

The Paradox of Contemporary Life and War in Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/ Repeat*

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“An honest reflection of the world we live in”¹

Abstract

This study represents new tendencies in contemporary theatre with Ravenhill's unusual play applying postmodern period, contemporary life and war effects between west and east. Introducing the aspects of in yer face generation and modern British drama, this paper studies out how Mark Ravenhill's play can be adopted of conditions in contemporary theatre and how these conditions create provocative, rebellious, disturbing and shocking plays. Considering these experiments, this paper analyses Mark Ravenhill's play Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat (2008) to show how these aspects and experiments create the paradox between contemporary life and war and change the understanding of the play. A detailed analysis, especially different themes of short plays in the play, is carried out in this paper. This analysis opposes to traditional understanding and habits of contemporary society. With this distinctive play Mark Ravenhill deconstructs general beliefs about core values of western democracy and represents destructive effects of war.

Keywords: Mark Ravenhill, Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat, War, Contemporary Life, Contemporary British Drama.

1. Introduction

A group of playwrights, related to in-yer-face generation, emerged in British theatre in the 1990s. Mark Ravenhill, one of the distinctive playwrights of this generation, wrote provocative, rebellious, disturbing and shocking plays. Caridad Svich states that “Mark Ravenhill has emerged as one of his generation most provocative playwrights” (Svich 2003, p.81) and gained an important place in new generation related to In-Yer-Face theatre. This generation gave a new impulse for British Drama because “at the beginning of the nineties British drama lacked quality and freshness. The rise of In-Yer-Face theatre saved British theatre with new aesthetic and new experiments” (Sierz, 2000, p.xii). By the help of these new aesthetic and experiments “there was more new writing in British theatre than ever in its history” (Sierz, 2005, p. 56). While 1990s drama may not represent a complete break with previous models, the '90s sensibility is different in one crucial way.

Ravenhill started his career as an administrative assistant at the Soho Theatre. This place is important because it was there he met with writers and directors, and learnt how to shape plays. However, the impetus behind of his choice to become playwright is to reflect his boyfriend death from AIDS and murder of James Bulger, a two year-old boy kidnapped by Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. They abused and left him to die near a railway station. Ravenhill especially expresses the effect of James Bulger murder on his writing:

¹ Mark Ravenhill, 'My Near Death Period', The Guardian, March 2008.

How could I have never spotted before that I was someone who had never written a play until the murder James Bulger? And it was the Bulger murder that prompted me to write? I have been writing ever since the murder (Ravenhill 2005, p. 87) Under the influence of his boyfriend death and James Bulger “Ravenhill wrote his first play *Close to You*” (Ravenhill, 2008a) in 1993, and stepped forward with his shocking and famous plays *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), *Faust Is Dead* (1997), *Handbag* (1998), *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999), *Mother Clap’s Molly House* (2000), *Totally Over You* (2004), *The Cut* (2006) and *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008). Ravenhill’s works contain different themes such as contemporary society, contemporary reality, sex, addiction, violence, terrorism, war, freedom, democracy, peace, crime, punishment and power. Svich explains characteristics of Ravenhill’s plays:

His mannerist plays examine gender, class, and the political-social climate in which his characters live, and how the transactions of daily life (present and past) shape a British culture. The schemas which his characters inherit and try to live up to, embody or destroy and the intersection of commerce and sex are the central concerns of his texts (2003, p.81)

As a writer, Ravenhill wrote his plays in the point of epic style because of social, political effects and his playwriting developments. Ravenhill’s subject matter is to emphasize the pyrotechnics of shock and provocation. “Ravenhill provokes with a view to generating on awareness, in his audience/readers” (Wallace, 2005, p.270), of “imperative historical realities” (Koufman, 1965, p.3). Related to these realities, Richard Patterson explains the theme of the play as “the theme of war came easily to Ravenhill. “You really have ask yourself what’s the biggest theme of our age,” he says,” and that clash of civilizations, war on terror, war in Iraq, just seems to be the biggest thing to write about” (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, 2008). While exploring these themes; we meet into different definitions of freedom, democracy and war. Ravenhill tries to form a picture which reflects the age we live in. In this age; we meet into war, freedom and democracy discourses. Ravenhill focuses on the effects and causes of war in contemporary world and decides to write *Shoot/ Get Treasure/Repeat*. In this paper, analyzing these different themes and core values, we will study the paradox between contemporary life and war using some short plays in the play.

