

Modern Drama and *Have I None* – The Present State of British Theatre

HAVE I NONE AND THREE CRITICS – 10.03.23

In January 2023 my play *Have I None* (HIN) was staged in London at the “Golden Goose Theatre” (director Lewis Frost). I read some of the critics on the morning in which I heard on the radio that the newly appointed deputy chairperson (I hope I've got that right) of the Tory Party, Mr Lee Anderson, wanted the return of hanging because, he said, no one who had been hanged had ever committed another crime. This plea is Hitler logic and is Fascist. It shows how dangerous our politics and degenerate our culture have become. That no hanged person had afterwards committed another crime is meant to show its a truth so obvious you can be flippant about it and that will even strengthen its truth. I call this sort of rhetorical device a Fascist curlicue. Its use has become common. But it fails as an argument about hanging because the point is not the salutary effect on the hanged person but the effect on the whole of society and its culture. It teaches us to solve problems with violence – and worse, it sets up deep sinister ramifications in the human psyche, in the dark brutish hinterland that no civilization has yet tamed. Hitler was more ambitious than Lee Anderson so as soon as he got power he restored hanging and beheading and introduced gassing. One small lesson from the long past: the middle ages publicly burned heretics alive but heresy (as a social crime) didnt stop till they stopped burning heretics.

I dont usually comment on critics but after hearing Anderson's plea for hanging I thought I should at least read the critics of *Have I None*. I got as far as three. What is drama? The classical Greeks created democracy and drama together. Neither can or could exist without the other. That follows from the relation between the plastic nature of our subjectivity and the objectivity of our species situation. We are not an architecture produced by nature. Only public drama can create the subjectivity of democracy. It is an ontological fact that we are the drama species.

My reason for writing these notes will become clear. The critics used conventional drama words in describing the play: shock value/heightened dramatised pressure build up/explosive excitement. Its as if the critics would have been happier at a soccer match or in a dodgem car. One critic writes “. . . the dramatic tension of HIN could have been more pronounced – the pauses and silences took away from the pressure that might otherwise have built up, leaving more explosive moments in the dialogue to arise somewhat implausibly, instead of a natural progression of on-going disagreements”. Another critic wrote HIN “paints a tense authoritarian future, but the director's execution of the show (sic) . . . seems to capture the drab and dismal, resulting in a very dull outcome. Many of the points within the script that can be heightened or dramatized further for shock value are instead paced too quickly, appearing rushed rather than conveying the sense of urgency or excitement that is required. The aspiring elements of comedy. . . fall flat, amplifying the awkward silences amongst the spare set. . . over-acting in many points in the latter half of the performance, . . . *steering the audience away from the storyline, taking it to a level beyond farcical and instead eliminating both the comedy and the dramatic aspects from the piece.*”

I italicised the last words because they are ambiguous: “steering the audience away from the storyline . . . to a level beyond farcical and instead eliminating both the comedy and dramatic aspects from the piece.” The “instead” is ambiguous and implies purpose – yet it comes to a gap. What does the critic miss? Is the “gap” actually the site of modern drama?

The italicised words show the problem. The critics don't know what they are writing about because they don't know what the characters are doing and talking about. So they don't know what the play is about. They are lost. They wrongly criticise manner and ignore content. The play is about the problem that has concerned major European thinkers for the last four or so hundred years. But the problem itself is clear and easy to understand. You step into it every time you leave your front door. Drama could solve the problem. It's why the Greeks created drama. But the Greeks were historically too early to solve it. And we don't solve it because we have no drama but only “theatre,” cinema and TV.

