'In memory, perhaps':
Howard Brenton's stage fictions
as historiographical criticism

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Abstract

Historical drama embodies the conflict between factual truth, the artistic fiction of representation and the reality of people and objects on stage. It can therefore be employed, especially when realistic in form, to support a version of events, by letting everybody see its repetition. But by highlighting fictionality or conventions it can also be harnessed to challenge the reliability of any reconstruction of the past.

The latter possibility, widely employed in contemporary playwriting, is investigated here by focusing on the exemplary case of Howard Brenton. His works often show up the opaqueness and unreliability of documents and accounts (*The Romans in Britain*, 1980; *H.I.D. – Hess Is Dead*, 1989; *In Extremis*, 2006). And they combine the patent fiction on stage and the intimate human reality of actors and spectators so as to question the received image of iconic figures (*The Churchill Play*, 1974; *Anne Boleyn*, 2010; *Lawrence after Arabia*, 2016).

Keywords

Howard Brenton; Contemporary Drama; History Play; Audience; Society of the Spectacle

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History plays for now

Rather early in his career, when historical drama was not yet the predominant genre in his oeuvre, British playwright Howard Brenton already felt the need to discuss its role in his manifestly engaged output. He writes «'history plays for now'», he said, «because of the old truth – that if you don't understand the past, you'll never understand the present, let alone the future» (Hay - Roberts 1979: 138). Far from being a form of escapism, his choice of remote time settings is rooted in Marxist historicism. Reflections along these lines, together with scripts that address contemporary issues by means of more or less ancient events, have constantly characterised his career. In discussing some of his twenty-first-century plays, he still stressed that «history plays are not exactly parables but you can show the workings of society more clearly in some way, and hope that there's a resonance» (Woddis 2010).

The reference to "parables" as a similar genre is bound to evoke the Marxist playwright 'par excellence', Bertolt Brecht. As a matter of fact, Brenton's complex relationship with Brecht has developed throughout numerous theoretical contributions and two adaptations (*The Life of Galileo*, 1980; *Conversations in Exile*, 1982). At first he defined himself «a Left anti-Brechtian» and bluntly stated that «Brecht's plays don't work» (Itzin - Trussler 1975: 14); then he criticized more specifically «the Brechtian, received idea of an epic» (Hays - Roberts 1979: 139) and started working on the hypothesis of a «British epic theatre» (Brenton

1986b: xi). Finally, after his close encounter with *Das Leben des Galilei*, which «overwhelmed» him (Mitchell - Brenton 1987: 199), he recognized the strengths of Brecht's dramaturgy and identified his only objection to much of the German writer's output: «what he thought was clarity and fierce presentation of humanity often plays as a dehumanized and static pageant» (Brenton 1986a: 6) in his «obvious parables» (*ibid.*)[1]. In other words, they lack the human complexity and "resonance" that can hopefully be provided by laying open the workings of a historical society rather than those of an abstract one.

These reflections have shown two of the ways in which Brenton's dramatizations of history are relevant to the author's time: they can outline its origins or portray a similar situation, which distance makes easier to analyse. Yet there is a third essential link between past and present they often display: historiography and its unreliability.

On the occasion of the World War I centenary, Brenton wrote *Doctor Scroggy's War*, that thematises this question in a short but pithy dialogue between guilt-stricken Field Marshal Sir John French and badly wounded Captain Jack Twigg:

> FRENCH   It was all pointless.
> JACK   It was not, sir. It was glorious.
> FRENCH   You, with your injuries, can say that? *(A beat.)* Well, carry on.
> JACK   Yes, sir! *FRENCH turns away.* The British cavalry are immortal, sir.
> FRENCH   In memory, perhaps. (Brenton 2014: 93)

Even in the mind of a soldier who suffers the horrific consequences of warfare, collective memory can make battles appear glorious and warriors immortal. French had spotted and promoted Jack for his enthusiastic knowledge of military history; now he perceives the full

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[1] Further insights into the Brecht-Brenton connection can be found in Reinelt 1985, 1992 and 1994.

power of that tradition, which will draw the disfigured officer, like many others, back to the trenches.

