



# BLAKE MORRISON AND THE READING OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH THEATRE

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“I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all I need for an act of theatre to be engaged” (BROOK, 1996).

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses issues that are relevant to contemporary British theater and how the playwright Blake Morrison is inserted into the English theater scene. Morrison uses as a backdrop for the elaboration of the play *We are three sisters* the text *Three sisters* (1900), by the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. The dialogue between Chekhov's Russia of the nineteenth/twentieth century and the (countryside) scenario of the (industrial) north of England in the Victorian period, when equated by Morrison in the context of today, invites us to make some considerations that have much to tell us about the parameters of contemporary dramaturgy.

## **Keywords**

Blake Morrison. Contemporary British theatre. Contemporary dramaturgy.



In the epigraph that opens this article, Peter Brook (1996) claims that the only things crucial to a theatrical event are an empty space, a man crossing this space and someone else watching him. That is a change of paradigm if we consider the historical background of European and American productions. Before thoughts like those proposed by Brook, the common idea was that the art of performance demanded an Italian stage with scenery, accessories, costumes, light spots and other materials that would support the performance of a play on the stage. Peter Brook translates the spirit of our age by separating what is vital from what is complementary, showing that the sophisticated American and European traditions have accessories that, ultimately, could be suppressed. Heavy machinery and scenery, refined costumes and multiple light spots are not as important as they used to be. The empty space reveals what is essential for theatre to happen – the actor, the space and someone watching, in the art that has been described as the art of encounter.

Drama has always been a complex kind of text because it contains many intricate particularities inside a structure that may apparently seem simple. The first difficulty relates to defining the ways in which drama belongs in Literature – not only because of its structure, but also because of the elements that belong in a play that depend on a different kind of materiality than that allowed by the written text. These elements are vital parts of a play, and for that reason the effect that a play provokes is different from the effect of a novel, or a poem. As to the elements upon which a play depends, film theorist Gerald Mast (1982, p. 287) says that

One can easily define what a novel concretely, physically is: it is that piece of matter one holds in one's hands, its letters printed on paper and bounded by the covers in which those pieces of paper have been gathered. But a play has no similar concrete, physical existence. The object that one can hold in one's hand is not a play but the script of a play. Nor is a performance of that text the play but a performance or production of the play. A play, then, is not a physical thing at all but an imaginary ideal: either the imaginary combination of all possible performances and productions of that script or the idealized "best" performance that can be imagined (by whom? at what time?) from that script. As teachers of literature we frequently pretend that the text of the play is the play, as if it were a novel written in speeches.

Anne Ubersfeld (1999), in her widely acclaimed book *Reading theatre*, presents an important theoretical contribution to the study of the dramatic

genre, be it on the page or on the stage. As a theatre director and the person in charge of the Institut d'Études Théâtrales at the University of Paris-Sorbonne for several years, she has the experience and the authority to present a whole theory centered on the role of the theatrical sign in the field of semiotics. Ubersfeld (1999, p. 2) acknowledges that the task of approaching a play is not an easy one:

Everyone knows – or accepts as truth – that you cannot read theatre. Professors are not unaware of this. Almost inevitably they know the anguish of explaining or trying to explain a textual document to which the key lies outside itself. Actors and directors embrace this truth more than anyone else and they view all the academic explanations, which they see as unwieldy and useless, with scorn. Ordinary readers accept this wisdom as well. Whenever they take a stab at it, they realize the difficulty of reading a text that most decidedly does not appear to be intended for reading the way one reads a book. Not everyone is technically versed in mounting a play, nor does everyone have the unique imagination needed to conceive a work of fictive performance. This, however, is what each of us does, and this private act cannot be justified either theoretically or practically.