I will illustrate this. Years ago The Royal Court Theatre staged the first production of my play *The Sea*. It was a wonderfully funny production (by Bill Gaskill). Later the National Theatre staged it. Years earlier I had met the NT director when he was young and told him he could do useful work or waste his life. He went to Hollywood and won 203 Oscars. Stage and screen work differently. Screen directors think what angles, what shots to shoot. So when they work on the stage they tell the actor say that line slower, look over there when you say it, as if the actor is performing for the camera. In this way the film-cum-stage director abolishes the connection between the actor and audience. It totally destroys any possible drama. The NT production of *The Sea* was well cast, all lines and scenery perfect, but there was nothing there. It was weird. A cellophane production. You could see through the cellophane to the centre and see that it was cellophane too – there was still nothing there. We live surrounded by screens and they create a demi-culture without structure and meaning. We are like imprisoned flies crawling on a pane of glass who think they are outside. Hence the compensatory razzmatazz. That is why the critics I read couldn't see the meaning and purpose of *HIN* -- couldn't see what was literally done and said in front of them on the stage. Weirdly their expectations have become cellophane. It's why we have theatre but no drama. Whatever its setting theatre takes place in a room. Whatever its setting drama takes place in the world. So I wrote *HIN*. Because of the cultural blindness we are not in control of society or ourselves. That's why I wrote it.

I need to go back to the lines I italicised. They fascinated me. Cameras degrade language to clichés, sob-words, chatter and wisecracks. Drama works by the human mind combining language and physical image to create meaning. It's a skill the critics I read did not show,

Grit is a stranger, a dangerous nuisance in the militarized, heavily-surveyed society. Sara and Jams decide to kill him. Jams sends her to the chemist to buy the poison. She disappears for three days. Jams goes out looking for her. Grit is left alone in the house. A knock on the door. Sara comes in. She wears a ground-length loose coat of stiff sky-blue silk. It is covered with metal spoons. They are sewn to the silk so that they can't swing loosely but may knock against each other when the coat moves. Where did she get the dress in a society of uniforms and rags?

Time and place have changed. Grit is now a child. Sarah is still her adult age.

Grit: Where have you been?

Sara: We played in the house when we were children. That was before they blocked the windows. Once you were ill. That made our parents worried. Harsh. In the night I came to the room where they put you. You were in a coma. I felt the ice. There were drops all over your face. I thought that was your fever: your skin cried. I pulled back the blankets. You smelt like a stable on a frosty night. I dragged you to the window so you could see. I had to climb on a chair. Pulled you up by your shoulder. Stood you on the chair. Turned your head to the window. There was nothing to see. No lights in the street. It was dark. The glass was black. I saw your face in it. It was white. Your face was talking to you. I couldn't hear it. You put out your hand. You tapped the glass. I thought you'd broken it – that was the power of fever. I nearly dropped you in fright. You'd fall in the glass. The splinters would tear off your face. The spikes would stab out our eyes. The glass wasn't cracked. What I saw was the pain in your face: your face had splintered. Your face in the glass had told you you were dead. You slithered out of my hands. Mother ran in. All next day I was terrified they'd find out you were dead. They'd blame me. I was frightened as only a child can be. A doctor came. He wore a long black coat. I never saw his front. I thought he had two backs. That made him a doctor. No one found me out. The doctor didn't notice you were dead.

Sara takes off the sky-blue silk coat, turns it inside out and puts it on again. The inside is black and covered with bones. Each bone is sewn at one end so that it hangs loose and rattles as the coat moves.

Grit: You are my sister. I remember my face in the window. Can I sleep now you're here? I walked for months to get here. All this time I didn't have five hours rest. I slept like a dog with an eye open.

Grit sleeps. Sara puts a pillow under his head.

Jams comes in. He doesn't notice Sara. Instead he sees Grit sleeping on the floor. He ties him to a chair. Sara goes out behind Jams' back. Jams talks to Grit. He tells Grit about the chaos they live in. The problems of his militarised life. Later Sara comes back. She wears her ordinary clothes.

Jams: Where have you been?

He and Sara begin their repetitive desultory argument. In the end Jams asks her did you go to the chemist. Sara gives him the poison. He takes it to the kitchen. Grit and Sara are alone. In the kitchen Jams is preparing the poisoned soup.

