, like its coverage, could be said to have been systemically unbalanced; the death toll reads: 1,166 - 1,417 Palestinians killed; 13 Israelis (including four who died from 'friendly fire'). The BBC published nightly updates on the bombardment as news fodder, while its director general felt unmoved to facilitate an invitation to the British public to contribute aid, and thus, acknowledge the plight of the Palestinian population. Placing a legalistic interpretation of journalistic neutrality over what was at stake for thousands of innocent people was widely seen as disproportionate; in the protestors' view, the BBC was clearly not neutral, but had become a player.

Archbishop Sentamu's emphasis on human need opens up dimensions of the DRC appeal that might not be obvious at first reading. Cash donations are essential for economic aid, but the social dimension of a charity appeal is of immense importance, because of the ethical position in which it places potential contributors. On the surface, humanitarian identification is articulated through economic means, but the response that drives it resides at a deeper level of human consciousness; a psychology of identification underpins the transaction. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, large social events, such as wars and oppressive regimes, produce, through the complex and varied nets of events, social dramas, which borrow from theatrical forms their power to activate empathic responses in the public mind, as people identify with, and even fear the catastrophe in question (92-104). This kind of interaction between witness and scenario draws on Aristotle's thesis of catharsis: a terrifying spectacle purges the witness and thus, in turn, produces an active, morally upstanding citizen. It is what Alexander identifies as the symbolic power of an act to facilitate widespread emotional and moral identification, which, in this case, Thompson's actions set out to disable (92-104).

A social drama gains symbolic weight by becoming shorthand for a contest between an oppressive regime and its alternative. Throughout the crisis, BBC airtime featured on-site correspondents reporting events from the Gaza Strip, in the clinical "unbiased" manner required of a public service broadcaster, according to Thompson. Others took the view that it was partial coverage, as it addressed audiences as if minds were only reliable when divorced from hearts; some saw this as shameful. It was in this context that the corporation's refusal to air the charity appeal appeared to symbolize a clear political agenda on the corporation's part, and became itself, ironically, the catalyst for the creation of one of the most powerful—and the most controversial—theater events in Britain in 2009: renowned playwright, Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children*, directed by artistic director Dominic Cooke at the Royal Court Theatre, London.

Churchill has never shrunk from using theater as a form of weaponry in cultural politics. Her body of work, extending over some fifty-four years, tackles multiple bold and controversial topics, while challenging formal boundaries and creating new theatrical strategies. Aston and Diamond summarize the complexity and inventiveness of her writing, "in Churchill's work politics and formal invention go

hand in hand, and if there are strong thematic tendencies in her work, her ability to reinvent theatrical technique and language from play to play seems inexhaustible" (8). This ability to reinvent and play with theatrical form is nowhere more present than in *Seven Jewish Children*. The play was written as an immediate response to the fierce bombardment of the Gaza war, and had no economic rationale, with performances free of charge, and donations solicited for Medical Aid for Palestine (MAP). This unusual redirection of generated income for a theater was in keeping with Churchill's objective for the play; she insisted that the play was very much "a political event, [and] not just a theatre event."

Churchill's sense of *Seven Jewish Children* as a form of political intervention was quickly confirmed by heated controversy generated in response to the theatrical performance. From the very first night, social media sites, quickly followed by the press, were awash with polarized reactions to the work. The outrage of those who found the play offensive [including Phillips (in Symons 2009), Jacobson (2009) and Nathan (2009)] was based on a perception of the work as anti-Semitic, a position neatly illustrated in Newkey-Burden's (2009) insistence that "*Seven Jewish Children* was a straightforward piece of anti-Semitism, masquerading as a critique of Israel." Melanie Phillips (qtd. in Symons 2009) suggested that the play was, quite simply, "an open vilification of the Jewish people," while Nathan condemned what he claimed to be the improper action of a major production house, such as the Royal Court Theatre, in staging an obviously anti-Semitic play. The most sustained critique was offered by Howard Jacobson in the *Independent* newspaper on February 6th, who didn't mince his words when it came to criticizing the play. He dismissed *Seven Jewish Children* as "a new hate-fuelled little chamber-piece by Caryl Churchill which only succeeds in contributing to, what he decried as 'the hatred of Israel expressed in our streets, on our campuses, in our newspapers, on our radios and televisions, and now in our theatres.'" He adopted a very condescending tone, demonstrated through his dismissive treatment of the play's innovative structure. He suggested that Churchill's dramaturgical strategy of dramatizing seven episodes from recent Jewish history, starting with the Holocaust, is a tactic which enables her anti-Semitic narrative to flourish: "No sooner are the Jews out of the hell of Hitler's Europe than they are constructing a parallel hell for the Palestinians." These heated criticisms led to a flurry of responses from the general public, not least from the playwright herself. Churchill wrote a detailed letter to the *Independent*, in defense of her work, titled simply, "My play is not anti-Semitic" (21st February 2009).

