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**The Dilemma of the Artist in
Contemporary British Theatre: A
Theoretical Background**

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The Dilemma of the Artist in Contemporary British Theatre: A Theoretical Background

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Abstract

The present paper tackles the dilemma of the artist in contemporary British theatre. It commences by introducing a clear-cut definition of the dilemma of the artist in literature. Certainly there are many dilemmas for the artist. One of the most painful is social: How can the artist function as a member of a certain community and, at the same time, retain the distinctiveness of his/her role as an outsider whose social usefulness is based on his chronic estrangement from the ordinary concerns of society? I mean the perplexing dilemma in which the artist finds in his/her struggle to reconcile private desire to public expectation. A second dilemma of the artist is economic: How can artists practice their art? This dilemma has two facets. On the one side, it is related to subsidy the art received from public budget. On the other side, it is the materialistic norms of the society in which the artist immersed into. Indeed, the dilemma that faces radical artists nowadays is that the popular forms of communication are often controlled by conventional and commercial forces at work in society.

However, it is not only money which is the source of the artist's economic dilemma but rather the existence or the paucity of good audiences. Under such perilous circumstances, the artist's genuine dilemma lies in confronting the *Zeitgeist*, the general intellectual and moral tendencies of an era, which can be an evasive and intangible. According to the above premises, three points will be discussed.

1. The function of the artist and art in society. This will be investigated according to those radical thinkers such as Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Gramsci, Shklovsky and Sartre. It also sheds light on Howard Barker's views of theatre.
2. Art and Commitment. The concept of commitment will be discussed to draw a full picture of how artists and thinkers responded to it. Accordingly, the cult of "Art for art's sake" in opposition of art for other aims will be highlighted. No doubt, the idea of commitment forms a crucial component in literature.
3. Art and Politics. It traces the general similarity between the intentions of art and politics. Both are an attempt to give coherence and form to the disorder of experience. However, the nature and function of art implies the inevitable political involvement to a certain degree, on the part of the writer. Sometimes art is exploited for political propaganda and ideologies.

Keywords: Dilemma, *Zeitgeist*, Commitment, Art for Art's Sake, Political Theatre

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Theoretical Background of the Dilemma of the Artist in Literature

In an article published in Fall 2009, Csilla Bertha maintains that the central place in which an artist occupies within a work of art gives an additional dimension to plays since the fictional artist's point of view, attitudes to the world and evaluation of phenomena may double or multiply the layers of the connections between art and life. Then she adds:

If an artist is chosen to be the protagonist of a play or novel, that choice naturally leads to the thematization of questions and dilemmas about the existence of art and the artist; relations between art and life, art/artist and the world; the nature of artistic creation; differences between ways of life, values, and views of ordinary people and artists; relations between individual and community, between the subject and objective reality; and many other similar issues.¹

No doubt, with the advent of highly sophisticated and challenging notions such as formalism and the death of the author, it is hard to conceive the dilemma of the artist without paying attention to the interrelations between art and life in which the ideal and reality, subject and object constitute sharp contrasts. Traditionally, this dialectical relation forms “binary opposition.”² Accordingly, one of the most painful dilemmas of the artist is social: How can the artist function as a member of a certain community and at the same time retain the distinctiveness of his role as an outsider whose social usefulness is based on his chronic estrangement from the ordinary concerns of society? I mean the perplexing dilemma in which the artist finds as he struggles to reconcile private desire to public expectation.

Adorno once said ‘art for art's sake’ denies by its absolute claims that ineradicable connection with reality which is polemical *a priori* of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real. Between these two poles the tension in which art has lived in every age till now is dissolved.”³ [Italics in the original]

The Kantian cult of “art for art's sake”⁴ has represented the source of debate concerning the role and function of the artist in society. According to this paradigm, works of art “exist primarily to satisfy the needs of art”⁵. The supporters of this approach look at art as something enclosing itself in its famous ivory tower.

¹Csilla Bertha, “Visual Art and Artist in Contemporary Irish Drama,” *Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS) v. 15, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 347.

²Ibid.

³Theodor Adorno, “Commitment”, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1997), p. 178.

⁴For an elaborate discussion of this concept in aesthetic theory and its history see Dorothy Richardson, “Saintsbury and Art for Art's Sake in England,” *PMLA*, v. 59, no. 1 (Mar., 1944): 243-260.

⁵Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez, “The Artist in Society: Understanding, Expectations, and Curriculum Implications,” *Curriculum Inquiry*, v. 38, no. 3 (Jun., 2008): 242.

As mentioned before, the relationship between art and life is polemical. It is true that under the banner of “art for art's sake”, the artist is responsible only to his work, yet he cannot ignore human life. In an article entitled “*The Responsibility of the Artist*,” Maritain argues “to assume that it does not matter what one writes is permissible only to the insane; the artist is responsible to the good of human life, in himself and in his fellow men”¹. Thus, his dilemma originates from confronting the inevitable tension between moral responsibility to life and aesthetic.