From the premise that theatre is not meant primarily to be read, Anne Ubersfeld (1999) defends the idea that, against all odds, such a reading is necessary and vital to those engaged in the theory and practice of the dramatic genre. It is not difficult to understand her thought if we consider that theatre is the art of the encounter, so it is necessary to meet, to be together, so that it can be put to use. No matter how many productions of Chekhov's *Three sisters* we may have watched, we will always return to the text as a touchstone. The performance is perishable, it vanishes as soon as the curtains drop; whereas the text lasts and can be kept to be explored and studied. Although, nowadays, it is a common practice to record performances on Medias in order to save the performance, it is a consensus that it does not reach the same artistic value as the live performance. Ubersfeld (1999) establishes a reading approach that decodes the specificity of the dramatic genre and connects the links of this textual practice to the specificities of the performance.

The specificity of the text written to be performed on the stage is the first question we have to face. The difficulty lies in the conflict of what is to be privileged – the written text or the performance. Ubersfeld (1999) refers to the inadequacy of the traditional methods in academic studies, since we are dealing with a genre that extrapolates the measure of poetry and is not as linear as the

narrative of a novel – because a play is not a novel written in lines. Drama is a problematic genre, especially in present times, when contemporary playwrights have suppressed many of the features that we used to attribute to theatre. Eugenio Barba (2010), who is an Italian director and theoretician of Theatre Anthropology, refuses to talk about dramaturgy, he insists on the term *dramaturgies*. Barba (2010) defends that each aspect of a theatrical performance has its own dramaturgy. The meeting of all these *dramaturgies* creates a theatrical event. Therefore, in Barba's (2010) view, we have a dramaturgy of the playwright, a dramaturgy of the costumes, the scenario, the light, the music, the director, and the dramaturgy of the actor, which is the one Barba has dedicated most of his research and writings to investigate.

In the opposition of the text and the performance, we find the intersection between the literary production and the concrete performance. As Ubersfeld (1999) reminds us, theatre is an art that is both permanent, because it can be registered on paper, and an art of the instant, because it can never be reproduced identically. It is at the same time the art of one single person – the playwright – and the art of a group of people who will put the words together on the stage through a creative process. Although theatre demands highly refined textual creation and is bound to a canonical literary tradition based on philosophical and theoretical texts, it is an intellectual and difficult art that depends on the creative processes of a group of people and whose fulfillment is reached only when it is presented to an audience. It is in the intersection that we read theatre.

To Ubersfeld (1999), this intersection is a semiotic space. Not in the sense of offering the truth about the textual sign, but of opening the possibilities of reading through multiple views on the textual sign system. Adopting this view, Ubersfeld (1999, p. 8) explores the theatrical sign in order to understand the dramatic genre and to create the proper tools for “directors and actors to construct a signifying system in which audiences can find their place”. It is, first, a matter of facing the reading of theatre as an integrated signifying event in order to trespass the barriers imposed by the text-performance opposition. Secondly, it is important not to see things in the traditional way that privileges the text and understands performance as a kind of expression or translation of that text.

This equivalence is very likely an illusion. The totality of the visual, auditory, and musical signs created by the director, set designer, musicians, and actors constitutes a meaning (or a multiplicity of meanings) that goes beyond the text in

its totality. In turn, many of the infinite number of virtual and real structures of the (poetic) message of the literary text disappear or cannot be perceived, because they have been erased or lost by the actual system of performance. Indeed, even if by some miracle performance could speak or tell the whole text, spectators would not hear the whole text. A good part of its information is erased or lost. The art of the director and the actors resides largely in their choices as to what should not be heard. We cannot speak of semantic equivalence: if T (text) equals the set of the entire set of textual signs, and P (performance) equals the set of performed signs, the intersection of these two sets will shift for each performance (UBERSFELD, 1999, p. 14).