Alternative critiques were also published, praising the play as an effective and persuasive piece of political theater. Playwright Diane Samuels (2009) herself of Jewish heritage, wrote, "I felt understood... It is also humane in the toughest sense. For this I thank her." Similar sentiments were expressed by Michael Billington of the *Guardian*, who suggested that the play, "avoiding overt didacticism, [...] becomes a heartfelt lamentation for the future generations." Billington also alludes

to the effectiveness of Churchill's form of theatrical representation. So what is it about this play that provoked such polarized and polemical responses? *Seven Jewish Children* was written in a matter of days and consists of seven short scenes, each representing a particular historical epoch of Israeli history, bookended by the beginnings of the Nazi Holocaust and the Gaza bombardment. As the play is brief in length and rich in content, its economies of time place particular constraints on what can be explored directly in embodied dramatic action. Churchill herself acknowledges the limitations of the work:

It covers many years in 10 minutes and is, of course, an incomplete history. It leaves out a great deal that is favourable to Israel and a great deal that is unfavourable. It shows people being persecuted, some of them going to a homeland (where others have been displaced) and the defensiveness of their threatened position, leading to further violence. ("My Play")

She goes on to argue that the episodic nature of the play allowed her to dramatize the common human difficulty of explaining violence to children, with the opening of the play exploring dilemmas faced by Jewish communities in 1930s Europe, a narrative tactically reversed by the time in which the final episode is set, when a similar dilemma is seen within the Palestinian communities in Gaza.

In keeping with Churchill's unpredictable and hugely diverse experimentation with theatrical form, *Seven Jewish Children* expands her portfolio of new and innovative approaches to theater-making. The play's structure in seven short scenes deals economically with a multitude of complex issues and events, among recurring acts of violence and bloodshed. Reference to such horrific and violent events is both constant and indirect; the stage never attempts to depict, let alone re-enact them. It is clear that Churchill's approach is to use the power of language and its particular ability, when crafted masterfully, to create provocative images in the minds of its audiences. The dialogue in all seven scenes, perhaps with the exception of the final scene, is brief—even cryptic—and all the words are delivered by unidentified voices to an absent young child. Considine draws attention to the success of Churchill's tactic of deploying words sparsely and strategically, like weapons used to achieve maximum dramatic impact: "And these words are dangerous. They stir up shadow-like images of violence and terror that are even more terrifying for their lack of definition" (46). Such language is deceptively basic, and words presented in such a pared-back form become all the more powerful, as they create an almost hypnotic, calming effect in the shared space of the auditorium; an effect that subtly enables vile images of human horror and destruction to be conjured up.

The serene tone of most of the play is perhaps due in part to the continuous repetition of the imperatives "tell her" and "don't tell her." According to Considine the mantra, "tell her/don't tell her" implicates the audience in the action, cleverly positioning spectators as extra cast members who are required to interrogate

conditions of violent historical upheaval, and decide what explanatory tale should be related to an invisible child whose innocence and sense of security must be protected, above all else. This dramatic strategy is the key to Churchill's insistence that the play has an overtly political agenda, as people are enrolled as historical witnesses; active spectators, not passive consumers. The dramaturgical strategy of inviting audiences to be critically engaged in processing the material presented confronts them with a set of moral choices, and this, according to Considine, is the reason why there were such extreme and heated responses to the work.

The economical use of words applies equally to the actual text of the play and to stage directions. As printed, this text has more in common with postmodern works such as those of Kane and the Etchells, where stage directions are practically non-existent. In a minor, but important departure from this convention, Churchill offers very brief staging guidelines at the top of the play. She insists that no child should ever be present on stage, declines to specify a number of possible characters, and leaves distribution of lines entirely to the director's discretion. The lack of defined characters and *mise en scène* heightens the performative intensity of the words spoken, a feature of the play which struck Michael Billington: "What she captures, in remarkably condensed poetic form, is the transition that has overtaken Israel, to the point where security has become the pretext for indiscriminate slaughter." At the core of *Seven Jewish Children* are ethical considerations around dissemination of information, making it an explicit counter to the BBC's perceived failure in this regard. As a critique of the broadcaster's managerial choices, the invisibility of the child in the play might even be read as a suggestive metaphor for the British public, with the BBC deciding whether and what to "tell" or "don't tell," but without the protective, life-preserving intent of the adults in the play.

Critical hostility was not the only form of reaction to *Seven Jewish Children*. Churchill's dramatic response to the overwhelming force used against the people of Gaza was itself the target of a theatrical counter-attack in the shape of *Seven Other Children*, a play by Richard Stirling (2009). His dramaturgical riposte repeated the BBC's stated objective of achieving "balance," and was, according to Stirling, an attempt to "rebalance" what he saw to be a play whose content was "dangerously one-sided to anyone not convinced of its political or even humanitarian premise" (Stirling). Stirling's approach to counteracting Churchill's political intervention was to write a play that mimics Churchill's title, and attempts to reproduce her original structure, speech patterns, and stage directions. Adopting the seven-scene structure, Stirling covers a slightly shorter time span, from the establishment of Israel (1947) to the present day, but with Palestinian as opposed to Jewish protagonists. The same human quandary is presented, but from the perspective of the dilemma of what version of the truth should be told to a Palestinian child.