Although the formalists did not fully cling to the idea of autonomy, they did not reject it. They asserted the independence of art from any social, economic and historical facts. For Shklovsky, art “was always free from life.”² A similar view is expressed by Wilde, who claims that “art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: rather, by doing so, it is more completely realized for us than which we desire”³. Unlike most Marxists who believe in the work of art as a record of social reality that “needs not only to be recognized but also to be understood,” Trotsky affirms on the relative autonomy of art. In *Literature and Revolution*, he insists that “art must be judged in the first place by its own autonomous laws- that artistic creation is a ‘deflection, a changing and a transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art.’”⁴ This formulation, derived in part from the Russian formalist theory that art engages a “making strange”⁵ of experience, modifies Trotsky's notion of art as reflection. In this regard, he looks at art as a powerful means to destroy the barriers and shape social reality. It is not a mere mirror.

He argues that:

Of course no one speaks about an exact mirror. No one even thinks of asking the new literature to have a mirror-like impassivity. The deeper literature is, and the more it is imbued with the desire to shape life, the more significantly and dynamically it will be able to 'picture' life.⁶

As far as reflection is concerned, Brecht gives it due attention. In his “*A Short Organum for the Theatre*,” Brecht maintained that “if art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing the proportions.”⁷ By saying this Brecht denies the corresponding relation between

¹Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (Princeton: University of Princeton, N.J., 1960), <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart1.htm> (accessed December 09, 2013).

²Cited by Leo Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1968), p. 164.

³Oscar Wilde, “Essays and Lectures”, in *The Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Peter Stansky and Rodney Shewan (London: Garland Publishing, INC., 1978), p. 128.

⁴Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 175.

⁵Cited by Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), p.51.

⁶Cited by Cliff Slaughter, *Marxism, Ideology and Literature* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1980), p. 112.

⁷John Willett (ed), *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 204.

between social reality and representation for producing a work of art. So breaking the mirror or “changing the proportion” do not mean that the work of art is not realistic. On the contrary, it will “heighten it.”¹

In accounting for the role of the artist and art in real life, Sartre insists on the social responsibility of the artist and the intellectual in general. This is quite clear in his rejection of “art for art's sake.” Today the writer “should in no case occupy himself with temporal affairs. Neither should he set up lines without meaning nor seek solely beauty of phrase and imagery.”² For Sartre, the artwork always carries a special power which found expression in communicating among freedoms without alienation or objectification. It is one side of art's spontaneity. In this sense, the relation between artist and public is intimate and reciprocal. The work of art is a mediator between them. Some writers go further to declare that the artist is no longer solely responsible for the production of a literary work. In other words, the work of art does not gain its significance without the impression of the audience. What is important, as Page said, “is not who the author is, but what he or she wrote. The author may therefore create a consistent persona in their work which can be inferred from discourse, but this does not necessarily imply that he or she can determine exactly how the persona is interpreted.”³

This leads us to another aspect of art which “serves the public world of human responsibility, not the narrow, private world of art for art's sake,”⁴ to use Fricke's words. What is needed here is a kind of equilibrium between aesthetic and immediate needs of the society. In an article entitled “*Dilemma of the Contemporary African Artist*” H. Ato Delaquis, rightly said that art should be “inspired by the present environment” of the society. Despite its great aesthetic appeal, art “cannot be divorced from the spiritual aspirations of the community.”⁵ Thus, the artist expresses the social enigma of social life without neglecting aesthetic qualities in his work. In doing so, his dilemma lies in finding a form of expression to distinguish beauty from ugliness to the public's face. In this regard, the social responsibility of the artist is not only to improve the public's taste but also reflect reality. The artist then “acts upon the taste of the public [and] his audience is a field where the fruits of his art ripen.”⁶ The society becomes his realm to talk about. It is needless to say that its effects on the mentality of the artist cannot be denied. Therefore, instead of remaining enclosed in his ivory tower, the artist feels obliged morally to think

¹Ibid.

²Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge, 1978), p.18.

³Adrian Page, “Introduction: The Death of The Playwright?,” in *Modern British Drama and Literary Theory*(London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1992), p.20.

⁴Douglas C. Fricke, “Art and Artists in “Daniel Deronda””, *Studies in the Novel*, v. 5, no. 2 (summer 1973): 220.

⁵H. Ato Delaquis, “Dilemma of the Contemporary African Artist,” *Transition*, no. 50 (Oct., 1975- Mar., 1976): 20-23.

⁶Howard Richards, “The Social Responsibility of the Artist”, *Ethics*, v. 76, no. 3 (Apr., 1966): 221.

of human beings. This moral obligation depends on his inner constraint which makes him firmly bind to the society.

In addition to the importance of art on social life, the significance of the writer's active involvement in politics had had a considerable impact on the notion of "commitment". However, the relationship between politics and art found expression in the belief that art has a decisive role in advancing and effecting change. In his speech about aesthetic autonomy within political commitment, Eagleton argues that art, as a radical thought is "conveniently sequestered from all other social practices, to become an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness."¹ But at the same time he does not deny its function as a revolutionary means of change. The concept of autonomy, to quote Eagleton

is radically double-edged: if on the one hand it provides a central constituent of bourgeois ideology, it also marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities which becomes, in the work of Karl Marx and others, the anthropological foundation of a revolutionary opposition to bourgeois utility,²

