

Playwriting in Wartime

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From the dawn of history human beings have fought each other, and despite the social, cultural and scientific progress they have made with the development of human civilization, they still go on fighting. For reasons that so far have not been thoroughly investigated, human beings have not managed to develop the skills that will enable them to resolve conflicts by peaceful means and they continue fighting, despite their knowing that the majority of wars have not resulted in stable political solutions. Quite the reverse: most wars only created the conditions for the wars that followed. Even when wars ended in political agreements, in most cases similar agreements could have been reached before their outbreak, and undoubtedly without them. The Yom Kippur War is but one example illustrating this paradox: in the course of 1972 representatives of Israel and Egypt conducted a political dialogue in Washington with American mediation. The dialogue was halted when Israel refused to accept the Egyptian demand of a complete withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. On Yom Kippur 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel and despite Israel's gains in the war, it withdrew from the whole of the Sinai Peninsula, just as Egypt had demanded before the war. But in the meantime more than 2,700 Israeli and over 10,000 Egyptian soldiers were killed. Were their deaths necessary? Apparently not. Could they have been avoided? Evidently, they could. A multi-tiered, complex and in-depth study of the human, social and national needs of both sides could have produced other possibilities of resolving the conflict, possibilities that were not so lethal.

The playwright examining the environment in which he lives can suggest these possibilities. He can discover them through a precise, sensitive and in-depth examination of the human processes taking place around him. Examining these processes and finding alternatives to war must be done before we open fire. I am not suggesting that playwrights engage in political negotiations, but rather that playwrights engage in investigation of the psychological, ideological, mythical and political infrastructure of their society, in order to prove that these other possibilities indeed exist.

True, many of us are convinced that man is no more than a bloodthirsty predator, fanatical about his tribe, his people and his race. He will neither flinch from massacring millions for their sake nor from spilling his own blood. Yet I cannot live my life without the hope that human beings are capable of change, that their thirst for blood can be allayed, that they can be wiser, more tolerant, more understanding, and more forgiving.

What can a playwright do to make us all wiser, more tolerant, more understanding, and more forgiving?

1. The playwright must expose the lies disseminated amongst us on the nature of war. For countless centuries we have glorified war and described it as a stage on which man's courage, his willingness for sacrifice and his stubborn will to win are revealed. We have lauded the fighters' esprit de corps. The thrill of battle has always been a moment of spiritual elevation that surpasses the banal moments of our life. Even Shakespeare extolled war, as Henry V in his famous monologue (Act IV, Scene III), says:

“This day is call'd the feast of Crispian:
 He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
 Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,
 And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
 He that shall live this day, and see old age,
 Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
 And say, 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian':
 Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
 And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'”

This description of the remembrance of war is a tissue of lies. Most people who have participated in a war remember it as a terrible, ugly and humiliating experience. When they think about it they are filled with terror, horror and disgust, not pride and not satisfaction. They know that the pain they experienced will never abate. Hundreds of thousands of us are unable to live normal lives because of our war experiences, and our neighbors, too, have similar nightmares. The playwright

must remind us all of this so that those who have not experienced war will not be so eager to participate in it.

2. The playwright must stress the cost of war: people die in it – men, women, children, the old and the young, soldiers and civilians. In the routine of our lives we tend to obscure the cost, and talk about statistics. When death is a statistic it is neutral, it doesn't hurt or threaten. The playwright must turn these statistics into people: men and women who died, men and women who lost their dear ones. The pain of death and loss must become part of the public discourse – and not only on Remembrance Day. They must be present among us particularly before a declaration of war. Comparing the cost of war with its benefits is a prerequisite for survival in any healthy society. Here I will cite several lines from my play, *The Murder of Isaac*, in which a wounded veteran says to his comrades:

“I opened the paper this morning and on the front page I saw the smiling faces of young soldiers. They're not smiling any more. Their bodies buried in the ground have begun to rot. Only those who have seen rotting bodies know what a horrific sight it is. You take your comrade's hand and it falls to pieces in yours... And the busy maggots hurry to find themselves another piece of meat... And the gaping eyes are empty... What really justifies such death? What is so much bigger than our life that makes it worth dying for like this?”

