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PAPER- I: LITERARY TERMS& MOVEMENTS (CODE: ENG- 201)

UNIT-III DRAMA/THEATRE

Dr. Meenakshi Pawha

Associate Professor

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow

In-Yer-Face Theatre

Introduction

A term coined and energetically promoted by Aleks Sierz in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001), to refer to a new wave of British drama of the 1990s that was notable for its provocative uses of obscene language, nudity, violence, taboo subject-matter and street-poetry. This feature of new 1990s drama had been noted before, and referred to by theatre critics as 'the new brutalism' among other labels. The leading dramatists of this new wave were Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, and Anthony Neilson, and its defining works included Kane's *Blasted* (1995), Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), Neilson's *Penetrator* (1993), Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995), Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997), Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (and Harry Gibson's *Trainspotting* (1994; an adaptation of Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel). Although predominantly British, this school included some American playwrights, notably Tracy Letts (author of *Killer Joe*, 1994) and Phyllis Nagy (*The Strip*, 1995).

The Definition

There are a couple of definitions of in-yer-face theatre. The widest of them according to Aleks Sierz is "*any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck und shakes it until it gets the message.*" (4) Hence it is the theatre, which touches the minds and souls, provokes and shocks in order to reach its spectators, smash their taboos and make them disgust the heroes or hate them. In other words, it invokes every spectrum of feelings, but doesn't leave callous.

The New Oxford English Dictionary defines the phrase "in-yer-face" as "something blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid". (962) The Collins English Dictionary adds the adjective confrontational. (855) This term appeared in American sport journalism in mid-seventies and step by step became popular in everyday language. It

means that you are forcing to see something close up, so that your boundaries are being destroyed. The term in-yer-face-theatre describes such a kind of theatre, which puts the audience in the situation performed on the stage. (ibid.)

Although the origins of this confrontational theatre come to the alternative theatre of the 1960s, it was clearly defined as a new stream in the world literature only in the decade of the 1990s.

Most of the in-yer-face plays has been staged by new writing theatres such as the Royal Court, Bush, Hampstead, Soho Theatre, Finborough, Tricycle, Theatre Royal Stratford East, and even Almeida. But also such smaller cities as Edinburgh, Manchester, or Birmingham were involved in this trend.[2]

A Brief History of In-Yer-Face Theatre

Ever since the publication of Sierz's book, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, in 2001 it has been widely assumed that he was responsible for coining the phrase "in-yer-face theatre". This is untrue. Although he most certainly was the first to describe, celebrate and theorise this kind of new writing, which emerged decisively in the mid-1990s, Sierz certainly did not invent the phrase: indeed, he has made the point (more than once) that his choice of the label "in-yer-face theatre" — as opposed to "new brutalism" or "Neo-Jacobean" — to describe this style of avant-garde new writing was precisely dictated by the fact that other people were already using the phrase. According to Sierz, "I did not impose it from above on an already existing theatre phenomenon; I extracted it from common usage. From below, so to speak." So when was the phrase "in-yer-face theatre" first used, and by whom? Well, the specific phrase "in-yer-face theatre" is derived from the general expression "in-yer-face" (often used as an adjective or exclamation in popular culture in the 1990s, sometimes in the more genteel form "in-your-face"). Every dictionary now has an entry for this phrase. As regards the specific label "in-yer-face theatre", Sierz's research suggests that it began as an adjective used occasionally by theatre critics, was then turned into a rallying cry by at least one theatre-maker, until it finally matured into a publishing opportunity. In April 1994, the *Independent's* Paul Taylor reviewed Philip Ridley's *Ghost from a Perfect*

Place and described the play's girl gang as "the in-yer-face castrating trio". (Incidentally, in his review of the same show the *Telegraph's* Charles Spencer used the phrase of "praying that you won't part company with your supper", an image he also used in his reviews of Simon Donald's *The Life of Stuff* in 1993 and of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* in 1995.) In the early 1990s, there was much less new writing than in subsequent years, and sometimes weeks went by with very few new plays, let alone in-yer-face ones, being reviewed. Be that as it may, in January 1995, *Blasted* opened in the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court, although no review used the phrase that had been suggested by Taylor. In November 1995, in an interview with *Financial Times* critic Sarah Hemming, playwright and director Anthony Neilson opined that "I think that in-your-face theatre is coming back — and that is good."