Seen in this light, I find that it is apt to concentrate on the concept of "commitment" since it acquires so many debates among thinkers and writers. It, in turn, has a close relation to the role of the artist and art in society. In aesthetic theory, Adorno claims "commitment" should be distinguished from "tendency." Committed art in the proper sense is not intended to "generate ameliorative measure, legislative acts or practical institutions... but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes"³. Here, every commitment to the world must be abandoned to meet the ideal of the committed work of art. In his study of "The Author as Producer", Benjamin insists that "commitment" is expressed in one's art not only by presenting correct political opinions but also "it reveals itself in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators."⁴

However, one pioneer of the writers who devotes his effort to explain the notion of commitment and the role of the artist in society is Jean-Paul Sartre. In his book, *What is Literature?*, Sartre claims that the process of writing is a form of acting in the world. Consequently, the author should assume responsibility for the effects it produces. He asserts that each writer is inevitably committed since "writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once [the writers] have begun, [they] are committed, willy-nilly."⁵ The commitment, here, implies a conscious affirmation of the writer's function as

¹Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology Of The Aesthetic* (UK: Blackwell, 1990), p. 9.

²Ibid.

³Theodor Adorno, "Commitment", in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, p. 180.

⁴Cited by Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p.62. For further analysis can be found in Walter Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973).

⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, p. 49.

an agent of freedom. He also emphasizes on the mutual relation between literature and human beings. Accordingly, literature should serve as a catalyst to provoke men to change the world in which they live and in turn change themselves.

Interestingly, Sartre draws a distinction between "prose", which can be committed, and "poetry", which cannot. He argues that prose is a purposeful reflection of the world, whereas poetry is an end in itself. It is meant that the language of prose is easier to be comprehended by the audience than poetry which is symbolic. It depends on associations and references which are figuratively difficult. Sartre's personal preference is for descriptive and unembellished language which expresses the more immediate issues of the time.

Moreover, Sartre pays our attention to the importance of totality in literature to deal with human beings. He claims that literature is alienated when it forgets or ignores its autonomy and places itself "at the service of the temporal power, dogma and mystification."¹ It is the writer's task to drive away from inertia, ignorance, prejudice and false emotion. The writer should not devote himself to a certain class of people. On the contrary, his function is to act in such a way that nobody can be marginalized or neglected.

As concerns Peter Weiss, he is interested in the human situation of oppressed people. He speaks of himself as a "political playwright" and affirms that "he could not write a play without powerful political content and motivation."² Today, he calls for theatre to be a political institution, played with non-professional actors in public places. Weiss also aspires for producing works with international impact beyond one country or era. That is to say, a type of plays that touches the fundamental, timeless human condition.

While John Arden argues that it is "impossible to avoid being a political playwright or a sociological playwright."³ He thinks that man is a political animal and what he did is to some extent apolitical act. He continues, saying that "any play that deals with people in a society is a political play."⁴

The issue of political commitment is made more complicated in Trevor Griffiths's extensive interest in dramatizing political issues. This case, in turn reveals the artist's dilemma in one way or another. To be committed only to political issues or particular politics, other social issues would be ignored. In such a way, the moral responsibility of the artist towards society would be demolished. Griffiths has spoken in details about the dilemma he has confronted in his personal life in trying "to reconcile his left-wing politics with his seemingly bourgeois professional career."⁵ It has shown that the risk of conflict between political and aesthetic criteria cannot be easily avoided. This

¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, p. x.

²Walter Wager, *The Playwrights Speak* (UK: Longmans, Green, and Co., Ltd., 1967), p. 125.

³*Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Austin E. Quigley, "Creativity and Commitment in Trevor Griffiths's Comedians" in *Contemporary British Drama 1970-90*, ed. Hersh Zeifman and Cynthia Zimmerman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 244.

kind of conflict is repeatedly explored in Griffiths's plays such as *Occupations* (1970), *Sam Sam* (1972), *The Party* (1973) and *All Good Men* (1974).

However, to be devoted to one class on the expense of the other, the creation of enduring works of theatrical art becomes problematic in nature. Thus, they would not be a true reflection of society with its entire spectrum. In such a context, Griffiths said, "I don't feel proud of the fact that I got enjoyment out of writing for the theatre and yet I can't lock into what is particularly efficacious about it. And I don't at all because I'm Northern, working-class and puritan by origin anyway, and developed to some extent, I feel rather guilty...."¹ So he justifies his writing for television because television is the medium of the masses unlike theatre which is exclusive to the middle and upper classes. Consequently, a large segment of the population would be encompassed in developing important political and economic awareness about the nature of society. In such respect, Alvin Toffler admirably states that "the arts cannot thrive unless they are organically related to the needs of the surrounding society, unless the arts reach out far beyond their traditional audiences...."² In doing so, the social factors should be fused with aesthetic elements in the artist's committed works. The artist as a human being could not separate himself from the society where he lives. He is the spokesman of humanity. In comparison to this view, some writers think that the role of the artist is minimized at the present time. In desperation or perhaps because of the problems the artist faced with the modern age, "he has been deprived not only of his exalted status but also of his social function."³

In what follows I shall consider the role of theatre in reflecting the dilemma of the artist and his commitment in society. Because of several factors, not least amongst them its validity and relevance, theatre has been seen as a miniature of real life wherein the subject and object met face to face. In one sense theatre "can benefit from its ability to visually or audibly introduce works of art."⁴ Then, through raising intriguing questions of representation of real life, the actor on stage will contribute to increasing the self-reflexivity of art. In doing so, the artist's human and artistic dilemmas expressed in the dialogues and monologues of the main characters "are not simply illustrated or reinforced through the visibility of the artworks, but ...multiplying the layers of meaning."⁵

Therefore, art's functions such as aesthetic, ethical, psychological, social, and religious will work either directly through the figure and the plight of the fictional artist or indirectly, through the effect of art on characters. In either case, the experience of the audience will be enriched and doubled through the

¹Ibid.