This reflection on the deceptively sublime memory of bloodshed had obviously topical resonances among the events marking the centenary of the Great War, yet the theme was not new to Brenton's works. On the contrary, he had repeatedly focused on it in the 1980s. His notoriously violent depiction of colonization and conflict *The Romans in Britain* (1980) stresses the need for untruthful accounts on the opposite ends of the social spectrum. Top-down, Caesar is accompanied by a historian, Asinus (Latin for 'Ass'), to whom the commander dictates an embellished version of his campaign for a propagandist official biography (Brenton 1980: 42-52). The very last lines of the play dramatize the birth of a legend, bottom-up, when two cooks, left without a trade in time of war and famine, turn to poetry and conjure up the story of the perfect King of Britain.

> FIRST COOK   […] And when he was dead, the King who never was and the Government that never was – were mourned. And remembered. Bitterly. And thought of as a golden age, lost and yet to come.
> CORDA   Very pretty.
> MORGANA   What was his name?
> FIRST COOK   Any old name dear. (*To the* SECOND COOK:) What was his name?
> SECOND COOK   Right. Er – any old name. Arthur? Arthur? (*Ibid.*: 94-5)

Those in power need to justify their position; the helpless need an illusion they can cling to. Although in different styles, they both turn to historiography to find their myths, and they both succeed, because the audience can easily recognize the official account of the Romans bringing civilisation to the British Isles and everybody knows King Arthur, the once and future king.

Historiographical Metatheatre

In 1989, Brenton devoted to the subject of historiography's opaqueness a whole play, the title of which already turns an apparently simple statement into a cryptic allusion to concealment: *H.I.D. (Hess Is Dead)*. The set design depicted in the first stage direction is characterised by three features, all suggesting a flaunted and yet ambiguous fictionality: tapestries that «have a *trompe l'oeil* effect, describing a room in a late seventeenth century palace» (Brenton 1989: 1), but which leave a gap near the floor and gently move, thus creating the room and denying its solidity at the same time; chairs and monitors for the spectators as well as for the performers, so that they may intermingle; «a sense that the whole space is 'bugged', tense with multiple recording devices, audio and visual» (*ibid.*).

In this puzzling context, a journalist, Larry Palmer, is faced with the argument that Nazi criminal Rudolf Hess could not have committed suicide and therefore must have been murdered in prison, and even with the hypothesis that the Spandau prisoner was not really Hess. Yet all information available is presented to him (and to the audience) in more or less fictional forms and all hard evidence is destroyed; the fact that Hess was too old and frail to hang himself, for instance, is conveyed by means of a young woman's dance (*ibid.*: 17-22), and essential documents are apparently consumed by fire (*ibid.*: 58-60). Moreover, the whole story is offered to the journalist by a possibly insane young woman (*ibid.*: 5-7, 61-3).

In the central part of the play, the conversations between Palmer and his source give way to those of the experts that wrote the official statement concerning Hess's death (*ibid.*: 27-61), but even they do not appear to know the whole story and, after all, their own identity is doubtful (*ibid.*: 63). At one point, a video recording shows a figure in seventeenth-century costume entering the room (*ibid.*: 30-1). In conclusion, there does not seem to be any actual truth to be discovered, just a heap of overlapping lies and fictions.