One dramaturgical decision lays bare the politics of *Seven Other Children* from the outset: in place of Churchill's use of the imperatives "tell her" and "don't tell her," Stirling inserts the repeated refrain: "Ask him." In this dramatic world, adults

continually demand answers of the unseen child, displacing the protective "tell her/don't tell her" of Churchill's play with an extended, aggressive, interrogation. This striking shift in tone between the two plays sets out Stirling's project in *Seven Other Children* as one of direct and heated challenge to Churchill's work. He insists that *Seven Jewish Children* alludes to "the connection between pre-WWII Jews as victims of the Nazis and present day Israelis as outright oppressors of the Middle East," and states that such a connection "was one that I, a non-Jew was not prepared to make without a great deal more debate." He here declares his status as not Jewish in order to lend authority to his work; he writes only in pursuit of "balance": "I'm sick that we, as predominately white Westernised theatre practitioners, continue to feel so adventurous about attacking problems within the Christian and Jewish traditions." This is a point emphasized also by Jacobson in his lengthy and polemical article, in which he questions the authority of non-Israeli or non-Palestinian people even to articulate an opinion in response to the Gaza/Israeli conflict:

But what's our agenda? What do we, in the cosy safety of tolerant old England, think we are doing when we call the Israelis Nazis and liken Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto? Do those who blithely make these comparisons know anything whereof they speak? (3)

Such a question invites a debate about the moral entitlement of a playwright to represent the circumstances of peoples to which they do not have an ancestral connection, and in relation to whom they hold outsider status; a constantly problematic position. The question of authorship and appropriateness of representation by the playwright is a key factor fuelling debate around the ethics of Churchill's theatrical intervention, and it returned to haunt Stirling's claim to unbiased authority in his own work, as in Nathan:

And if one of my complaints about Churchill's play was that the playwright, a non-Jew, implicated all Jews in her criticism of Israel, then the same point must surely apply to Stirling, a non-Palestinian whose play, it would appear, represents the attitudes of all Palestinians, even though Palestinians are conspicuously absent from his title.

The debate about authorship and rights of representation is one central to scholarship in the human and social sciences. That said however, whatever the ethnicity of its author, a theatrical work, it seems, continues to be a platform where attitudes and political questions can be posed, through the power of theatrical language to reach and implicate the general public in a debate which requires from them a contribution. Given that Churchill announced from the outset that her play was most definitely a political intervention, the argument of "one-sidedness" and "imbalance" presented most stridently by Stirling and supported by a range

of like-minded critics, fails to understand the intention, purpose, and efficacy of political performance events. By its very nature, political theater has never been bound by aspirations to balance, but has offered a vehicle for information transmission and mass education. It is partial, sets out to persuade, and makes no apologies for that. Stirling's appeal to 'balance' as the principal ethical value in public discourse ends up with his insisting that wherever *Seven Jewish Children* is staged, it should be immediately followed by the staging of *Seven Other Children*. This aligns him in a strange way with Thompson's reductive account of 'objectivity' and reflects very poorly on his understanding of the social role of performance, and of political theatre especially.

The impact of political theatre over the years has been documented eloquently by the likes of Samuel et al (1985), Kershaw (1992), and Kelleher (2009) and its forms have been recognized as effective and powerful ways of convincing and educating popular audiences. However, the efficacy of Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* goes a step further; and the controversy generated around the play was significant in this. Public interest in the polarized responses actually widened and deepened awareness of the mediated social drama of the extended bombardment of Gaza. The play's commitment to contradiction in the theater countered the simplifications of the social drama in which the BBC had assumed a role, potentially activating public consciousness of the extraordinary collective punishment of Palestinians by the state of Israel (see Alexander). It is a considerable irony that, while Stirling sought to make use of the same formal means as Churchill, his greatest success may well have been in sustaining controversy around her play, thus cementing its role as an intervention in the social drama of the bombardment of Gaza.

Conclusion

Social dramas draw on theatrical rhetoric to embed simple messages in the public consciousness. Acts of theatrical performance offer a symbolic platform on which to restore awareness of moral complexity, and activate ethical questioning in members of the audience. It was this power, theater's ability to convince, and to tell an alternative story, which meshed Churchill's work in such a web of controversy. In itself, in its multiple productions and adaptations before a wide range of audiences, and in the heat of controversy, *Seven Jewish Children* exemplifies John McGrath's criterion for the public efficacy of acts of performance:

Any serious theatre that questions all assumptions, that scrutinizes contemporary reality with a sense of history and without fear of engaging in politics, must inevitably tell a different story, with different values and a different perspective. (90)

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