²Cited in Elmer H. Duncan, "The Artist in Contemporary Society: Report of an International Symposium", *Leonardo*, v.10, no. 1 (Winter, 1977): 73.

³Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Artist in the Twentieth Century," *Prairie Schooner*, v. 28, n. 4 (Winter 1954): 323.

⁴Csilla Bertha, "Visual Art and Artist in Contemporary Irish Drama," *Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), p. 347.

⁵Ibid., p. 365.

self-reflexivity of the artist on stage. Unlike other genres of literature, drama represents the meeting-place of art and life since it deals, as Mazzini said, “not merely with man, but with social man, with man in his relation to God and to Humanity.”¹ On the one hand, in theatre, art has a very limited lifespan. But on the other hand, time plays a significant role in the dramatic action. As soon as the play is over, it is gone for ever. The only thing that remains is the impact in the hearts of spectators. Although the role of the artist as the ancient shaman who performed the healing of the community has vanished in this age of militant nihilism, nevertheless, he can still show partial “images of wholeness in the theatre.”² In *Theatre and Politics*, Kelleher envisions theatre as a political arena where people are represented. Theatre reflects us “in ways that can persuade us to make judgments on the quality and fidelity of those representations and to make critical judgments too on the lives that are so represented.”³ As a result, the play will stir up conflict in the immediate

Undoubtedly, Brecht's influence on the art world is undeniable. In his book, *Brecht on Theatre*, Willett exposes an extensive picture of Brecht's view of theatre and the style that should be adopted by the artist to acquire the audience attention. In his prologue to the epic theatre, Brecht clarified that “this theatre justified its inclination to social commitment by pointing to the social commitment in universally accepted works of art.”⁴ Theatre represents an organic body which cannot be isolated from social life.

Likewise, in his answer to question related to the function of the artist, Arthur Miller said when writing plays, “I am trying to account as best I can for the realistic surface of life as well as Man's intense need to symbolize the meaning of what he experiences.”⁵ As a playwright, Miller is highly affected by the problems of his society which become a fertilizing material for his plays. More interesting is that Albee looks at all plays as a social comment. He claims that “some playwrights are conscious critics, intentional social critics... some do it more intuitively.”⁶

As far as British theatre is concerned, Barker provides a significant contribution to the argument about the role of theatre in changing society. He also shows the relationship between the artist and his external environment. Barker reveals his idea about the artist and theatre, arguing that in an age of populism, “the progressive artist is the artist who is not afraid of silence.”⁷ An artist, he said, uses “imagination to speculate about life as it is lived, and proposes, consciously or unconsciously, life as it might be lived.”⁸

¹Oscar Wilde, “Essays and Lectures”, in *The Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Peter Stansky and Rodney Shewan, p. 139.

²Csilla Bertha, “Visual Art and Artist in Contemporary Irish Drama,” *Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), p. 364.

³Joe Kelleher, *Theatre Politics* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.10.

⁴John Willett (ed), *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 179.

⁵Walter Wager, *The Playwrights Speak*, p.6.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: John Calder, 1989), p.11.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 33.

In his speech about theatre, Barker affirms that the great responsibility of the actor is to attract the audience by showing them the unknown life that exists beyond the text. In other words, the writer and the actor conspire to entice the mind into a deeper analysis of what has observed.

The function of the dramatist becomes not to educate by his superior political knowledge, but to lead into moral conflict by his superior imagination. If we make a comparison between the function of the dramatist and poet, we see that the function of the dramatist is doubled. While the poet's function "is to charm the spirits of his listeners", by creating a joyful atmosphere without instructing them. The dramatist, in addition to offer pleasure he should serve as "a preacher of morality and a political advisor."¹ Then, the audience itself must be encouraged to discover meaning, and thus begins some form of moral reconstruction.

In his theory of the "Theatre of Catastrophe," Barker points out that, like the tragic theatre, my theatre insists on the limits of tolerance as its territory. It "has never aimed for solidarity but to address the soul where it feels its difference."² Barker, here wants theatre to be an efficient means of testing existent principles for making new ones. In such kind of theatre, the function of the dramatist is to show the ordeal of the audience in a language which exposes the entire range of human emotions and experiences.³

For Ranciere, the role of theatre has been associated with the romantic idea of an aesthetic revolution which manifests itself in changing not only the mechanics of the state and laws, but also the sensible forms of human experience. For him, reform of the theatre means the restoration of its character as assembly or ceremony of the community. Theatre is "an assembly in which ordinary people become aware of their situation"⁴ through discussions of their dreams and interests. This is the type of theatre, he aspires for.