> PALMER   In my trade, facts are all. They are stones. Stones are real. That was said, that was done. But hard facts can, I find, go… mushy. The stones turn to marshmallow. The… assassination of John Kennedy? Was there a second gunman? The death of Mozart, poisoned by Salieri? The world has seen *Amadeus*, the movie. Actually, Salieri was a good friend to Mozart. Who was not a pauper but a man with a carriage and servants. Not poisoned he just caught the 'flu. But once the world has seen the movie… (*Ibid*.: 13)

Not only does the truth melt, then, but it is replaced by the apparently solid details of shameless fiction. Conscious fiction cannot (re)establish the truth, though, because it is unfathomable: *H.I.D.* ends without revealing the circumstances of Hess's death or solving any of the problems raised. What artists can do is highlight the unreliability of historical accounts, and a typically theatrical way to do so is to stress the fictionality of the stage and draw a parallel between its lies and those of ostensibly objective chronicles.

This procedure is essentially what Alexander Feldman has defined «historiographical metatheatre»[2] in its stricter acceptation, i.e. not only «all of those works, and parts of works, in which self-reflexive engagements with the traditions and forms of dramatic art illuminate historical themes and aid in the representation of historical events» (Feldman 2013: 2-3) but those with a specific interest in the way facts «are constituted in the discourse of history; how history is written and how one conceives of history, in philosophical and ideological terms, prior to and during the process of writing it» (*ibid*.: 3).

Feldman chooses one of Brenton's plays among the examples with which he illustrates the concept: *The Churchill Play* (1974). Both the historical subject and the metatheatricality of this text are evident in its title, that refers to a biographical sketch staged in the near future by the inmates of the Winston Churchill Internment Camp. The script actually

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[2] The phrase is obviously modelled on Linda Hutcheon's "historiographical metafiction" (1988: 105-23) but, as Feldman points out, the two genres are independent, though related, and so are their investigations (2013: xv).

opens with the Prime Minister's apparent resurrection, which soon turns out to be part of the prisoners' rehearsals. Throughout the play, the preparation and the performance of their community production is mixed with scenes of camp life and with an official visit, during which the theatricals take place and the 'actors' plan to escape.

The necessity of rewriting history or at least adding new perspectives to its narrative is manifest since the first scene of the play, when the soldiers standing vigil over Churchill's catafalque hear him knocking, and one expresses the hope the dead man will not be able to come out.

> MARINE   He'll come out, he'll come out, I do believe that of him. Capable of anything, that one. *(Fiercely.)* To bugger working people. *(He coughs. Recovers. Fiercely.)* We have never forgiven him in Wales. He sent soldiers against us, bloody man. He sent soldiers against Welsh mining men in 1910. Three were shot.
> [...]
> PRIVATE   But 'e won a war. 'E did that, 'e won a war.
> MARINE   People won the War. He just got pissed with Stalin…
> (Brenton 1974: 113)

So Churchill may be celebrated as a war hero, but he was also a fierce Home Secretary; many people loved him, but others detested him; in point of fact, the Marine suggests, it was the soldiers, not him, who fought and defeated the Nazis. The final remark is especially relevant to the argument of Feldman's book, the subtitle of which is *In History's Wings*, because it shifts the focus from a well-known figure to the unrecorded masses. Nevertheless, the Marine's line does not end with the reference to the anonymous soldiers, and Brenton's text is in fact centred on the popular perception of Churchill more than on the importance of the people.

Generally speaking, while Feldman is quite right in remarking that historiographical metatheatre has often been employed to shed light on the minor characters that chronicles often neglect, a wider analysis of Brenton's output will illustrate the possibility to focus it, on the contrary,

on the most widely known personages, so as to reveal the shallowness of their iconic images.

The title of *The Churchill Play*, to begin with, is by no means deceptive in drawing attention to the role of Churchill almost as much as on the performance. Indeed, not only the play-within-the-play is consistently focused on the statesman (*ibid.*: 111-4, 160-2), his career (*ibid.*: 119-20, 164-5), his participation in the Yalta conference (*ibid.*: 142-3), the way people perceived him (*ibid.*: 159, 163, 167-70) and his personal life (*ibid.*: 165-7), but his figure can be recognised at the core of the play. The internment camp being entitled to an icon of British democracy resisting, fighting and winning against nazifascism is not just a joke. Coupled with the reflections on the limits of the statesman's acclaimed simplified portrait, it can be taken to stress the risks of such an apparently innocent redaction of history: silencing dissenting voices, even just by passively accepting to turn a person into a monument, in this case paradoxically an emblem of democracy, is the first step towards the loss of civil rights epitomized by the creation of internment camps.

