

The Theme of “Discussion” : Ibsen, Shaw and Ding Xilin Compared

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Abstract Ibsen’s plays, especially his social plays, are known for the theme of discussion, which, according to Shaw, marks a technical novelty and a departure from the traditional well made play of Scribe. Shaw is a great admirer of Ibsen and also a practitioner of the so-called Ibsenism. His discussion plays are very subversive in terms of their political and moral purposes. Shaw in turn influenced Ding Xilin who wrote many plays in the early twentieth century in the style of Ibsen and Shaw by using the idea of discussion in his plays. This paper will examine how the three playwrights use the idea of discussion in their plays and explain why discussion plays were so popular in their respective situations.

Key words Ibsen; Theme of Discussion; Shaw; Ding Xilin

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In many ways, the theme of “discussion” is one of the most important traits of Ibsen’s plays, his social plays in particular. Michael Meyer, the noted Ibsen biographer, pointed out: “Nevertheless, what excited his contemporaries and caused these plays to spread throughout the Western world and make the theatre something it had not been since Grecian times was the fact that they discussed, in dramatic form, the kind of topic about which people argued in newspapers and debating societies and on street corners.”¹ In his perceptive comment, Meyer clearly captured the essential power of Ibsen’s dramatic creation and also showed the contributions the Norwegian playwright made to the European theatre which was undergoing an important change from the traditional elitist drama to the modern and the popular at that time. And Ibsen was acclaimed “the father of modern drama” for starting this exciting transition.

A reading of Ibsen’s plays shows that the device of “discussion” is used extensively in his plays of the middle and the last periods (though we can also find the employment of the device in his earliest plays) in which the relationships between husband and wife and between individuals and society reach a crisis. The characters need to have discussions to air their views and reposition themselves in the conflict. It is not an exaggeration to say that discussion has become a dominant theme in modern drama ever since it was first discovered in Ibsen’s plays, especially his most performed play *A Doll’s House*.

It is acknowledged that *A Doll's House* starts as a very traditional play with all the salient features of a well made play that the French playwright Eugene Scribe is famous for. However it breaks out with the last act when for the first time in the theatre in Western Europe, a wife asks her husband to sit down and talk, and to discuss the issues vital to the husband and wife relationship. The language that Nora uses is not difficult but the seemingly easy everyday utterance is endowed with a poetic power and a kind of subtle irony. And the effect is electrifying. Toril Moi is very accurate to point out that “*A Doll's House* shows how Nora finds a way out of her idealist and melodramatic scenarios towards the everyday, dramatized onstage by having her change into her everyday dress and launch into the deliberately non-spectacular conversation that ends the play. In *A Doll's House*, then, the everyday stands for the realm in which words in a conversation begin to make sense, where we can manage to see that language—or, more precisely, our use of language—expresses us” (Moi 248). It is true that when Nora speaks to her husband demanding that they talk, she uses the language of everyday. So finally through discussion, the disillusioned but enlightened Nora finds herself, and most important of all, a voice of her own and she leaves the house banging the door behind her.

As a sensitive and an insightful English playwright, Bernard Shaw, the self-proclaimed Ibsenite, quickly perceived the strength of Ibsen's technical innovative approach to the dramatic conflict and declared in his *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (“a masterpiece of Shavian polemic writing”²): “But at just that point in the last act, the heroine very unexpectedly (by the wiseacres) stops her emotional acting and says: “We must sit down and discuss all this that has been happening between us.” And it was by this new technical feature; this addition of a new movement, as musicians would say, to the dramatic form, that *A Doll's House*-conquered Europe and founded a new school of dramatic art.”³

The technical novelty that Shaw talks about in the book is the discussion which marks a break of convention, “Formerly you had in what was called a well made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and unraveling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation, and discussion” (Shaw 171). Certainly when Shaw made that comment, he obviously had in mind the Scribean well made play and he wanted to make a breakthrough in the English theatre which was dominated by the plays far away from the sordid social reality. He aimed at creating a kind of theatre in which people could respond to the social ills by voicing their own opinions. That is one of the reasons why Shaw wanted to introduce Ibsen into England at a time when many English people regarded new ideas from the Continent suspiciously. Shaw, as a pro-socialist writer, was quick to respond to the creative Endeavour of Ibsen and his great influence, believing that “The discussion conquered Europe in Ibsen's *Doll's House*; and now the serious playwright recognizes in the discussion not only the main test of his highest powers, but also the real centre of his play's interest” (Shaw 171).