2. Analysis of Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat

Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat consists of sixteen short plays and an epilogue *Paradise Regained* showed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival named Breakfast with Ravenhill. Each play served as breakfast and “also examines the West’s urge to export its trademark goods of freedom and democracy” (Ravenhill ‘My Near Death Period’, 2008a). Mark Ravenhill describes *Shoot/ Get Treasure/Repeat* is an “epic cycle of short plays” (2008b, p.5) because these short plays contain classical epic titles such as *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Armageddon*, *Paradise Lost* and *The Odyssey*. Apart from these, *Women of Troy*, *Intolerance*, *Women in Love*, *Fear and Misery*, *Yesterday an Incident Occurred*, *Love (But I Won’t Do That)*, *The Mikado*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Mother*, *Twilight of the Gods* and *Birth of a Nation* are the other short plays of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*. The play has also different screens formed by videogame and new technology which help spectators to feel performance on stage and to explore contemporary world. *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* describes our contemporary world:

I didn’t want this to have a grand narrative with linking plot and characters. I wanted this global theme to be glimpsed through 16 fragments, individual moments that could be watched singly but that would resonate and grow the more fragments each audience member saw. I felt this would be an honest reflection of the world we live in. It’s a world in which we are more aware than ever of our global connections, and in which we still hunger for the grand narratives of the Lord of the Rings or Shakespeare’s history plays. But it’s also a world in which we get so much of our information in shorter bursts: the sound bite, the text scrolling across the screen, the YouTube clip (Ravenhill ‘My Near Death Period’, 2008a).

Ravenhill’s honest description reflects the realism of contemporary world. This contemporary world “Western democracy” inhabits the rest of the world with the aim of imposing democracy and freedom. While imposing democracy and freedom, threat, suicide bombing, rape, violence and damage of war become a normalized part of contemporary world. Although some people continue their routine lives, as drinking coffee, doing shopping, the others are raped, killed and consumed.

3. Paradox of Contemporary Life and War in Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat

In *Women of Troy*, the first play of epic cycle, a chorus of women wonder why their city has been bombed:

-We all ...All of us: why do you bomb us?
 -You see. We are the good people. Just look at us
 Take a look at us. Take a look at us.
 Gathered here today. And what do you see?
 You see the good people (Ravenhill 2008b, p. 7)

They try to find answer their questions and also they call themselves as the good people for they eat good foods, make healthy breakfasts, and read newspapers. They behave as if they are unaware of the war and when the war and the suicide bomber get close to them, they start to worry:

-Which of you is the suicide bomber?
 Identify yourself. Come forward.
 Come forward.

A man steps from the crowd with a backpack on.
 Man I am the suicide bomber.

-You can kill us, detonate your... blow our bodies apart, rip our heads from our ... consume us in your flames because we will die a good death (p.15).

While people of the same community (contemporary world) doing shopping, eating ethical foods, having sex and sitting their garden, they understand the effects of war and turning of war to them. Ravenhill questions some themes as contemporary life, war, fear, love and death. These themes form the behaviours of characters of the cycle. Ravenhill tries to create two worlds. The first one reflects 'the good guys' who are natives of western civilization and the other one the 'bad guys' who are the "Palestinians, the Iraqis, the Taliban, the Pakistanis, or Al Qaeda supporters" (Laera, 2009, p.6). Anxiety and fearful opposition occurred between 'good guys and bad guys'. Ravenhill constructs an atmosphere using media and electronics devices that show West's attitudes at the time of war.