The connection between an overtly political outlook and a postmodern distrust of linear narratives is thus strongly established while focusing on those "historical heroes" of which both attitudes are natural enemies. Such an engaged metatheatrical attack on the received images of well-known figures is a hallmark of Brenton's history plays, which makes them stand out among both the historiographical metatheatre theorised by Feldman and the metabiographical drama analysed by Ursula Canton (2011: 97-122).

Historiographically conscious characters

Indeed, several texts of Brenton's underline the 'fictionalisation' of historical figures by playing on theatricality. An obvious case is that of *Lawrence after Arabia* (2016), as the title itself suggests: TS Lawrence became the well-known national hero 'Lawrence of Arabia' at thirty, and the drama is centred on the clash between his hardly exhausted desire for adventure and the fixed role popularity imposed on him. The

specificity of this character compared to the other historical icons discussed here is his deep and painful awareness of such crystallization.

Moreover, it is in theatrical (and therefore meta-theatrical) terms that he faces and opposes it. He consciously wears his 'costumes', getting dressed on stage, in his army uniform and then in the unmistakable Arab robes (Brenton 2016: 24 and 28); and he tries to create different identities for himself by donning other meaningful clothes (the uniforms of Aircraftman Second Class and of private in a tank regiment, *ibid.*: 16 and 84) and inventing new names for himself (John Hume Ross, *ibid.*: 18; Shaw, *ibid.*: 84). In other words, knowing that fame has turned him into a character, he tries to change into another.

As a matter of fact, Lawrence, who is also plagued by a sense of guilt for betraying his friend prince Feisal and the Arab cause, is also conscious of an original sin of publicity: he built the image of 'Lawrence of Arabia' himself by means, for instance, of well-thought photographs (*ibid.*: 30-2, 35). Lowell Thomas, who took those pictures, is now his self-appointed populariser and avowedly part of the cost of fame (*ibid.*: 12-5). As a mythologizing biographer, he represents the cultural industry, patronising the public and feeding on exceptional people by turning them into icons; but he is also a product of Lawrence's ambiguity, of his «forever backing into the limelight» (*ibid.*: 15), as even his fellow fame-victim GB Shaw says.

Lawrence's ambiguous flirtation with his own myth is nowhere more evident than in his autobiographical book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In Brenton's play, the question of its truthfulness is linked to the complexity of private, rather than public, memory: the memoir contains an account of the hero's being captured and tortured while he was spying in disguise in Daraa that does not correspond to the reality of facts but to his own desire for punishment[3]. Yet this psychological truth can be just as real as the physical one:

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[3] Of course, all these reflections refer to the play's Lawrence: biographers and critics have discussed the facts, his account and its interpretations, but this debate is not relevant to the present analysis of the dramatic character.

> TOM   I wanted it. It is real to me, now. It is what I live. Every day.
> CHARLOTTE   But it didn't happen.
> TOM   I've made it happen. I wrote it. (*Ibid.*: 80)

Brenton's play features another celebrated writer, GB Shaw, who is portrayed, together with his wife Charlotte, secretly hosting Lawrence. The Irish playwright is equally conscious of his public persona, he also performs roles (e.g. *ibid.*: 10, 38), but his tone is amused and farcical rather than moving and tense. As his secretary Patch remarks, he is stubbornly cheerful (*ibid.*: 37) and makes it often hard to tell whether he is cracking a joke or speaking in earnest.