3. Numerous politicians offer simplistic solutions to their peoples' fears of their enemies: they promise to prevent war by creating a deterrent. These leaders do not see that the accumulation of force spurs their enemies to accumulate force even greater and more destructive. The playwright can indicate more complex and efficient solutions: If you want to prevent war, you must abolish the reasons for war. So long as the reasons for war exist, the danger of war will continue to hover over us. Public Analysis of the reasons for war can indicate other possibilities for resolving the conflict – possibilities that must be examined prior to the declaration of war. According to Samuel P. Huntington, in recent years we have been witness to 'the clash of civilizations' of the Judeo-Christian West against the Islamic East. Unfortunately, the world's

leaders are not investing efforts in pinpointing and counteracting the reasons – cultural, economic and religious – behind this clash, and instead are attempting to impose political balance by force in incessant regional wars, and by creating a balance of terror. Playwrights, who contribute to the formation of these civilizations, must invest their best efforts in turning this clash of civilizations into a constructive competition that will ensure progress and peace.

4. How can the playwright expose the causal infrastructure – social, psychological, mythical and political – that is likely to lead to war? By creating characters that contend with the reasons for war. He must focus on their plots, their relationships, and on the catastrophes they go through in the course of their struggles to fulfill their desires against the background of this causal infrastructure of the war. He must examine the flow of events in his characters' conscious and subconscious minds. In their deepest emotional strata he will reveal the fear, despair, hatred, evil and fanaticism whose collective accumulation cause the war. As we know, the heroes of the tragedy always fail in fulfilling their desires and they end their lives in a catastrophe. The heroes of our political plays, too, will fail in their endeavors to counteract the reasons for war. They, too, will fail to prevent the titanic clashes in whose shadow we live. But their failure is a warning signal for the audience. Their failure on stage strengthens the audience to contend with the reasons for war existing in their own political reality.
5. The playwright must not be satisfied with simply investigating political processes from a narrow national point of view, but must examine them from a broad, universal, ideological perspective, and in particular from the perspective of justice – justice in its simplest and most basic definition: What is hateful to you, do not unto your fellow men. This justice is not only a moral tenet of the highest order, but an efficient tool for resolving international conflicts. Human history proves that international agreements that did not provide relative justice for the parties involved in a conflict only lasted so long as there was a balance of terror between them. Only agreements that provide relative justice for all parties will remain stable over time, without resorting to force in order to uphold them. The concept of relative justice needs some

clarification: an agreement that accords relative justice is one that enables each party to enjoy a maximal sense of satisfaction from its negotiated achievements, while accepting the right of all the other parties to enjoy the same sense of satisfaction from their achievements. An agreement of this kind is the 1979 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Israel returned the entire Sinai Peninsula, and Egypt undertook to maintain the area as a demilitarized zone. Achieving an agreement according relative justice to all parties is not a matter for mathematicians. It can be achieved in negotiation out of goodwill, sensitivity and empathy.

6. Empathy is really a key word in this process of reconciliation. How do we create this Empathy? By placing the other onstage, the playwright can create a political, social, ideological and religious dialogue between opponents. This dialogue will take place only if he presents this other as a fully developed human being, and a complex three-dimensional character. This dialogue will create an understanding of the other's fears, aspirations and needs, and will constitute the beginning of conciliation. We must remember the great contribution made by South African playwright Athol Fugard to the conciliation process in his country. By presenting the black man on a stage where most of the audience was white, Fugard succeeded in creating a dialogue between audience and characters, thus bringing about empathy that in turn led to profound social and political change.

I assume that many of you will agree with all I have said so far, but many others will surely ask themselves: can we demand from the playwright such great responsibility for political and social processes over whose development he has no control? I think that the answer is yes.