In the second short play *Intolerance*, Helen, a middle class mother, devoted herself to breakfast. She always gets macrobiotic yoghurt and vitamin tablets because of the pain in her stomach. Apart from her agony everything is perfect in her contemporary life but she does not read newspapers and watch the news because:

There's bombs and wars and...
 They only upset you really and what can you do?
 If I'm going to be blown up – so be it.
 As long as I'm in the centre of the blast (2008, p. 19).

In her city there is a war and she witnesses these bombings for that reason she tends to keep away from the blast in the centre:

Breakfast is my favourite time of the day. My time.
 Thomas is in the shower.
 Zachary is watching a DVD in his bedroom before school.
 And I'm here – with my juice (p. 19)

Instead of escaping Helen must accept the fact that her country is responsible for the war and terror which brought blast to her city and she must know that the war has already started.

The fourth short play *Fear and Misery* takes place in a dinner table but their main concern is their baby monitor instead of meal. The woman character Olivia sees her partner as a rapist but at the same time wants to trust him:

Olivia There are moments in the past when I've felt for a blink of ...rape and then it's back to love again.

Harry Do I scare you now?

Olivia No.

Harry What are you feeling now?

Olivia Sorry I said anything. Sorry. I love you – respect you – trust you – I totally totally love you. I do I do I do I do (pp.40-41).

They both struggle to keep away from effects of war and try to be on the safe side. Especially this safe side is so important for their child Alex. For them Alex's safety is very important and they want to keep Alex away from contemporary fears.

Olivia QUITE. Shhh. Shhh now, Alex is sleeping. Alex only got off ... Quite. I just got Alex off twenty minutes ago.

Harry Sorry sorry sorry.

Olivia It's really important Alex doesn't –

Harry Of course of course of course. Is he alright? Did he seem alright?

Olivia I think so, yes.

Harry Any dreams?

Olivia Not yet. It's early. He might still ...

Harry You didn't let him watch the news? The invasion.

Olivia Of course not (p.42).

Here, we witness that war, soldier and fears have affected them deeply and the same effect should not be felt by their son, for that reason they even do not let their son to follow media. Their contemporary world contains war, violence and corruption and all of these are reflected by media so they are ready to do everything to protect their son:

Olivia Our child was born in love and tranquillity and his life will be lived, he will never know, I will do everything I can to make sure he never knows the fear and – that I

Harry That we –

Olivia We, we have known. We will work together. Keep away from addicts. The madwomen. The bombers. The soldiers with his head blown off. We will keep them away – yes (p.44).

Their world brings them fears, so their son Alex should stay asleep not to witness. Their community, streets, buses are not safe and there are bombs, fighting and catastrophe everywhere. Based on these, Harry wants a gated community with high walls because:

Harry ... THE WORLD IS ATTACKING US, THE TERROR IS EATING US UP AND YOU ... WE NEED GATES. WE NEED TO, TO, TO ... DRAWUP THE DRAWBRIDGE AND CLOSE THE GATES AND SECURITY. I CAN'T FIGHT THIS WAR EVERY DAY. WAR WITH THE SCUM. THE POOR, POOR DRUG – HUNGRY MENTALLY DERANGED DAMAGED SCUM. I HAVE TO HAVE PEACE (p.48).

Harry wants peace for his family especially for his son but at this time a bloody soldier enters and watches Harry and Olivia and he goes to Alex and Alex screams. In this short play we can understand that their fears for their son and their future will continue because a soldier, war and catastrophe represent that everything will not be well at their home and in their contemporary society even this society builds a gated community with high walls.

The fifth short play *War and Peace* is a follow up of the fourth one. In this part, we see Alex and a desert war headless soldier:

Alex I'm frightened sometimes, Alex told the soldier with no head. He told the soldier with no head: I wee the bed. Last time. Other times.

Soldier I didn't know that, said the soldier.