Grit: Where have you been? Three days! Were you lost?

Sarah: I was in the ruins. Rubble everywhere. I ended up in a cellar. Not really by chance. I was looking. I found the old woman with the picture. Jams had said a picture of the sea. I

hung it on the wall. Hammered in the nail. Sat there three days. The top of the wall lurched forward. Then it all came down in a rush. The bricks fell on the ground like teeth. The old woman's dead. I've never seen the sea. Did you see it?

Grit: No.

Sara; Its shrunk. Only puddles are left. Where the sea was the sand moves as if its still there. They say the sea's ghost walks on the shore

Grit: You remember when I was ill? You came in my room one night. Sat me up in bed to make me better. You told me stories.

Sarah: No. Its all in your head. Ive never seen you before.

Jams comes in with two bowls of poisoned soup. Puts them on the table. (Remembers:)

Salt.

Jams goes out to the kitchen for salt.

Sara dips a spoon in the soup. Breathes on it to cool it. Swallows it.

Grit: . . . you bitch. . .

Grit thinks Sara is drinking his soup. She is killing herself. Suicide. Jams returns. She drinks the rest of the soup and collapses.

Panic.

Sarah to Grit: Take me outside. I dont want to die in the house.

She goes out through the door. Grit follows her.

I think this is what one critic called a surreal episode. Its not. Surrealism would be of no use in HIN. Reality has outdone surrealism. Instead I analyse.

HIN's first director asked me if Grit was really Sarah's brother. I said I dont know. He said you must! I cant direct the play if I don't know! I said I dont know. HIN is not an Agatha Christie play. Whatever the location TV and theatre takes place in a room. Drama takes place in the world.

In the "thirties" theatre was middleclass posh. Then the war -- killing -- the death camp universe, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. After the war some writers -- some even working class (an innovation in drama)-- started to write a new democratic drama. There was a new freedom, a new world, as if they could write plays even on the sky. Its home-base was The Royal Court Theatre. It was even called the most important theatre in the world. Of course some of its plays were simplistic or reactionary -- former public schoolboys seeking to restore the past. But it abolished censorship, helped to create the welfare state, the national health service, raised school leaving age, marched with CND. . . A new world was kicking in its cradle but the old world was stirring in its coffin. The Thatcher-Reagan Axis. Reaction, the counter revolution. It was all so simple. The new world created by peace was destroyed. Laid waste. We live in its debris.

I cant write a political-economic paper here. Some brief indications are necessary.

There are two classes: owners, workers. The owners employ the workers to make goods. The goods are sold to provide money to pay the workers. This could be described the other way round without changing the structural function. The workers employ the owners to

invent the goods to be sold to provide profit and the workers wage. Its like a fair merry-go-round. It could be reversed. Then the workers employ the owners to work for them. The structure in reverse remains the same. The difference is in the subjectivity of human self-consciousness. The goods are made by the workers and sold by the owners to pay the workers out of the profit. The real connections are hidden by ideology and in society's class labyrinth. Money is produced only by work not by banks The owners provide intellectual work – organise and invent. The workers are paid from the profits made by selling the products the owners invent.

In the past this structure was secured by ideology and violence. Modernity secures it, also, by inventing an endless variety of products. They are “must haves” created by physical and psychological need and now even more so by pressures of social standing – the “must haves”. The owners create the endless variety of “must haves” to increase their profit so that they can make more profit by creating more goods. This has become structurally necessary. The structure is mechanical (like a funfair roundabout). In the past It was socially secured by ideology and violence. In modernity it is secured also by constantly expanding the market. There is now a huge range of goods unimaginable in the past. The socially desirable becomes the necessary. The workers still work to buy the goods they make with the money they “manufacture” by making them. The system is possible because of the tie between the needs of human “animality” and consciousness. (Based on the bind of drama and consciousness, morality and democracy.) To create profit acquisitiveness and anxiety are constantly increased. They are now destructive. Global warming makes the earth a desert and turns the sea to a sewer. There is no way out of this unless you discard the structural round-about. This is the horizon of HIN.