7. We must bear in mind that there has always been an alliance between playwright and audience. From the theatre's inception the audience has come to see plays not only to be entertained, but mainly to be given answers on the meaning of their life. The onus of these answers rests on the playwright. It is he who must give the audience answers to the difficult questions they sometimes fear to ask. We have, in recent years, become cynical, ignoring people's need for inspiration, and

convincing ourselves that they only want jokes. We are guilty of turning our art into entertainment. We are guilty of causing the audience to expect entertainment. We are guilty of continuing to provide entertainment while claiming that this is the only way the theatre can survive. The moment the audience knows that the theatre is conducting a crucial debate on the important issues in their life, they will come to the theatre without any need for a marketing campaign or stars. Israeli theatre has proved to the world that plays dealing with critical political and ideological issues can also be financially successful. Many such plays have been produced in Israel's theatres and have brought audiences of hundreds of thousands to their auditoriums.

8. In wartime a playwright can choose the easy way out by joining the consensus supporting the war. It is easier for him to be comfortable in the lap of the majority, without being forced to argue with them, attack them and defend himself from them. Brotherly comradeship is always a tempting feeling – even Henry V uses it in his famous monologue that appeals to his soldiers not to shy away from the war effort. But by joining the consensus does the playwright fulfill his obligation to himself and his art? I think that the answer is no. It seems to me that the playwright must act to the best of his ability to form an opposition to this consensus. He must offer a different view of reality, a view that negates continuation of the war. How can he offer such a view? As I mentioned earlier, by building characters that contend with the continuation of the war. This is the playwright's strength – he can build such characters and through them explore the reality in which the war is taking place, explore the outcome of the war through processes undergone by his character, and thus present the tragic lacuna between the outcome of the war and the sacrifice it demands. This suggestion is not a formula for writing a play. It offers a process of exploring reality using powerful dramatic tools – character, conflict and catharsis. Human culture has not yet found more effective artistic tools than these for observing reality. It is the playwright's duty to use the tools at his disposal with appropriate morality. As Bertolt Brecht said, "In times of war talk about trees is almost a crime because it implies silence about so many horrors..."

9. This responsibility and duty are not imposed solely on the playwright. When there are no playwrights writing plays in which the characters face up to political reality, or when the plays dealing with political reality are simply not good enough, it is the theatrical leadership's responsibility to lead a process that will bring about the writing of such plays. This leadership must establish teams of playwrights, directors, actors and designers and challenge them to start creating. Creative processes such as this have taken place in numerous important theatres worldwide, like the Parisian Théâtre du Soleil between the 1960s and the 1980s. Support from other disciplines can be enlisted for such a process, and gain the assistance of historians, philosophers and human rights activists, who are capable of suggesting ways of observing reality that can inspire the creation of characters and plot. This responsibility is not given to the theatrical leadership only in wartime. The theatrical leadership has to understand that theatre must always be a laboratory in which reality's various components are tested. By this I do not mean the immediate reality we see in our backyard or on our TV screens. Theatre must examine the reality that is beneath it: the hidden reality; the reality that does not volunteer to show itself to the observer; the harsh, menacing, uncontrollable inner reality that feeds the actions of those engaged in oppression, occupation and killing. How can the theatre discover this hidden reality? There is only one answer: depth. By building multi-tiered theatrical forms that mutually create and nourish one another: characters, plot and catharsis.

To be more specific I would like to set out a number of concrete ideas that a playwright should address in wartime. They are mainly intended for Israeli playwrights, but I think there is value in addressing them in other societies as well.

1. First and foremost we must re-discuss the role of God in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. God has been exploited by both sides as a tool both for destroying the other and for self-destruction. Israelis use the divine promise as proof of their right to every corner of the Greater Land of Israel. Some of us use God, his Law, and his Messiah as a source of inspiration for arrogance, cruelty and racism. When the Messiah comes, say the fanatics among us, he will not try to reconcile us and our enemies, but will annihilate every last one of them as though they were the ancient, despised Amalekites. What kind of god annihilates human beings? What

happened to the merciful and compassionate God we have known for hundreds of generations? How did he become a merciless God of vengeance to his own creatures? Islam has created a similar god – the God of Jihad. The God that rewards the suicide bombers in the city square, the God that seeks to destroy an entire civilization only because it does not believe in Muhammad. This God's face must be exposed to prevent people from worshipping him. If we leave mediation between him and us to the fanatics representing him on earth, he will devour us all.