Alex I'm talking to a... it's a psychiatrist (p.52).

Soldier loses his head in the desert during the war and returns to gated community to take Alex's head because soldier fights for Alex and for their freedom:

Soldier And the soldier called out: I've been fighting. I want my reward. You took my estate. I'm fighting for your freedom and democracy... I'm fighting for democracy, least you can do is – (p.60).

By the help of Alex's head soldier can turn back to the war and kill more towel heads:

Soldier Live without food, live without money – you can do it, it's hard but you do it. Live without family, live without friends – that's easy. But live without war? No human being's ever done that. Never will. It's what makes us human.

Alex Who you killed? asked Alex.

Soldier Towelhead. Coming for me so... Kid only a few years older than you but he's coming towards me with a gun so... phut (p.54).

Instead of human values, family and friends, soldier points out that we can only exist with wars because money makers, arm trade and core values shape relations between western countries and countries in war regions. To go on this war, new soldier is required and Alex, wanting soldier's gun, gives us the cue that he will be new soldier and go on killing: "**Alex** Alex – Give me the gun/ **Soldier** Soldier – I gotta touch your head/ **Alex** Alex – Gun first. Gun gun gun gun gun gun gun" (p. 55).

The play explains that new soldiers and new wars will go on in the name of core values and democracy, and societies continue to give pound of flesh.

In the seventh play *Crime and Punishment*, there is a soldier interrogating with a widow woman who lost her son and her husband in the bombing. In addition these desperations, she has to see her mother in law being ill in a hospital. While she thanks soldier for freeing her country and for bringing democracy and freedom, soldier wants to be loved: “**Soldier** I am in a lot of pain here. I want you to love me. How do you I make you fall in love with me? I am opening my heart to you and what am I getting?” (p. 86)

Soldier wants to be loved because he claims that he brings freedom and democracy, he saves woman from an evil dictator. He tries to buy woman’s feeling. He wants more because he becomes a power and can invade everywhere. Because the woman does not accept to say “I love you”, soldier turns to violence and kills woman. Soldier reflects the West’s attitudes, its power, wealth, markets, and civilization. Soldier is the product of contemporary society which only thinks to consume in everywhere even in war zone:

Soldier I will invade every fucking country in the fucking world, okay? I will fucking invade them all. Got the will, got the firepower and I will fucking do it. They want supermarkets, they want garden centres, they want Xboxes, they want Starbucks. They got it. It’s coming. It’s coming. It’s fucking coming (p.91).

Ravenhill shows characters struggling with brutality, violence and hearing sound of bomb blast. Ravenhill tries to show this violence on the stage; tries to show war and terror and palavers of democracy and freedom.

(T) hese violent plays are an honest attempt to express the brutality of our “clash of civilizations”, of jihad and the war on terror, the white noise that fills our everyday lives, driving us to act in irrational, cruel ways. There may be an element of the personal, even the therapeutic in this writing but they are, above all, political plays. (...) There have been as many swallow brutal plays on the British stage as there have been urgent, important ones. We have to be wary of violence as fashion. But to discourage all such writing is to curb a natural response to the world around us (Ravenhill ‘You Can’t Ban Violence From the Stage’, 2008c)

Ravenhill suggests an honest reflection of the world including rape, torture, suicide bombing, starvation, trauma and war’s collateral damage that becomes a normalized part of everyday lives.

In the eighth play *Love (But I Won’t do that)* we see similar dialogues between Marion and soldier like Crime and Punishment. Marion, is a businesswoman in her occupied country, is protected by an occupant soldier however Marion does not believe him:

Marion I think you’re a big strong handsome brave soldier fighting for freedom and democracy, all that we believe in.

Soldier So why?

Marion And, if we didn’t have you, our world would have ceased to exist long ago and been eaten up by the evil ones (2008b, p.98).