In the past, Ranciere argued, the stage was thought of as a magnifying mirror where spectators could see the virtues and vices of their fellow human beings in fictional form. That vision, in turn, was supposed to prompt changes in their minds⁵. This aspect of stage is required now to stimulate people to revolt against the wrong things in society. In his view about commitment, we see that Gorky is in analogy with Ranciere. Gorky argues that "literature should free man not only from false ideology or superstition, but also from moral vices such as greed, envy, sloth and aversion for labour."⁶

Ranciere also emphasizes on the effects of the modern techniques, embodied in film and television on theatre. Although theatre is "a community site," the conditions of spectators' reception of film and television are different.

¹Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), pp. xii-xiii.

²Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 54.

³*Ibid.*, p.27.

⁴Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 6.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶Maxim Gorky, *On Literature* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), p. 28.

He argues that spectators must become “active interpreters, who develop their own translations in order to appropriate the story and make it their own.”¹

As a reaction to the painful experience that comes from a political loyalty to the particular ideological system, some writers change their attitudes towards commitment. As far as theatre is concerned, Eugene Ionesco is one of those who are skeptical of commitment. In *Notes and Counter Notes*, Ionesco argues that “without the guarantee of total freedom, the dramatist will never be himself, he will say nothing except what has already been formulated [by ideological system]: my own intention was not to recognize any laws except those of my imagination....”² He adds:

we are trapped and immobilized by Sartreism, in the chains and dungeons of a commitment that was meant to bring freedom. All these 'commitment' of yesterday and to-day have already led and could still lead straight into the camps of the most varied and antagonistic fanatical doctrines, or to the physical and intellectual supremacy of regimes....³

In saying this Eugene Ionesco agrees with the Martin Esslin's view that “a serious artist dedicated to the arduous exploration of the realities of the human situation, fully aware of the task that he has undertaken, and equipped with formidable intellectual powers.”⁴ His plays depict a struggle against any tyrannical and dogmatic system, any ideology that becomes an idolatry. Relating to his view of theatre, he said “the theatre must teach people that there are activities which do not serve any purpose, which are gratuitous.”⁵

It is certainly interesting to note here that the art is a double-edged weapon. It may be positive and negative respectively. On the positive side, art is necessary in life especially when it is put at the service of human beings without constraints. The negative side of the art is when it is used as propaganda for false ideology. Then, the art will be a mere means to espouse a particular ideological viewpoint. This reflects the totalitarian claim that the artist “must be completely subservient”⁶ and controlled by the state. In such a worse reality, artists have no free will. They are dictated by and enforced to follow particular rules, legislated by the state itself. As Hitler's and Stalin's regime have shown, creative activities are accountable to the existed regime. Accordingly, the artists have a moral obligation towards politics which reveals their submissive nature to the state. Even their creativity should comply with

¹Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 22.

²Eugene Ionesco, *Notes And Counter-Notes*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964), p. 47.

³*Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴Walter Wager, *The Playwrights Speak*, p. 111.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁶Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p.1.

aesthetic tenets set forth by the state “which claims to express and protect the needs of the people.”¹

A second dilemma of the artist is economic: How can an artist practice his art? This dilemma has two facets. On the one side, it is related to subsidy the art received from public budget. On the other side, it is the materialistic norms of the society in which the artist immersed into. Indeed, the dilemma that faces radical artists nowadays is that the popular forms of communication are often controlled by conventional and commercial forces at work in society. The materialistic side of the society has a negative impact on the artist in a way that inhibits his creative activity since his aim of writing would be secular. As a result, the art world would be corrupted by the market's inflated prices and by the dream artists. The market has taken the edge off the art world. The art world would be guided by the investors. The consequence of that is even art “which starts as a critique of society becomes depoliticized, objectified, institutionalized,”² consumed by those who have money. Here, we have a problem posed for the artist from the outside. As regards, Eliot makes a distinction between two types of artists. The first one is the dedicated artist who devotes his effort to create beauty within the realm of social and moral responsibility. The second is the self-absorbed artist who uses art either as a means for financial gain or as a means to escape or reject duty and responsibility in the real world of human problems³. In both cases he will lose his function as a true artist. Compared to the playwright in theatre, the dilemma faced by the modern poet is that he feels impoverished and enfeebled because he is alienated from nature as well as from society. In such a competitive society, he feels uprooted, alone, without purpose or hope of creativity. Being unable to escape from stifling reality, the modern poet gradually lost “the purity of his vision and whatever faith he once had in his vocation.”⁴ The source of inspiration is distorted by lack of moral cohesion. Moreover, the modern industrialized environment has bereft the modern artist of “his inspirations and defeated his efforts to communicate with [others].”⁵ As a result result of this situation, the resultant art will be merely a romanticizing picture of life which does not touch reality.

The second aspect of the dilemma is concerned with the public subsidy of the art. It is true that in an economic inquiry, the artists cannot be expected to pursue a large range of social changes in society. The arts are always in need for outside support if they are to continue to exist. Therefore, subsidy is important for the arts to be sustained. But the problem lies in the fact that to depend entirely on public subsidy, art will lend itself to the establishment as a means through which the establishment markets its policies. And through that process it takes away from the real situation of human being. The artist, in turn

¹Ibid., p. 6.