With her just as resolved refusal to be entertained by his antics (*ibid.*: 10), Patch is a perfect foil for Shaw, a stooge and a critic at the same time. The play actually starts with a deeply meaningful gag of theirs (*ibid.*: 8). Shaw is dictating a speech of the Grand Inquisitor in *Saint Joan*, but he suddenly starts commenting on his own attitude and work, and the secretary fails to notice the change, thus implicitly showing that his style is just as dramatic as his characters. Furthermore, she makes a reference to the fictionality of history plays, in answering his attempt to demonstrate that he was obviously speaking as himself and not as the Grand Inquisitor when he said, among other things, that he is a playwright:

> GBS   The Grand Inquisitor is not a playwright.
> PATCH   For all I know you may have decided to make him one. (*Ibid.*: 8)

Indeed, in a multiple 'mise en abyme', Shaw is writing a history play and in particular a speech centred on the omissions of historiography: «The records of the Holy Inquisition are full of histories we dare not give to the world» (*ibid.*: 8), it begins. Later on, the Irish playwright will admit to reading the present through the lens of his current work, after connecting Lawrence's predicament to Saint Joan's (*ibid.*: 43-6). The succession of mirror images highlights the fictionality

of the dramatic text, but it also points to the unreliability of all historical accounts: Shaw is not only writing about Saint Joan with Lawrence in mind (*ibid.*: 82), but he is also reading his friend's behaviour in the light of his protagonist's. In other words, even first-hand perceptions, at the very moment an encounter takes place, are tainted by fictional templates.

The sundry narratives at play in *Lawrence after Arabia* do not come into open conflict: Charlotte questions Lawrence and challenges his point of view (*ibid.*: 79-80), but nobody writes or even tells a different story; Thomas threatens to give alternative, horrible lectures on the hero (*ibid.*: 14-5) but he does not carry out his threat; the successive versions of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* probably differed substantially, but they have been lost or destroyed, just like some crucial diary pages (*ibid.*: 69).

The theme of contrasting histories is on the contrary central to *In Extremis* (2006), Brenton's dramatization of Abelard and Heloise's ill-fated love, that is represented as being already fictionalised while it is still in progress. At the very moment when the heroine discovers that it is over, because Abelard, emasculated by order of her outraged uncle, has taken the vows, the abbess Mother Helene helps her realise that «even the memory of love isn't real. It becomes just a beautiful story. Not life» (Brenton 2006: 67). And since the beginning, theirs is surrounded by other narratives concerning them: Denise, Abelard's sister, hears rumours that mix correct details («she is the niece of a canon at Notre Dame», *ibid.*: 18) with exaggerations («she is thirteen», *ibid.*). Later on, it is still Denise who says they are «the great lovers, the scandal and the wonder of the world, sung about in songs» (*ibid.*: 48). When they have already become an abbess and an abbot, they are the object of popular jokes and songs, and Heloise's name is used as a byword for lust and pleasure (*ibid.*: 69-70).

But the main narrative with which theirs is bound to clash is Bernard of Clairvaux's. The ascetic abbot is portrayed in Brenton's play as the lovers' antagonist mainly because he embodies absolute belief while they represent philosophy coupled with religion so as to pair reason with faith (*ibid.*: 78). Bernard sees Abelard as an unrepentant sinner and a heretic and Abelard considers Bernard a fanatic. The

humanist is utterly defeated at the Council of Sens (*ibid.*: 79-82), but time will overthrow that conclusion by making the lovers' story much more read and believed than the ascetic's (*ibid.*: 90).

While throughout the drama Heloise and Abelard are essentially the protagonists of either private narratives or uncontrolled rumours, Bernard soon begins to take care of his public figure and almost anticipate his own hagiography. As his followers Alberic and Lotholf remark, he even repeats actions that have become part of his legend, such as licking Lotholf's feet: the first time they met, it was a gesture of humility and an attempt at relieving his suffering after a long walk (*ibid.*: 21-2), but in time it may be transformed into a miraculous healing (*ibid.*: 70-1). Alberic explains to his uncomprehending companion that they «live in a mythic time» (*ibid.*: 71).