Bernard Shaw, thus inspired, began to experiment with this special form to embody his radical ideas. He needed a way to express himself, and a way that would be shocking and effective. With the help of Harley Granville Barker, a young man twen-

ty years younger than him, Shaw was able to put several of his discussion plays at the tiny Court Theatre in Sloane Square in London. Barker produced several of Shaw's earlier plays—*Candida*, *Captain Brass bound's Conversion*, *Man and Superman*, *How He Lied to Her Husband*, *You Never Can Tell*, and *The Man of Destiny*—along with such new Shaw plays as *John Bull's Other Island*, *Major Barbara*, and *The Doctor's Dilemma*. And Barker even acted in Shaw's play, *The Widower's Houses*. The Shavian theatre was crowded with an audience made up of women, intellectuals, and especially young people who came to the theatre to experience the change and to share his theatrical values. *Major Barbara*, Shaw's most important play for the Court, is a case in point. It aroused disquiet by touching upon a very sensitive topic of prostitution. Shaw was bold in presenting in the last scene a series of intellectual discussions during which the characters reacted to each other nakedly on this controversial social issue. Similar scenes can also be found in *The Widower's Houses* and other plays. It goes without saying that with those discussion plays; Shaw successfully set up a theatre of dissent and subverted the then British theatre which was entertaining but politically safe. It is agreed that Shaw has done much to naturalize Ibsen by spreading his brand of Ibsenism in the theatre and making a stir there. As Errol Durbach says, "This is Shaw at his best; provocative, audacious, polemical. . . His Ibsen remains a theatrical realist who holds the mirror up to society and shows the age its moral form and anti-idealist pressure" (Errol 234).

Among the modern European playwrights, Ibsen without doubt exerted the greatest influence upon the Chinese political movement and the Chinese theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. When Ibsen was writing his plays, China was painfully struggling to rid herself of the shackles of feudalism and to free herself from the oppression of imperialism. On May 4th, 1919, a great movement took place in Beijing. The movement was initiated by the students and intellectuals calling for political, ideological and cultural reform. At that time, two important themes became dominant in the Chinese political and social scene; salvation and enlightenment. In order to solve the problem, new ideas should be introduced and spread. It seems that traditional values could not free China from a feudalistic state. As a result, many books written by western scholars were translated into Chinese. Science and democracy were popular catchwords at that time. The thoughts of the western thinkers and philosophers played a big role in awakening people from their long dream that China would always be invincible under the doctrines of Confucius. Together with the influx of political ideas and theories, many literary works from the west were introduced into China as well. Particularly the period witnessed the performances of many western plays, especially plays by Ibsen.

During the May 4th movement, people started to focus their attention on many social issues, about how China, as a great nation in the world, came to such a state of chaos in the late Qin dynasty. Young intellectuals in particular questioned the problems of the political system and the traditional values upon which China stood. So heated discussions and debates were widely held and people found that the theatre was an important venue for these activities. And the spoken drama became a very effect way of exploring all the social problems. So consequently "among the many re-

forms launched then was a theatre reform” and “In order to serve more pressing political and intellectual needs, the Chinese theatre world needed to change to a modern, Westernized spoken drama” (Eide 183). That is the reason why Ibsen caught the fancy of the people immediately after he was performed in the Chinese theatre. And Ibsen’s “modern aesthetic principle of drama meets the need of setting up the modern Chinese aesthetic principles” (Liu 81).

Like Shaw, Hu Shi, a well-known Chinese scholar and a political activist also advocated a kind of Ibsenism in the then journal *New Youth* calling people especially intellectual to rise up and expose the evils of the society by learning from Ibsen. “We must admit that Ibsenism, to a large extent, is something borrowed and reconstructed (in the Chinese context). Its purpose is to expose the dark reality and to criticize the social and cultural customs of the feudalistic society” (Wang 195). In a sense, Hu Shi has done much to popularize Ibsen’s ideas of the modern theatre and to inspire the young Chinese playwrights to write plays which would reflect the reality and the pains of the people in everyday language. That explains the reason why so many brilliant plays were written and produced at that time by so many talented young playwrights with Ding Xilin as one of them.

Ding is rarely mentioned when we talk about playwrights who have been influenced by Ibsen in China. Instead, we often hear people mention the names of Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Cao Yu and other well known writers. However if we examine some of Ding’s plays closely, we will find some family likeness between him, Ibsen and Shaw in their respective works. As we can see, the three dramatists were all writing at a time when their societies were undergoing radical changes, shifting from one stage to another one amid great ideological liberation. Under such circumstances, conventional ideas, beliefs, concepts and theories were questioned, debated, challenged and even destroyed. Those great changes were inevitably reflected in their plays in which a lot of hot issues were discussed.