²Carol Becker, *Social Responsibility and the Place of the Artist in Society*(Chicago: Lake View Press, 1990), p. 16.

³Douglas C. Fricke, “Art and Artists in “Daniel Deronda””, p. 220.

⁴Charles I. Glicksberg, “The Artist in the Twentieth Century,” p. 325.

⁵Ibid., p. 326.

would be a mere propagandist. As far as British theatre is concerned, debates about theatre and subsidy take two directions which clearly reveals people's attitude towards art. Many people felt that it was wrong for taxpayers' money to go for those who are against "the political status quo; young people should not be paid to bite the hand that fed them."¹ Here theatre is politicized to achieve particular aims far from the immediate needs of society. Others believed that a healthy and vigorous theatre is the one which reflects all shades of opinion as well as preserve all aesthetic forms, "and those in receipt of subsidy should not be discriminated against on the grounds of their politics."²

In her book, *Stages in the Revolution*, Catherine Itzin has talked about the political theatre in Britain and the difficulties surrounding it. The theatre, whether it is conventional or commercial has been the domain of the bourgeoisie. The economic and cultural system were in their hands. So, if the political playwright, to quote David Mercer, "does not write for the bourgeoisie... [his] plays cannot be seen"³ because the bourgeoisie owns the means of production without which no play comes into existence. The domination and hegemony of the bourgeoisie on the one hand and his duty towards his natural allies; the working class on the other hand has led the dramatist to feel bewildered and virtually untenable.

However, it is not only money which is the source of the artist's economic dilemma but rather the existence or the paucity of good audiences. In other words, how can art stimulate "publics in adequate numbers with appetites for excellence and authenticity [and at the same time] provide the social setting in which art can thrive?"⁴ Although at times the economic predicament seems immediate, subsidy is not the serious problem. Nowadays, art can be subsidized by different veins such as local and federal governments, foundations, universities, corporations and even some communities. In such rapid industrialization and the development of science and technology, the real problem of the artist is to find "enough interested people [who is willing] to give their time to art."⁵ Under such perilous circumstances, the artist's genuine dilemma lies in confronting the *Zeitgeist*, the general intellectual and moral tendencies of an era, which can be an evasive and intangible.

In addition, the appearance of modern means of communication, represented by television and cinema was one of the challenges for the role of theatre and people's reception in real life. Although it is to a certain degree true, theatre still remains a magical place. In his answer to question about the role of British theatre to attract people in comparison with the cinema and television, David Edgar states that what differs theatre from that "is the play of the

¹Micheline Wandor, *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990*(London: The British Council, 1993), p.3.

²Ibid.

³Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*(London: Methuen, 1982), p. 95.

⁴Edmund B. Feldman, "Dilemma of the Artist", *Studies in Art Education*, v. 4, n. 1(Autumn 1962): 5.

⁵Ibid., p.6.

imagination in the presence of the event in front of you.”¹ In the theatre the audience put into picture spontaneously. The event, which is being witnessed collectively, gives an opportunity for people to share opinions and views. The theatre has the capacity of medium to engage its audience in a live conversation.

It is assumed that no artist can escape the characteristic modes of feeling of his time. He affects and being affected as well. If that time is ill, he will reflect faulty picture of reality. In her book, *Social Responsibility and the Place of the Artist in Society*, Becker sums up the situation of the artist in America which reflects the dilemma of the artist in general. She argues that we unconsciously envision the artist as a marginalized figure, cut off from the mainstream of society- operating out of what Freud calls “the Pleasure Principle” while people struggle within “the Reality Principle ”, or within its present manifestation, “ the Performance Principle.”²

In the nineteenth century, American writers such as Walt Whitman, Melville and others, had a vision of the artist-writer in America as the voice of democracy, integral to the daily life of a pluralistic society. They represent diverse, hidden, and necessary points of view. But there have only few times when this vision actually became a reality, as in the 1930s when the economy collapsed and artists aligned with workers and intellectuals to form a strong progressive movement. Then, Becker reveals her disappointment of “modern art” because it has often existed outside the lives of many people. Although it reflects the ontological changes of daily life, most people find the forms of the art world incomprehensible and obscure because they are not employed in such a way that can be understood by the multitudes. Thus, when post-modernists attempt to use popular imagery to break down the distinction between high and low culture, they are failed because many outside the art world see such work “as a joke, a scam loaded on them by artists.”³ In doing so, artists have often remained silent, unwilling, or unable to explain their work to a popular audience. Hence people feel they are deceived by the art world which excludes and mocks them as well. The frustration with audience response that dominates their discussion made the “artists feel alienated, misunderstood, and definitely unsupported by the mainstream of society.”⁴

It is time now to consider the situation of contemporary British theatre to see how the dilemma of the artist is represented. To do this, it is necessary to be acquainted with the main developments in British theatre following John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) at the Royal Court Theatre which ushered in a new period of important playwriting. The great subject of the post-1956 British theatre was the limits of the democratization of British society during the war. The first wave of new playwrights, from John Osborne and

¹David Edgar, “State of Play: new work in the contemporary British theatre,” *RSA Journal*, v. 141, n. 5440(June 1993): 458.