Soldier, uncaringly Marion’s sayings, forces her to couple with him: “I want a promise. Here. Now. I want you to promise that you will take off your clothes in front of me. No bathroom, no – I ‘ll watch as you get totally, totally naked” (p. 101).

Marion understands that there is no democracy and freedom in her contemporary life. Instead of these values there are boots and huge hands and there is a brutal and cruel soldier in her house.

In play ten *War of the Worlds* we see a chorus again like the first short play *Women of Troy*.

This chorus represents the people who watch the video related to a devastated society because of the war and informs how they suffer on behalf of this devastated society:

-This is for you. We gather in this square for you. This is dedicated to you. You brave beautiful people. You unbowed children of freedom and democracy.

(...)

-You have been bombed. We are sickened.

- We are yes, we are yes, we are really, really ... sickened.

(...)

-We feel as you do. Here’s the little girl – see? – the little girl I pick out running away from the blast, running away and she’s a little black girl but she’s been turned to white by the ash from the blast. See? See?

The little girl is running towards the screen and I'm eating my breakfast and I call out to her – let me show you how I call out to her – watch me (pp.119-120).

However as the play proceeds we realize that Chorus's (the people in peace) sufferings and feelings are mannered:

All the Chorus are now laughing hysterically.

- I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry but you are so fucking, so ... (Laughs.)
- You are so ... stupid. (Laughs.)
- You are so ... vulgar. (Laughs.)
- You are so ... naive. (Laughs.)
- You are so old fashioned. (Laughs.)
- You are so crude. (Laughs.)
- You are fat, ugly, thick, unsophisticated, idiot, idiot. (Laughs.) (p.127).

And they actually state that war victims deserve all these things because of their behaviours and livings:

- You run towards me. In your arms you hold your dead child. Your child is dead in your arms and most of her dead has been blown away and you hold your child out to me like so as if to say, 'Oh help me oh help me help me.

- And I say – I don't say this in anger. I am calm. But please listen as I say: You had this coming. Can't you see – you had this coming? (p.130).

Among these epic plays *War of the Worlds* has a particular importance because it reflects the paradox and conflict between devastated and contemporary societies.

The following play *Armageddon* portrays the relationship between Emma and Honor. Although they are both religionist cannot control their feelings and comes together in a hotel:

Emma He sees that I am frightened but I can't go back.

Honor He sees my fear but also ... He watches as I reach out.

Emma He watches as I take a taste of liquor from the tiny bottle in the tiny fridge.

Honor He watches as I knock on the door.

Emma He watches as I hear the knock on the door.

Honor He knows the feelings I have for the woman behind the door.

Emma He knows what I feel for the boy in the corridor (pp. 132-33).

While declaring their love each other, they at the same time pray for Emma's boy and thank God for their country:

Both O Lord, you have chosen our land to be the land of freedom and democracy. We thank you for that. O Lord, you have cursed our enemy with tyranny and poverty and our enemy has grown envious of our blessed good fortune and our enemy has attacked our blessed country (p. 136).

While they thank the Lord they learn that Emma's son is dead from the news because of the war. On behalf of core values Emma loses her son.

The subject matter of the twelfth play *The Mother* resembles to *Armageddon*. *The Mother* contains three characters Haley, Male soldier and Female soldier. Haley Morrison, who sent off his son to military, spent her times watching TV and drinking alone. One day male and female soldiers came to her house in an early time to give his son's death knell and to delay this knell she tries to put them off:

Haley You got up early. I don't normally get up this early.

Female Soldier Mrs Morrison –

Haley Really – I'm lazy cunt, I suppose. Yeah. Real fuckin' lazy. But you know.

(...)

Female Soldier Mrs Morrison –

Haley Does bad language bother you? I thought you being army ... The army everything's cunt the other, right? I mean when Darren come back he was all ... Does it bother you? (pp. 143-44).

Understanding insistent behaviours of soldiers, Mrs Morrison offers them breakfast this time:

Haley I'll get you a roll. Do you want anything in your roll? Bacon Sausage?