In the last scene of the play, Heloise accuses Bernard of having consciously acted so as to build his life legend, and she asserts this was his main purpose in attempting a late reconciliation with Abelard (*ibid.*: 82-6) and then pretending it was successful (*ibid.*: 89), as well as in visiting her after her lover's death (*ibid.*: 88-9). Their final dialogue is focused on the reversal of fortune operated by time and the book market: Heloise states that Bernard is the loser, in the end, and he does not understand, since Abelard's works are banned, while he is as influential as ever, but the abbess is thinking of the future.

> HELOISE   […] I suppose there's Peter's autobiography.
> BERNARD   His what?
> HELOISE   He called it *History of My Sorrows*. Peter was always a little self-dramatizing.
> BERNARD   Abelard wrote an autobiography? (*A dread comes over him.*) Am I in it?
> HELOISE   Oh we're all in it. And there are our letters. […] There are copies translated into every language of the world. (*Taking the Penguin paperback edition out of her habit.*) Look, here's one in English, eight hundred and fifty years from now.
> *She holds the Penguin book out to BERNARD, who stares at it, then out to the audience.*
> *Blackout.* (*Ibid.*: 90)

It is worth noting that Heloise does not present Abelard's narrative as the unqualified truth; on the contrary, she stresses the fact that he has always been melodramatic when speaking of himself, and she describes the content of their letters as transparently subjective («full of our love and pain, and our hopes to live a better life», *ibid.*). In this play too, Brenton shows that historical figures are unavoidably fictionalised, even though sometimes voluntarily and even by their own hands.

The responsibility of the audience

The ending of *In Extremis* brings to the fore another essential aspect of the way Brenton criticises historical simplification by means of metatheatricality: the central role, in both fields, of the audience. It is future readers that will decree the lovers' ultimate victory over the ascetic, and, as the final gesture shows, the same public opinion is represented in the theatre by the audience.

Conversely, spectators had their representatives on stage, in the chorus of young nuns. They are first introduced as the gossips from whom Denise has heard of her brother's affair (*ibid.*: 17-8). Then Mother Helene describes them as simple and naive, needing to be sheltered from the exceptional worldly experience of Heloise (*ibid.*: 58). In both cases, the only trait that brings them near to the audience is a crucial one: their curiosity. When they finally come on stage (a part from a short appearance when they guide the lovers to their separate rooms, *ibid.*: 59), their role as spectators is manifest: they spy on the couple (*ibid.*: 61-2). The scene depicts a meaningful change in their attitude, though: at first they relish their own outrage, when one of them describes the sex scene she has witnessed in the chapel, but once they all go and look at the now sleeping Heloise and Abelard, they end up kneeling in silent contemplation (*ibid.*: 62).

The nuns' interest begins as morbid gossip, but when they actually observe the couple in person, they perceive something deeper and even sacred in their love, which helps them go beyond the initial enjoyment of scandal. The audience is invited to make the same progress, from the curiosity aroused by a well-known story of sex and violence to a more

considered appraisal of Abelard and Heloise's significance as early representatives of the humanist sensibility.

A similar change is portrayed in one of the main characters of Brenton's *Anne Boleyn* (2010), James I. In act one, scene two, the Scottish James VI, recently arrived in London after his coronation as king of England, is admiring the dresses of his predecessor, Queen Elizabeth: an innocuous entertainment, in the eyes of powerful courtier Robert Cecil (Brenton 2010: 17); food for thought, actually, for a suddenly wealthy monarch who is facing a new kingdom (*ibid.*: 12-4). When shown the coronation dress of Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, James first reacts as expected, speculating on the beauty and on the sex life of «the harlot Queen», the «witch» (*ibid.*: 14-5), but when his hyperactive curiosity reveals, concealed in the dress's trunk, two books by William Tynsdale, the translation of the New Testament and *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, his thoughts turn in an entirely different direction. He immediately starts to wonder what may Anne have done with such books (*ibid.*: 16) and to consider what they might mean for his own reign: «we must settle religion in England» (*ibid.*), he concludes. The two aspects of the queen then mix in his decision to look for her in a ghost hunt: on the one hand, its premises are to be found in her being a witch and someone who suffered great violence; on the other hand, its main purpose would be to ask her why she gave Henry VIII *The Obedience of a Christian Man* to read and to confront the religious unrest she has come to embody in James's mind (*ibid.*: 20-1).

