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## Theatrical Evolution through the Great War

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### ABSTRACT

Theatre has always been an avenue for social change and cultural development. In times of extreme human strife and hardship, the theatre can become a reflection for its populace. During World War I, the governments of Europe tried to utilize the theatre as a nationalist tool. As morale for the war began to break, the population of theatre-goers enforced a new policy on their art. This examination looks at why that cultural intersection took place in a country deeply impacted by The Great War with a specific look at Great Britain during the 1910s.

**Keywords:** World War I; theatre; George Bernard Shaw; nationalism; escapism. JEL Classification Codes: F510; F520; Z110; Z180

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### 1. Introduction

There have been moments throughout history when world events have shaped art. The opposite also occurs when artists, and the audiences they serve, dictate to their corresponding societies the path humanity has chosen through different artforms. Europe believed at the outbreak of World War I that it would be in for a quick contest like many of the wars that came before it (Terraine, 1965). British theatre at the start of the war was used as a medium to drum up support for the same nationalistic tendencies that were gripping all the major European powers (Krivanec, 2014). That initial line of thinking affected the theatrical output in England during WWI as war dramas were used to garner support (Trussler, 1994). Once the population realized they would be subjected to a bogged down war with no end in sight, they deemed that the theatrical scene would need to change. The fight for social change would not win out over mere escapism from the horrors of the war however. The servicemen would leave a lasting effect on what war time entertainments they would see (Williams, 2003). They wanted escapist adventures that would make them laugh instead of drum up support for a war that had become a meat grinder. The war was not carefully examined theatrically by any enduring work until after its conclusion. Playwright George Bernard Shaw observed the war critically in 1919 with his play *Heartbreak House* and deemed the educated liberals to be morally bankrupt and the cause of

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British involvement (Teachout, 2017). Certain entertainments, such as Elizabethan masterworks, would gain notoriety and see a change in form as Shakespearean drama would take on a more modern approach (Wilson and Goldfarb, 2004). The state of the theatre would be a healthy one upon the war's conclusion as its many uses had served the populace from the government and soldiers to the workers who kept the war machine churning (Elsom, 1979). English theatre would forever be changed by developments through The Great War and this investigation aims at charting and analyzing that evolution. This study referenced books on theatre history and looked at the criticisms written not only in retrospect but also during the war through historical research methodology. Plays that influenced British populations at the box office and plays that had an enduring influence on theatrical history were comparatively analyzed. The author was able to discern how the population shifted their focus from showing widespread nationalistic support to escapism to pushes for cultural advancement. This research helps put into perspective how communities utilize their art during periods of war. This work will be divided into a chronological look into the use of theatre throughout the war and post-war years of 1914-1920 while specifically looking at Great Britain and their particular theatre scene during those years.

## 2. Methodology

The historical research methodology was used to compile information. Several historical texts were used to gather details on the time period. Specifically, theatrical literature that examined the 1910s in Europe and America were found to be the most useful. Plays were researched from 1913 to 1922 to get a sense of the type of theatre that was most pertinent at different points during the war. Works about theatre in other time periods and during other wars were consulted but not specifically used to get a greater sense of how this time period contrasted with others. The majority of the works used to compile information were secondary sources although primary accounts in the forms of historical journals were also consulted. Information was collected from these sources, analyzed, interpreted, and critiqued to determine the answer to the research question.

## 3. Chronological look through the use of British theatre during World War I

At the beginning of the war, nationalistic fervor had overtaken Europe's primary powers. The intricate alliance system tied nations together in a tangled web of promises and backdoor dealings. When Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by a Serbian Nationalist, the powder keg exploded and Europe found itself locked in its deadliest war to date. The theatre was one branch of society that fed into the idea of nationalism and helped Great Britain swell its military numbers by showing propaganda plays that would raise awareness for the cause of sending the Huns back to the German hinterland. Shortly after the outbreak of the war for Great Britain on August 4, 1914, a number of nationalistic plays that celebrated Britain's history were on display throughout the country (Krivanec, 2014). These mostly entailed heroic Shakespeare plays from the past. After the first rush of troops had made their way through the registration lines, and the women had begun to pick the white flowers to give to the "cowards" who had not yet signed up for the war effort, the theatres began to embrace the militarization of the country.

There was a series of "khaki nights in theatres which quickly learned to cater to the presumed tastes of the boys in battledress" (Trussler, 1994, p. 278). These wartime productions were mostly militaristic melodramas with titles like *The War Baby*, *Brave Women Who Wait*, *The Enemy in Our Midst*, and *Are we Downhearted? No!* (Trussler, 1994). While the boys in khaki were watching their propaganda pieces, works of art from other nations were being strictly prohibited as censorship began to take hold. "Both sides...welcomed a self-imposed "purification" boycott of all plays originating in 'enemy states.'" This led to far-reaching modifications in theatre repertoires, especially in popular entertainment which had been oriented towards international successes before" (Krivanec, 2014). Although Richard Wagner and Heinrich von Kleist's work were no longer allowed in the country, alliances were strengthened through the use of the stage. France and England in particular would present each other's works on their national stages to help unite their populations to the common cause. The English would present plays by Pierre Corneille, and "on the other side, French war plays

often included the character of a smart, well-dressed, polite and civilised British gentleman or officer” (Krivanec, 2014).