²Carol Becker, *Social Responsibility and the Place of the Artist in Society*, p. 7.

³Ibid., p. 14.

⁴Ibid., p. 14.

Arnold Wesker to the early Edward Bond is to “confront the cultural consequences of working class empowerment.”¹

If we take a historical glance at British theatre after 1960s, we see that British theatre has reached its fulfillment. The social and political changes, together with the technological advances have left their imprint on British theatre. Motivated by new ideologies, from Marxism to feminism, playwrights take on their shoulders the task of political and cultural change. Their efforts had crowned by founding the National Theatre and the abolition of state censorship of theatre in 1968. Having realized the importance of theatre in life, questions have been raised “about the function of drama, the nature of its reception and the relationship between form and content.”²

From 1970s onwards, a whole new phase of British theatre seemed to begin. The British theatre has changed in many respects:

numbers and kinds of venues; a variety of approaches to the making of drama; attitudes to public subsidy; searches for new audiences; enthusiastic playwrights, especially the new cultural voices of women and ethnic writers; realism and politics; above all the agenda...which debates the relationship of the individual to his/her society.³

The political and cultural conditions which gave rise to the flowering of British theatre could not come into existence without the figure of Jenny Lee, Britain's first Minister for the Arts. Through her policy of public funding to attract new audiences for the arts and to encourage young practitioners, more than 100 theatre venues have been built in the mid-1960s.⁴

As far as theatre is concerned, funding was its main source. It increased steadily to match the demands of a variety of new work. Government financial aids increased, not only to the principal companies but also to an increasing number of 'fringe' or alternative theater⁵ as they appeared in the late 1960s. So, theatre became a powerful attraction for the new young writers and “those interested in propagating social theories.”⁶

¹David Edgar, “State of Play: new work in the contemporary British theatre,” p. 456.

²Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 1.

³Michelene Wandor, *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990*, p.1.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.2.

⁵The “alternative” theatre is existed to democratize the social division in the theatre by initiating flexible and collaborative work methods. It proposes an alternative to the way of theatre organization, production and distribution. In this theatre, new audiences are introduced by “representing the experiences and interests of groups of oppressed and exploited people whose lives and emotions and hopes they felt had not been adequately represented on the mainstream stage” Wandor *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990*, p. 13. See also John Allan: *Theatre in Europe* (Eastbourne, 1981).

⁶C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Contemporary English Drama* (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1981), p. 16.

However, the period from 1968 to the mid-1970s witnessed the rise of a politically committed theatre. The major thrust of contemporary British theatre is overtly political. Thus, a great deal of “agit-prop” plays (agitation-propaganda) was emerged. In one sense, they reflected the function of theatre and playwrights during that time.

If we take Piscator's views of political theatre, we shall get an accurate summary of British left-wing drama in this period. For Piscator, the function of the writer is primarily political. He must put his own ideas aside and devote himself to bring out “the ideas which are alive in the psyche of the masses.”¹ Theatre always responds, more directly and abruptly to the present moment by conveying messages. For him “man portrayed on the stage is significant as a social function.”² In an agreement with John Arden, he asserts that “Man is not made into a political animal by political theatre, however, but by a social world which ineluctably charges him with political significance.”³ He adds:

We, as revolutionary Marxists, cannot consider our task complete if we produce an uncritical copy of reality, conceiving the theatre as a mirror of the time. We can no more consider this our task than we can overcome the state of affairs by theatrical means alone, nor can we conceal the disharmony with a discrete veil, nor can we present man as a creature of sublime greatness in times which in fact socially distort—in a word, it is not our business to produce an idealistic effect. The business of revolutionary theatre is to take reality as its point of departure and to magnify the social discrepancy, making it an element of our indictment, our revolt, our new order.⁴

But Piscator's theatre was subject to the same problems which afflicted contemporary British drama. This problem can be summed up in the matter of government subsidy. Within this, there is a profound debate about the function and morality of art itself. The writer “fears that he may be an accomplice to a process of manipulation which is perceived in the external world, but which invades an art which no longer has the autonomy proposed by modernist aesthetics.”⁵ It certainly focuses on the dilemma of the playwright who, on the one hand seeks directness without restrictions, on the other formal experiment. However, the affinity between political commitment and aesthetic experimentation has always proved difficult.

Therefore, the function of the playwrights is determined by the state which is responsible for theatre subsidy. Conversely, a radical drama “being subsidized by the state it wishes to destroy.”⁶ As a left-drama in Britain, it

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

²Ibid., p. 187.

³C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Contemporary English Drama*, p. 36.

⁴Cited in C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Contemporary English Drama*, p. 37.

⁵C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Contemporary English Drama*, p. 22.

⁶Ibid.

inevitably associates itself with its enemy. As a result, it has attested to its apparent lack of confidence in its ability to effect change. The playwright cannot exceed the role assigned to him. David Hare is quoted in the National Theatre program for *A Map of the World* as having said “As a playwright, I can't offer a solution to the world's problems. What I can do is [just] make people think about them.”¹ Most writers are constrained by a particular point of view which does not necessarily reflect their own. In this context, theatre as a highly visible and social practice makes clear the consequences of state interference in a way that no literary or visual arts do.