2. We, in Israel, must continue investigating our accepted narrative of the history of Zionism, the establishment and consolidation of the State of Israel. This narrative was created by politicians, historians, teachers and writers, who believed that it would serve our survival. It includes, for example, a description of the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, according to which with the outbreak of the War of Independence when five Arab states attacked Israel, 700,000 Palestinians who lived among us were given a promise by their leaders that they would return victorious to their villages, and so they packed up their belongings and left. This description is inaccurate. Many Palestinians were expelled by the Israeli army, many others fled under armed threat, and in some places there were actual massacres. The Israeli narrative serves the self-image of many Israelis, thus reinforcing their identification with their state, but it does not serve the advancement of the peace process. If Israel seeks peace it must accept its responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian tragedy. We must apply the principle of "Truth and Conciliation" that was successfully employed in South Africa. True conciliation can only be based upon a true definition of the history of the conflict. We must investigate the creation of the refugee problem, correct the false narrative we have created, and help theatre audiences to contend honestly with their past.

3. We, in Israel, must meticulously investigate the creation of militarism in our country. Our admiration of the army and its commanders, which for many years was part of our defense mechanisms, has become a destructive component in our development as a society. This admiration created an intolerable situation whereby the weight of the army's positions on political issues is far too great. The

army's commanders can exert pressure on the government and impose upon it solutions deriving from a power-driven worldview, which stems from the fact that the tools available to the army's commanders are the tools of war. The playwright must present to his audiences the limitations of the use of force. He must emphasize that any political achievement we reach by force will only be sustained so long as we possess the force to sustain it. In other words, to sustain the achievements of war we will need another war followed by another, *ad infinitum*. Should we not seek an alternative? And if such an alternative is not to be found then the playwright must participate in the effort to draw conclusions. If there is no prospect of living in Israel in peace, then everyone must ask himself if he wants to go on living there. This is a extremely difficult question but it must be asked.

4. We must tirelessly and unremittingly continue to investigate the impact of war on our basic values as individuals and a society. Although plays about the moral corruption caused by the occupation of the Palestinian territories have already been performed, we must continue writing new ones that examine this corruption that is becoming more and more acute. The playwright must stand up like Cato the Elder and by every means possible point out the terrible demeaning of human life that has spread among us; occurrences of monstrous cruelty towards Arabs which are legitimized by occupation; the relationship between the occupation and the violence in our midst; the relationship between the occupation and our attitude towards the weak in our midst; and the relationship between the occupation and our attitude towards foreign workers in our midst. Day and night the playwright must ask whether the diminishment of our quality of life is a worthwhile price to pay for our achievements in this occupation. The very fact of a debate on this question is likely to create a change in the public's position regarding the concessions necessary for achieving a stable political agreement.

Despite the sense of self-persuasion evident in the above, I am not entirely confident in the ability of playwrights to change political reality, and certainly not in wartime. Every day I awaken to new doubts, and every day I am compelled to go on fighting them in order to again believe that the playwright's influence is not an illusion. Every day I reiterate to myself that while the playwright is, perhaps, unable to bring about

immediate change, he can possibly do so in the long term. Perhaps he is creating a latent stream of consciousness that is gradually spreading, gradually reaching hidden corners, and in not too many years time we will all discover its influence. I endeavor to strengthen myself with the knowledge that playwriting in Israel has had a significant influence on the attitude of Israeli society towards the idea of a Palestinian state, the majority of which currently supports the idea thanks also to the works of Hanoach Levin, Joshua Sobol, Joseph Mundi, Hillel Mittelpunkt and others. Sadly, the contribution of playwrights to the political processes presently taking place is not great. Far too many remain silent. Far too many are engaged in other matters. They are quite possibly tired of engaging in politics. They have quite possibly despaired. I feel that we cannot allow ourselves to tire, and that writing about other subjects is a luxury. It is my hope that a new generation of Israeli playwrights will emerge that will make a greater contribution than ours to the Middle Eastern conciliation process, a generation whose commitment to its audience and itself will be greater than ours. A generation of playwrights that will acknowledge that the talent for writing is a gift, not only for expressing what is happening in their inner world, but also for creating profound social and political change that will redeem us all. The illusion that we can save the world by writing is a vital component in the drive to write.

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