In this sense, ranking the text above performance can provoke the illusion that there is a right way to align the signs written on the paper to those performed on the stage. As Ubersfeld (1999, p. 16) attests,

The main danger of this approach lies, of course, in the temptation to freeze or fix the text, to sacralize it to the point of making the system of performance impossible and thwarting the imagination of the interpreters (directors and actors). Further danger lies in the (unconscious) temptation to fill in any silences or spaces in the text, and to read the text as if it were a compact book or unit that could only be reproduced using tools external to it; in this way any production of an artistic object is prohibited. The greatest danger lies granting privileged status not to the text, but to one particular historical or codified reading of the text, a reading which, as a result of textual fetishism, will be granted eternal legitimacy. Given the relations (unconscious but powerful) that are established between a theatrical text and the historical conditions of its performance, the privileged status to codified ways of performing that text. In other words, the result might be the prohibition of any advances in the art of staging plays. Thus traditional actors and directors thought that they are defending the integrity and purity of a Molière or Racine text, when in fact they were defending a codified reading of the text, or perhaps even given a predetermined way of performing it. We can see not only the extent to which granting privileged status to the text can make theatre sterile, but also why, in theatre, it is so necessary to distinguish clearly between what is essentially of the text and what is essentially of the performance. Without these distinctions, it is impossible to analyze the relation between the two phenomena and identify their common task. Paradoxically, the failure to distinguish clearly between text and performance leads those who defend the primacy of the text to indeed cause the effect of performance to revert upon the text.

Aristotle (2000, p. 62) seems to solve that matter in his *Poetics*, when he affirms that although the text is meant to be performed, it must be possible for

it to be read as any kind of poem – being it tragedy, comedy, epic or poetry. Ronald Peacock (2011) suggests that a proper analysis of the opposition text/performance should focus on the images that are generated by the text and on the symbolical matter that can enrich the creative processes of performance. The reading of theatre that one performs is a product of one's own constructs and concepts, so it is not difficult to understand that all definitions are likely to fail if they propose to account for a reading of totality. In order to provide a reading of the images (in a symbolical way) contained in the text/performance dyad, symbolical constructs must be observed. It is important to consider the image in the context in which it appears, avoiding the risk of simplifying the analysis by opening dictionaries of symbols that provide possibilities of definitions for the image we investigate. We should rather consider where the image is inserted, feel the literary text that contains it, decide if what we see is a symbolical pattern, or just an ordinary image, and select one possibility of meaning in the context we contemplate.

Thinking about it metaphorically, we could say that theatre is a kind of craft similar to weaving and embroidering, as it depends on the work of capable hands to tessellate the multiple threads in a proficient way. Contemporary theatre, in this sense, is an intricate tapestry because it is woven from different threads and materials. In order to understand what theatre was and what it has become, it is necessary to accept that the rules of this game have changed so many times that what was considered a piece of art in other times could be dismantled and discredited by contemporary playwrights and theoreticians. Cultural clashes are also important to observe, as it seems impossible to define a European panorama of contemporary theatre taking into account the amount of dissimilarities in the offered productions. The article discusses such questions highlighting the work of the English poet and playwright Blake Morrison and how his plays fit in the contemporary British scene.

One of the major characteristics of the British theatre is its eccentricity. There is a marked resistance of British theatre to incorporate post dramatic theatre and other artistic tendencies that are present in French and German contemporary theatre. To the English playwright Howard Brenton (2009), a play is as tight a form as the eighteenth century sonata. Brenton (2009) defines a theatrical text as an event that generally lasts two or three hours, is performed in chunks, and consists in a group of people presenting an enacted story to another group of people sitting in front or around them. He also declares that the rigidity of such form has taught the audience what expectations to bring

and what conventions to adapt to in the playhouse. To Brenton (2009), this is a fact that happens whether theatre-makers like it or not. This can be called the most traditional approach to theatre, and it represents the rigidity of form that the author-centred theatre culture of Britain is best adapted to. Of course, one can always highlight names such as Sarah Kane, John Osborne, Tom Stoppard, Joe Orton, Harold Pinter and Mark Ravenhill to illustrate how innovative English dramaturgy can be. However, it is important not to forget that artists such as Samuel Beckett and Peter Brook only achieved success after crossing the canal and moving to France.

One cannot think about contemporary dramaturgy without thinking about the vanguard movements from the twenties. And there is no better way to look back at those movements than trying to answer Hamm's question to Clov, in *Endgame*, written by Samuel Beckett (2003, p. 39) – “We're not beginning to... to... mean something?”. Were they bound to mean something? Were theatre and art movements such as Surrealism, Expressionism, and Futurism intending to signify something? What did these movements provoke in the way we face drama?

