

Theatre and Political Change

I was born and I lived in Israel all my life. In the last two years we're witnessing vast changes that are taking place around us and within us. In various Arab countries spring is awakening and revolutions and civil wars are taking place. Opposition is alive in Iran. Islam rises in Turkey and in Egypt. It'll probably take over Syria soon and Jordan in the near future. Palestinians have declared their state and most of the world has recognized it. Last summer we saw a huge social protest in Israel. It has been struggling for the past few months quite successfully to change the country's social values, and we already see some positive results to this struggle.

These changes have surprised many of us in the theatre community. We didn't anticipate any of them. But now, as they are taking place in front of our eyes, we must ask ourselves how we explore, how we comment, how we get involved and influence these changes, using the art of the theatre. If we won't be able to decipher these changes, if we won't be able to present their meaning to our audiences, they will lose their trust in us and desert us. Since the beginning of the theatre, audiences have expected playwrights to explain to them the deep meaning of the events taking place in them and around them. That has always been the alliance between people and theatres. That's why people have continued coming to see plays.

How can the playwright explore these significant events that are taking place around him? How can he understand their meaning? In the world we live in, we are surrounded by abundance of noises. They reach us from all directions. They come from the protestors in the squares, from the demonstrators in the streets, from the wounded, from the dead, from the media, and from within ourselves. We travel more, meet more people; we talk more and hear more words and more interpretations. But this cacophony of noises deafens us, and we can barely hear any authentic melodies, which are so essential for our writing.

What can we do to overcome this attack of noises and hear those authentic melodies that we seek so much? There are many ways to do it. I must admit that after writing about political and social themes for more than thirty years I discovered that I am returning more and more to the basic concepts defined by Aristotle in his fundamental book "The

Poetics". Aristotle talks about pain and suffering as the leverage for changing the spectators' positions some 2300 years ago. I also believe that if we open our hearts and listen to the voices around us with our utmost empathy, and identify the pain and the suffering - we'll undoubtedly hear the melody we're seeking.

The pain and the suffering of those we hear could be the same pain and suffering of the characters in our plays. This pain, as Aristotle explains, is the catalyst for this powerful total process which he called the Catharsis of the Protagonist. This Catharsis is taking place at a moment of huge suffering that forces the protagonist to recognize his or her Hubris and cleanse himself or herself from it.

If our play will be written well and performed well, the spectators will feel empathy and compassion for the protagonist and will also experience his suffering and hence they'll also recognize his or her Hubris. But the spectator still has one more phase to go through after the fall of the protagonist into the abyss. Just as he is strengthened by his nightmares when he wakes up in the morning and finds himself safe and sound in his bed - when the tragedy ends and the light will come up in the auditorium, the spectator will find himself strengthened to accomplish the struggle which the protagonist has just failed.

For example, let's look at "Romeo and Juliet". I think that most of the spectators in the play don't come out at the end of it saying to themselves: Forbidden love is so dangerous - I'll never fall in love with someone I'm not allowed to. On the contrary. Most spectators feel that love is such a noble experience that they'll do all they can to fall in love, even if it is forbidden.

In other words - if we can create a protagonist that goes through a catharsis, we can influence the spectator to struggle to accomplish the same action in which the protagonist has just failed. I believe this is a great achievement.

The theatre must take part in the political social changes that are taking place in our world. For that purpose we have to use the most powerful devices we have. I agree that comedy and satire could create change too. But as I stated above, I believe that the tragedy could be even stronger. Let's not forget that ever since the beginning of the European

theatre in Greece the tragedy has been a subversive art form. King Oedipus challenges the fate dictated by the gods, So does Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet challenges the prohibitions of their parents, Antigone challenges the orders of king Kreon, and till today she strengthens the spectators to act according the commandments of their own hearts. This subversion is way to create progress. And sometime, progress can be achieved only if we undermine the authorities of the various establishments - the political, the religious, the social and the ideological. That is why the tragedy has survived for more than 2700 years. That's why we must continue writing it.