When Shaw was busy experimenting with the theatre, he did not realize that his great plays as well as his brilliant essays had attracted the attention of a Chinese student from Shanghai studying in England at that time, Ding Xilin. Ding was studying physics at the University of Birmingham as a science student. But he loved literature and read a lot of novels, plays and essays. Plays by Ibsen and Shaw impressed him deeply and he was particularly fascinated by their use of language and the portrayal of female characters in their discussion plays. When he came back from England, he tried his hand in playwriting while teaching physics at the universities. Though amateurish, he wrote many plays which made him one of the most influential playwrights in the May 4th movement and he was described as a dramatist with “a divine hand”, the highest compliment people give to a writer who writes superbly. Most of Ding’s best plays were written from 1920s to 1940s. They include *One Wasp*, *Dear Husband*, *Oppression*, *After Drinking* (based on Arthur Schopenhauer’s novel), *The Air in Beijing*, *Three Yuan*, *When the Wife Comes Back*, *Miao Feng Mountain* and so on. Among those plays, the most influential ones are *One Wasp*, *Oppression*, *Dear Husband* and *Miao Feng Mountain*.

In 1923, he published his first one-act play *One Wasp* at the suggestion of some

friends who ran a magazine. The play was a great success when published. This is a play about love and it exposes the hypocrisy of the society at that time. It describes two young people Mr. Ji and Miss Yu who struggle to get their freedom of love by using their wit and wisdom. The mother of the son Madam Ji in the play is an old-fashioned woman who is interested in acting as a go-between for her nephew. She does not realize that the girl she wants to match is her son's girl friend. And to her dismay, she happens to see them Mr. Ji and Miss Yu kissing each other. When they are discovered, the son jokingly says there is a wasp on the girl's face. Though simple, the play is full of talk and discussion about love, freedom and marriage with a touch of humor, irony and repartee. The performance of the play aroused great interest in the audience, especially the college students when they saw it on campus. And the critics were also generous in their praise of the play, describing it as the best comedy they had ever seen.

Ding was encouraged by the positive critical review and he continued writing. The play *Oppression* written and performed three years later also caught the attention of the audience. *Oppression* is about the landlords in the big cities like Shanghai in the 1920s who refused to admit single male tenants. There is a gap between the owners of the houses and the needed. When the landlady is about to reject the tenant one day, there comes a single female tenant. So the two decide to unite to fight the landlady by pretending they are a married couple. Then they rent the house and stand up to the landlady. Though the play contains some jargons fashionable during the revolutionary years such as *proletariat*, *capitalist*, *the oppressed*, the verbal ingenuity of the play puts Ding Xilin at the top of the playwrights at that time. And Hong Shen, a famous Chinese director, described this play "the only masterpiece".⁴ It was staged in Beijing on June 5, 1926, directed by Yu Shangyuan.

A reading of Ding Xilin's plays shows that there are some similarities between him, Ibsen and Shaw or rather Ding has inherited and borrowed much from the great masters. For one thing, like Ibsen and Shaw, Ding was writing at a time of turmoil and turbulence. That was an era of revolution when the old order of the world was about to collapse and the new order was about to come into being and it was also an era which required people to think, to question, to doubt and to discuss. In order to do this, language should be changed in order to suit the change of the world. The result of the May 4th Movement was to free China from the confinement of the old style of talking and writing. This is what Ibsen and Shaw did in their respective discussion plays; and Ding made great contribution to popularizing the simplified Chinese characters and baihua (colloquialism) in spoken drama in China. And also, Ding actively explored the relationship between husband and wife and dramatized the conflicts between the old and the new ideas over this relationship on the stage. Most of his plays are about this kind of relationship and gender problems with a kind of contemporary relatedness.

Ding Xilin wrote more than ten plays in his life time while working as a professor in different universities. Though his dramatic output cannot match that of the great masters, his contribution to the development of the Chinese spoken drama cannot be overestimated. This paper has only touched upon briefly one aspect of his plays.

However his plays are worth exploring in great depth. In this respect, Zhang Jian's comment shows how important Ding Xilin was in modernizing the Chinese theatre in the twentieth century: "His comedies can rightly be regarded as successful new forms born in the process of sinicizing the Ibsen type of social plays. . . . In his artistic practice, he not only improved the coarse and monotonous language used in the early Chinese social plays, but also found a rationalistic type of comedy both in form and content for the Ibsen type of social plays" (Zhang 234).

【Notes】

1. See Michael, Meyer. "Ibsen; a Biographical Approach," *Ibsen and the Theatre*. ed. Errol Durbach (London: Macmillan, 1980)22 -23.
2. See Martin, Esslin. "Ibsen and Modern Drama," *Ibsen and the Theatre*. ed. Errol Durbach (London: Macmillan, 1980)71.
3. See Bernard, Shaw. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1913)175.
4. See the quotation from Zhang Jian, *The History of the Chinese Comedies* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2006)234.

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