Female Soldier Mrs Morrison –

Haley Sausage, bacon, egg?

Female Soldier Mrs Morrison –

Haley What's it to be? What you gonna have in your breakfast roll?

Male Soldier Mrs Morrison –

Haley I'll do a bit of everything and you can choose later. You watch the breakfast telly while I – there, who wants to push the buttons? (p.145).

However soldiers do not accept Mrs Morrison's offerings and male soldier tries to inform once more time: "**Male Soldier** Mrs Morrison, it is my sad duty to inform you that your son Darren Morrison was – **Haley** No!" (p.149).

Mrs Morrison still tries to not to hear the knell and continues to insult and swear thereupon soldiers, giving death knell:

Male Soldier Mrs Morrison, it is my sad duty to inform you that your son Darren Morrison has been killed in action. Darren was a well-respected and well-liked member of his regiment who died as he lived fighting bravely for a noble cause (p. 152).

Leaves her house and Mrs Morrison again starts to watch TV alone. The war, breaking out because of Morrison's country, bereaves her son.

In *Odyssey*, a group of soldiers in a war zone probably in Iraq are ready to go back and start to dream about their ordinary life at home. These soldiers can benefit from all of the possibilities of Western materialism:

Maybe you can't imagine this, but there is no shelling and bombing in our cities. Our cities are beautiful places. Beautiful shops. Leisure facilities. People who move about in freedom, every day making the democratic choices that shape their future (pp.179-80).

Soldiers want to return home because their contemporary world has beautiful cafes, warm coffees; beautiful wives and they can sit together with their children and play Xbox being unmindful of their murdering children. When the troops get information that plane is ready for going to civilization and home; a last minute change of plan stops them:

--STOP! THE BATTLE IS NOT OVER YET.

--STOP! THE BATTLE STILL RAGES!

--No.

--STOP! ANOTHER COUNTRY. ANOTHER COUNTRY WHICH IS THE CRADLE OF HATE. ANOTHER COUNTRY WHICH WILL DESTROY THE CIVILIZED WORLD.

(...)

--My son has a girlfriend. He's messaged me. Please, I must see my son's girlfriend at least please.

- THIS IS THE NEXT WAR. THIS IS THE NEXT INVASION. YOU WILL NOT RETURN HOME. YOU WILL INVADE. STAND BY TO INVADE (p.185).

A last minute change of plan sends them to the next war zone where they will fight again in the name of humanity's core values. Core values of contemporary world are humanity's core values. Because of the war, soldiers cannot return their civilized world. Contemporary world, in which soldiers want to live, command them to fight to spread democracy.

In the final part of this cycle Ravenhill forms an epilogue *Paradise Regained* which represents two old friends Tom and Matt who have lived together for years but Tom goes to the war and Matt always live in a city under bomb threat for that reason their relations has ended up. During this long period Matt perpetually gets wealth and takes a younger lover. This old couple faces again and starts to talk about old days and devastation of the war:

Tom Look at this city. Look at that.

Matt It's been a long time.

Tom It's been decades

Matt It's been decades. Things move on. There's inward investment. There's been a new infrastructure.

(...)

Matt This city was – it carried on – their side shelling, bombing, sniping, our side shelling, bombing (pp. 201-203).

Because of the bombs and devastations they are so tired and they even do not know who is an enemy and a friend. They believe in core values but they miss everything, have no families and they are so lonely in their strange world.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion Ravenhill questions civilized worlds and values such as freedom and democracy. *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*'s message comes over loud and clear. While western democracies and citizens have breakfast, live their garden in a comfortable way, shelling and bombing continue on the other side of the world. Contemporary worlds watch these shelling and bombings and think these shelling and bombings are for core values.

Ravenhill wants the western citizens to feel uncomfortable and tries to show their blindness, why their children die as soldiers and why their children kill innocent people on behalf of freedom and democracy in different countries.

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