Characteristic Features of the In-Yer-Face Theatre

What is so characteristic for this theatre? Aleks Sierz describes it in the following way: "the language is usually very filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each other, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent" (ibid. 5) This kind of theatre uses shock tactics to wake up the audience and to make it feel the scenes from the stage. The writers of this movement want to investigate the human nature and its barriers and bounds; they try to question their foundations and sense. The other reason for this shock tactics is searching for deeper meaning, an attempt to see just how far they can go. (ibid.) The authors try to challenge the traditional distinctions such as good and bad, right and wrong, normal and abnormal etc. These terms are normally out of the question for us and of course questioning them becomes easily unsettling.

Themes for the Plays

In-yer-face theatre concentrates also on such things which we otherwise feel too painful, too acute or too mortifying. That's why we avoid them, they show us all these unpleasant things, the human beings are capable of. But at the same time it lies in our nature that we are curious of these forbidden sides of the human nature and emotions associated with it. In-

yer-face theatre gives us an opportunity to explore it and in this way to conquer our ancient fears about the power of irrational and the instability of our world.

The other characteristic of the in-yer-face theatre is that it must be controversial to touch raw nerves of the spectators.

The form of In-Yer-Face Theatre

The form of the presentation is a very important aspect for the spectators. If the content of the play departs from the conventional rules of the traditional drama, it is often quite difficult for the audience to accept it. On the other hand, those shocking and sometimes even disgusting scenes can appear as more acceptable within a theatrical frame and not as a naturalistic representation of some extreme unpleasant acts.

Another characteristic feature of the theatre is live action in real time with real actors. The brake of taboos happens not private but in public in surrounding of another people who also feel uncomfortable and confused.

Every play is something unique in its own way that's why every time something unexpected can happen. Live performance can make some scenes almost unendurable. Otherwise, the spectators understand that the play is something unreal, played. On the other hand they invest emotionally in it, they empathise to the actors who are always real people and breathe the same air with the audience. (Sierz 7)

Taboo-Words in In-Yer-Face Theatre

The usage of taboo words is very important in confusing and shocking the spectators, because "humans are language animals", the words can offence them more as an act itself. These words possess some magic power, they mark a line that is not to cross. (ibid.) Like all taboos, they protect us and make the human behavior more or less predictable. Said at the stage, these words have an effect of an explosion because they are used openly and by real people.

Nakedness of the Intimate Sphere

The in-yer-face theatre is also characterised through the usage of such private and intimate situations as sex and in this case unavoidable nudity. They are also more powerful on the stage as in films or arts. They are often

very unsettled for spectators because they feel offended, that's something of what the people try to keep secret and not to show this intimacy in public.

Violence in In-Yer-Face Theatre

The demonstration of violence is impossible to overlook or ignore, it shows naked pain, suffering, humiliation and torturous death. Violence is shown literally as well as figuratively. It is primitive and irrational. It breaks rule of human morality as well as the other characteristics of the in-yer-face theatre and at the same time this unconcealed violence rouses unhealthy curiosity by the spectators, catches and fascinates them and so gets them in some kind enjoy this violence. And in this moment one can discover some unpleasant and disturbing truths about what one is. (ibid. 9)

Hot and Cool Version of In-Yer-Face Theatre

Aleks Sierz makes a distinction between the hot and the cool version of in-yer-face theatre. The hot version is usually only for a small circle of people exposed and enjoys the "aesthetic of extremism". (ibid.) The players use a very striking language and explicit actions. Hence the impressions of the audience are unforgettable through this open aggression and violence. Cooler version avoids radical provocations with the help of stylistic and language devices. The most usual of them is comedy. But the both sorts of this theatre are so powerful and emotional, that the actors on the stage force the spectators to react and either to stop what is happening or to come once again.

But whether hot or cool this theatre is to wake up the deepest senses of spectators and make them think over the common norms and rules. That is the main aim of the in-yer-face theatre and not to shock the spectators showing them disgusting scenes full of pain and violence.

References

Sierz, Aleks. *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

<http://www.inyeface-theatre.com/what.html>

<http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/intro.html>

Recommended Reading

Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms-Ed. Roger Fowler

History of the Theatre-Oscar G.Brockett

Dictionary of the Theatre :Terms, Concepts and Analysis- Patric Pavis