Because these structures directly involve human subjectivity they change social structure institutions and culture. They are deformed by the pressures Ive described. Drama becomes the Entertainment Industry. Understanding is manipulated away. But dont people need entertainment? Not if it stops them solving their problems.

This artificiality of modern society leads to the destruction of social institution. Morality is perverted and the relation of drama and morality is reversed. Instead of drama and morality there is corruption and The Theatre Industry. The effect on social institutions is extraordinary. They become grotesque. The capitalist market is worldwide and so is the institutional corruption. For instance Putin's psychopathologies. Here I deal only with the Anglosaxon-American-Atlantic situation because that is the site of drama.

TRUMP – in prison not government

BORIS JOHNSON – adolescent remand institution

TRUSS – care home -- if you lower taxes for everyone billionaires will invest more in Picassos as security – this will raise the price of food because workers dont buy Picassos

THATCHER – national health service is NOT safe in our hands – nor is society

All this creates the world of HIN

Arthur Miller said America has shows Britain has plays – no more

I am used to criticism. Once an angry critic wrote to me in what he said was blood (it was red ink, which is thinner than blood). I don't criticise the HIN critics personally. They are victims. They often write for the Entertainment Industry and that destroys them. In her revolution Thatcher tore drama and democracy apart. Democracy is in ruins. It's a literary duty to rebuild it. The HIN critics may think they are politically progressive but what they write on HIN supports the reactionary society that Lee Anderson hopes to see. They destroy a future generation of young dramatists and condemn them to literary servitude to the Entertainment Industry. It wastes their lives. It is offensive.

None of the critics I read refer to the events I describe above. Why, say, a sky-blue coat decorated with spoons has a black lining decorated with bones? Drama combines language with images. The critics I read don't have this skill. One of them even writes "that the poison intended for one person is accidentally consumed by another has been done before (Hamlet, anyone?)" You catch the triumph in his tone. And he's wrong, Sarah buys poison for one person but then deliberately drinks it herself. I don't know how anyone can sit through the play and not know this. It defies belief. She poisons herself because she has discovered the modern and centuries old crisis the play confronts. It's the crisis of our society. I know my business. Does this critic? Do any of the critics I read?

The critic made a thunderous slip up! -- a classical Fascist curlicue. He writes -- yells, if print could talk -- "Hamlet anyone?"

LETTER FROM INDIAN STUDENT & DRAMATIST RIT CHATTAPADHYA 5.7.23

Dear Edward,

I hope you are doing well. I was reading *Have I None*, and like all your plays I found it very intriguing. I have some questions regarding the play:

1. There is a repetition of the word 'sometimes' in the play. Sara says it again and again and finally she mentions a diary. I understand that in the dystopic universe that the play is set all personal possessions have been banned. The diary is a critical personal document of memory. Does the repetition of 'sometimes' mean something?
2. In the play, Jams, Sara, and Grit continuously fight about three chairs and its position. I know that the chair often acquires special significance in your plays. Can you please give me some understanding why are they arguing about the chairs, its position, and its relations to their existence? For example, in one instance Sara compared the scrape on her chair as her coffin.
3. Sara seems different from Js. She has some form of imagination left. Yet when she sees Grit leaving and a singular leg jumping down from the table she agrees with Jam's suggestion of murdering Grit. Why? ----- Love, Rit.