As the war efforts bogged down and the trenches got deeper, Europe realized they were not in for the short wars of their predecessors like the Franco-Prussian War or the Russo-Japanese War. This would be a war of attrition that would send its populace through the meat grinder. The war was a stalemate that would not be decided for four toilsome, destructive years. As the soldiers became disenfranchised with the war effort, they quickly tired of the propaganda and war glorification efforts. New provocative titles became all the rage with names like Hot Lips and High Heels and Stockings. These distractionary efforts were hits along with escapist musicals and farces (Trussler, 1994). The historical plays with their nationalistic appeal also came to a screeching halt. The government, in an attempt to raise money for the war effort, imposed an Entertainments Tax in 1916 which would not be repealed until the 1960s (Griffiths, 2019). The military men were forced to organize their own entertainment as their own country’s artists fell into deeper debt. It was a rough time to be an actor during the war years. “Following the outbreak of the First World War, the West End managements patriotically reduced the salaries of their actors by up to a half.” By the end of the war, only ten companies of actors were playing to troops in “garrison theatres” (Trussler, 1994, p. 278).

Although the prevailing English playwright from the period from a historical perspective was George Bernard Shaw, the British population was more interested in wartime entertainments and escapist adventures to take their mind off the destruction. Arthur Pinero, master of farces and drawing room comedies since the late 1800s, had 4,834 performances of his plays during the pre-war and wartime years. Comparing that to Shaw who enjoyed 2,568 performances between 1890 and 1919, the evidence suggests the British population was not looking to be socially challenged at the theatre (Trussler, 1994). Shaw would win the day historically when he broke out of the table talk conversations of the intellectuals and into the mainstream attention of the middle class. One of the only social commentaries about the war that was written during wartime years was by Shaw himself. “Only in Heartbreak House, written during the First World War when armament production was no longer a laughing matter, does a raw nerve of honesty seem touched within himself, creating a more contemplative, bittersweet mood which the English later came to insist on regarding as Chekhovian” (Trussler, 1994, p. 269). Shaw sticks to his core belief in Heartbreak House that art is grounded in the society from which it springs and contributes to the progress of that society “spiritually, morally, and practically” (Luckhurst, 2006, p. 73). It would take until the fateful moment in a small train car in the Compiègne Forest when the Armistice was signed on the 11th hour before true reflection and introspection could begin at home.

Once the war was concluded, theatrical works from continental Europe were attempted to be brought back into the country to no avail. Instead, the British populace attached itself to John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* and enjoyed 1,500 performances of the English classic (Trussler 1994). The majority of the major European theatre movements were largely ignored in England as the country turned inward after all the losses it had incurred throughout the war. Their plays stood largely apart from their European counterparts. “Few British plays of this period show much awareness of, let alone responsiveness towards, the expressionist experiments of the German theatre, the constructivist ideas of the early Soviet era, the futurism of Italy, or the surrealist and dadist movements in France” (Trussler, 1994, p. 288). There were plays that brought in exciting new ideas and concepts like Karel Capek’s *R.U.R.* which found its way into English theatres shortly after the war. The play broached the topic of evolution, technological advancement, and societies response to those ideals. Yet, theatrical development was slow in the post-war years and many of these boundary pushing products were continental imports. However, the theatre was alive and well and the return of the men in khaki allowed the theatre to thrive as British society saw a return to normalcy (Elsom, 1979).

British theatre retained the commercial appeal that had helped it survive throughout the war, but there were developments in the English approach to theatre. Shakespeare found a reinvigorated audience yearning for his work. After the war, the concept of producing classic plays like Shakespeare with modern dress became a popular trope. This was first popularized at the premier Shakespearean theatre in England, The Old Vic, between the World Wars (Wilson and Goldfarb, 2004). The actor-manager role which had dominated British theatre for centuries was now a concept on the road to

extinction (Brockett and Hildy, 2004). Britain's top actors after WWI were now more versatile in their approach and utilized the burgeoning film industry to increase their popularity, their pocket books, and gain international appeal (Wilson and Goldfarb, 2003).

#### 4. Conclusion

World War I saw the English theatre first utilized to promote the war effort before seemingly becoming the escapist response to a war that was ravaging its social structure. Post-war British theatre retained a primary function of the unification of a populace that had endured a loss of a generation and needed significant healing. Although there was a lack of social development during the war effort because of the shellshocked societal tenants that had been shaken to their core, the theatre did eventually become a place of some self-reflection. World War I took from the theatre its heart and manipulated it to serve the men who fought and gave their lives. The returning troops repaid the service with their own devotion to the theatre. Although a Great Depression and second World War were looming that would stress the theatre to its breaking point, the English theatre left "The Great War" intact and still functional as a means of slowly developing cultural evolution. Future conflicts would further stress the theatre in Britain and abroad as more overarching societal ideals would be emphasized with the emergence of communism and the role of strong centralized governments beginning to dominate international and domestic policies.

As the world enters into a new phase of more interconnectivity through the process of globalization, what will future conflicts lend to the conversation and how will these conversations show themselves through our forms of art? Cinema has been quick to address these sorts of issues as a way of reaching a broad medium and fostering conversation while the theatre has taken a step back in cultural impact. Whether one will serve as the voice of the people more than the other, only time can tell. As western cultures continue to determine what types of societies will serve them best on the political spectrum perhaps the artistic realm can help to shape those conversations in some capacity as it did back in The Great War.

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