Spectators are prompted to make the same shift from morbid curiosity for her gory death to a new interest in the political and religious conflicts in which she was involved. In the opening monologue, directly addressed to the audience, Anne arouses and then disappoints their expectations by offering to show them an unspecified «it« because it may be «fun» and «a scandal» (*ibid.*: 11) and then taking out of her bag her Bible. «Why? Don't you realise? This killed me! This book! This put me in the Tower, this made the sword, the sword, the sword...» (*ibid.*), she tries to explain the perplexed spectators. Thus, the first scenes of the play set the course for the audience's ideal journey: they were probably attracted by the promise of a sexy and violent spectacle attached to the

name of Anne Boleyn and, though not completely disappointed (after the Bible, she does show and discuss also her severed head), their curiosity is at least in part redirected towards a less superficial treatment of her role in British history.

Conclusions

Both *In Extremis* and *Anne Boleyn* premiered at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, an open-air venue in which spectators are sun-lit just as much as performers and surround the apron stage almost entirely. As a result, in this playhouse the audience is unavoidably part of the spectacle, in full view from every position in the auditorium, and playwrights are encouraged by this structure to involve punters in the performance, to make them part of the play's world and action (see Cantoni 2017: 79-139 and 180-8). This opportunity to focus on spectators has been deftly harnessed by Brenton, perhaps the most successful dramatist of the reconstructed Globe (see Lukowski 2014), as a way to highlight a new aspect of a theme at the core of his oeuvre: the Situationist concept of the Spectacle.

Brenton has always acknowledged the influence on his plays of Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* (see e.g. Megson 2012: 214): he shares the idea that public life is a sort of billboard, flat, uninhabitable, but apt to impose its own framework on daily life, and adds that «what plays can do is put a boot through and try to explode this» (*ibid.*). An aspect of the Spectacle analysed by Debord is the existence of 'stars', «spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles» (Debord 1967: 38). If «in entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with [the star] renounces all autonomy in order to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things» (*ibid.*), historical figures are the perfect candidates for this role: they are obviously unable to reject this renunciation and easily canonised as part of a supposed heritage; at the same time, even when reduced to stereotyped icons, they are still perceived as actual people, not fictional characters.

As Hersh Zeifmann remarked already in 1993, Brenton reacts against this «pervasive and pernicious comic-book view of history which mythologises historical figures into cartoon 'heroes'» (132). His denunciation of spectacularised historical icons has taken different forms: every time he has portrayed such a personage, he has pointed out their less known, apparently contradictory sides; he has highlighted the mechanisms of simplified and mythical historiography and their possible consequences; he has denounced the responsibilities of spectators, without whose collaboration or at least acquiescence the Spectacle would cease to exist, and suggested a route the audience may take towards a deeper understanding of history's workings.

While these different perspectives have originated sundry variations on the theme of the Spectacle's historical 'stars', a constant aspect of Brenton's treatment of this subject has been the employment of metatheatrical devices. The play within *Churchill's Play*, the costumes donned by *Lawrence after Arabia*, the wavering scenery of *H.I.D.*, the stage audience constituted by *In Extremis*'s nuns and the protagonist's direct address to the spectators in *Anne Boleyn*, as well as all the characters that define themselves as such, are all ways in which Howard Brenton has stressed the stage's illusions as a patent double of the subtler fictionality of historiography's narratives.

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How to cite this article