REPLY TO RIT CHATTAPADHYAY - 6.7.23

Dear Rit I am very pleased to hear from you. I will try to answer your questions. If you agree I would like to place your letter and my answers on my web site. Your letter coincided with a production of HIN in London. I read three of the critics who wrote about the production. They were irresponsible and dangerous in our present social-political situation. Your questions were much more perceptive than anything the three critics wrote. [

Sara's repetition of "Sometimes" on pages 67/8. Here its just a word she uses in the argument. Jams says he' knows whose chair is whose – and Sara says he knows it sometimes but sometimes he gets t wrong. But she always gets it – things – right because she keeps a record of everything in a diary. In other words she always knows what happens. Yet she hears a mysterious knock at the door – or is that just her imagination. You are right that she has a sensitivity that Jams doesnt have – but on another level the play is asking what is reality – how do you know the reality of yourself – sometimes she remembers her childhood with Grit and then she denies this and says its all imagination. Authority is against imagination because it is in fact part of reality and we use it to anticipate and create the future. Imagination can be deadly and dangerous – but it is also humanising and makes us human, makes us ask the questions that make us human – so authority seeks to deny imagination and when it cant do that then its seeks to own imagination as national culture. The subject is important – many of my short plays were written first for children and children have to learn what imagination is, when it anticipates truth or creates lies. (Artists have imagination but so did Adolf Hitler and it made him a mass murderer. So authority tries to order everything, keep everything in its official place – in HIN people are assign their own chair and mustnt use someone else and all the chair must always be in a designated place. The blue dress is imaginary and yet it "becomes real" – drama can do this, can, can utilise the imaginary to understand reality – later the blue dress "turns into" the sea – but the sea is dying, is dead – and yet people say the sea still haunts the shore – this is Sara's idea, her "knowledge" that humanness can never die as long as human beings have the mechanisms of brains – or until capitalism or fascism can surgically alter brains just as it can control the chairs and tables in Sara's house—its because we have imagination that we can seek humanness but that means we can also destroy humankind and make reality a grave. The play doesnt say precisely why Sara decides to poison herself with the poison that was meant for Grit and that she in fact bought to poison Grit with. I dont have to decide this – but the critics the audience or their future generations) have to decide. That is the question reality poses for us –and it is revealed in the imagination's examinations in Have I None. Drama allows us the insight of being dead (suicidal) so that we can understand life and our responsibility for humanness. In fact capitalist and fascist art – films, TV, media – are wholly on the side of Grit. When the play was recently produced for adults in London, three critics (the only ones I read) were wholly on Grit's side – ignorant stupid destructive arrogant vicious contemptible moronic intellectually-morally depraved – I need not name the doctrines by which they implicitly live.

You ask about the positions of the chairs. I used the chairs because I could dramatize. Manipulate their use. In the play authority is trying to control everything, even the exact place the chairs may be in. It would control, ration the number of breaths you are allowed to

take every twenty-four hours. Authority would like to put a TV in your head so that it could be your thoughts. One of the play's idiot critics (see below) complained that the play didn't tell him how long in future he would have to wait for an ambulance. In the world of HIN ambulances would be replaced by hearses.

About Sara's buying the poison to kill Grit. She is doing what authority would want her to do -- but as you point out she still has imagination and it asserts itself -- and she goes on a different mental journey when she sees the old woman in the ruins trying to hang on the wall a painting of the sea -- when the real sea has died and become ghost haunting the shore,

You will realise I was shocked by the three critics -- they pose as some sort of authority entitled to make public judgement yet they are a public danger.

RESPONSE FROM RIT CHATTAPADHYAY - 7.7.2023

Dear Edward

Thank you so much for your detailed reply. Your answers are perfectly clear. It helped me understand the play a lot better.

Thank you so much for your kind words about my understanding of the play. I think critics tend to categorize plays too early, and their superficial understanding can only recognize so many issues in a play.

I'd be very happy if you share my questions and your answers on your website along with my name, country, and designation (Doctoral Scholar, Raiganj University). It would be an honour to have my name on a document on your website.

I hope you are staying healthy and well. I write to you again with more questions soon. You keep me alive and a lot of us alive.

Love,
Rit.