It is worth noting that one of the reasons for the absence of women playwrights during 1960s has ascribed to the cultural climate of British society. C. W. E. Bigsby suggests that “women avoid drama as a social art requiring the strength and personal acerbity necessary for sustaining one's views in a public arena.”² The playwright has to battle with producer, director and actors for his plays to see the light.

Because of the world recession in the mid-1970s, provoked by the oil crisis, Britain underwent economic ruin. It is British “Winter of discontent” as it is called in 1978 which culminated a period of acute industrial strife.³ This situation cast its shades on different aspects of life. Theatre was not an exception. Accordingly, by the second half of the 1970s, the Arts Council “sought to rationalize and relocate responsibility for funding.”⁴ So, debates were emerged concerning the amount of money earmarked for theatre. In doing so, theatre is discriminated according to particular “standards” which determine the levels of state subsidy. One explanation for this action is that theatre is seen as a place of investment. It is in turn subject to market forces.

This paved the way to more decadence in British theatre with Margaret Thatcher's general election in 1979. In Thatcherism's period, the market was seen as “the sole motor of arts development.” Under its discipline, the producers of art found themselves forced to “provide what its consumers wanted”⁵.

In his book, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, Edgar expounds that the new spirit that had entered and sought to dominate the British theatre was no longer political emancipation but “economic liberalism.”⁶ The art theatres are commercialized.

In her encouragement of the culture of enterprise and free-markets economics, Thatcher seeds the feeling of competition which was hostile to innovation. In justifying for this new policy, Mrs Thatcher's first Arts Minister Norman St John Stevas defends, saying “private funding not only provide ' an

¹Peter Buckroyd, “British Drama 1975-1985,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, v. 40, n. 1/2 (1986): 51.

²C. W. E. Bigsby(ed.), *Contemporary English Drama*, p. 16.

³Cited by Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999,” *Theatre Journal*, v. 51, n. 3, Theatre and Capital (Oct., 1999): 271.

⁴Micheline Wandor, *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama 1970-1990*, p. 3.

⁵David Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 14.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.

alternative source of finance' but also had the merit of 'avoiding or neutralizing some of the dangers of state patronage, such as censorship and conformity and the promotion of what I might venture to call "establishment art."' ¹

The modernist liberal view of the artist as a human being who offers society works which go beyond any particular political and economic regime died with the coming of Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher who was suspicious of "intellectuals" as she called them. She thought they are talking more than acting. Consequently, her policy in decreasing state funding for the arts continued. ² Keeping in mind the fact that British theatre had relied heavily on state support to survive since the 1960s; it was struck at the core of Thatcher's policy. Theatre is affected not only by restricting the number of productions that could be staged, but also the type of plays that could afford to stage. So many artists resented and felt an urgent need to respond against the government's attitude to arts funding.

In the early 1980s, British subsidy for theatre was subjected to a fundamental shift in the ideology and economics of the funding decisions which "revolutionized its relationships to the public sphere." ³ It was clear that the market plays a decisive role not only in society but also peoples' attitudes towards life. This was a time when everything is purely measured by monetary factors. Here, the dilemma of the playwright arises to find a suitable subject to address his audience who live in a culture of new selfish money-making ethic.

Perhaps one less-visible phenomenon of the 1980s was the rise in the movement of self-help and education playwrights which comes as a direct response to the reduction in state support for art. The other prominent phenomena are the active role of women playwrights. In the eighties, most of the plays, presented at the Royal Court were by women. ⁴ They develop an examination of the internal worlds of social issues which are caused by Thatcher's philosophy. In this connection, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982) and *Serious Money* (1987) are critical of Thatcherism.

The writers who emerged in the 1990s had experienced the ebbing and flowing of Thatcherism. They had brought up with "the belief that profit was the ultimate test of anything's worth" ⁵ in which they repudiated it completely when they started writing.

In 2000s, there is a new approach in British theatre which makes it unique. One of the developments is that theatre is run by artistic directors who are in immediate contact with the dilemmas that the playwrights suffer from. The second thing is that theatre manifests its ability "to respond quickly to current events, much more so than television and cinema" ⁶ It, in turn reveals the theatre's function to reflect reality. A good example of how theatre responded

¹David Edgar, "State of Play: new work in the contemporary British theatre," p. 453.

²Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 141.

³Baz Kershaw, "Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999", p.271.

⁴David Edgar, "State of Play: new work in the contemporary British theatre," p. 454.

⁵Michael Billington et al, "The State of British Theatre Now: An Interview with Michael Billington," *Atlantis*, v. 26, n. 1 (June 2004): 89.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 93.

is a series of early evening staged forums by the Royal Court on the Iraq War. More interestingly, to see how debates are waged among different writers. In this concern, Martin Crimp wrote a wonderful satire called *Advice to Iraqi Mothers* (2003). Likewise, Caryl Churchill did a factual piece, *Iraqdoc*, relied on exchanges between Iraqis and Americans online in chatroom.

The dilemma of the artist, as this study will strive to show is the playwright's attempts to be true to his art. The playwrights such as Stoppard, Barker, Brenton, Wertebaker and Crimp are preoccupied not only with presenting those dilemmas but also finding a common ground between art and life. Their transcendent end is conveying the truth to audience.