I believe that, among the literary genres, theatre was the most affected by the conceptual changes about what an artistic text is. Contemporary dramaturgy is made of very different kinds of texts – and some of them are very difficult to recognize as theatre at all. Hamm's question reveals the joy and the horror of being exposed. Beckett (2003) plays with such lines by showing that characters have to take the risk of being read and interpreted by others. Beckett (2003) breaks the possibilities of interpretation or, at least, multiplies them, in a new kind of theatre that denies representation the right to be anything but itself. From such a concept, theatre is not an imitation of life anymore, but a (re)presentation of life and there are no boundaries to new presentations of life. So, contemporary theatre is not bound to rules or fixed structures that could help readers and audience to recognize it as theatre.

Theatre relies on the game of what is being shown and what is being hidden. The dramatic text does not imitate life: it proposes a double of life, building to life a verbal replica that is performed on stage. Contemporary theatre seems to maintain such features, which demand an active role from the readers/audience, so as to be understood or decoded. Contemporary dramaturgy deviates from what we recognized as theatre before, presenting as a play, texts written in prose or verse, in a linear or non-linear narrative, with fragmented voices that echo not just the society we live in but the artistic movements of

the past, in a constant movement of killing and resurrecting the vanguard movements from the past.

In the present scene, we have at least two models, each representing a different artistic attitude. The first is the classical model, a closed model, made out of informative writing, facilitating the understanding of readers and audience by structuring the play in a traditional way with a linear narrative, lines, characters, scenes and acts. The second is bound to erase everything that facilitates interpretation. It is a model bound to erasure and void. The empty space and the feeling of void come as an expression of powerful images that compose a new way of writing that communicates rather through absence than through words. This kind of dramaturgy deviates from what we recognized as theatre before, presenting as a play texts written in prose or verse, in a linear or non-linear narrative, with fragmented voices that echo not just the society we live in but the artistic movements, in a constant movement of killing and resurrecting the Avant-guard movements from the past. We see exponents of this kind of theatre in names such as Sarah Kane, Heiner Müller and Valère Novarrina, authors whose dramatic narratives are open not only to different interpretation but also to different ways of reading and organization. When critics and artists talk about contemporary theatre, they are generally talking about this second model.

Although contemporary theatre attempts to break the structures of the Aristotelian model, it is still a way of representing the world, in which the matrix is also being used – a group of human beings performing something in front of another group of human beings. Jean-Pierre Ryngaert (2013) sees contemporary theatre as an answer to the classical model of drama that relies on clarity of information, which must be complete, coherent and compact from the opening lines of a play. According to Ryngaert (2013, p. 8),

Contemporary Drama proposes a different relationship with the reader/audience. Insufficient information in writing is hardly accepted as a game with the reader, as an informative puzzle, whose pieces come only gradually. Or even worse, a puzzle whose pieces will never come or will lack, or misfit. The role of the reader is to fill these empty spaces and empty writings with his own ideas and imagination.

Adding to the role theatre directors have engaged themselves to since the eighties, the contemporary theatrical scene is an amalgam of fragmented voices

that are put together in order to make sense and to defy the limits of interpretation. Names such as Bob Wilson, Pina Bausch and Tadeusz Kantor contributed to undermine many of the certainties about the status of mimesis and representation, especially those concerning the written text. In spite of the efforts to amplify the presence of artistic directors, we still have the presence of the writer, whose words are repeated through the years in multiple performances. We have also been witnessing a new phenomenon in contemporary drama – the multiple artist, who takes several functions at the same time. Of course, there is nothing new to that – Shakespeare was responsible for writing, directing and acting in his group. Nevertheless, nowadays, these characteristics come to scene again, and we have the presence of artists who are also responsible for the translation, or re-mediation, of their works into different languages – as cinema, for instance.

This kind of artist was foreseen by Antonin Artaud (1998, p. 156), who in his book *The theatre and its double*, professed that the postmodern world would give birth to a new kind of artist, cruel and capable of translating himself into different artistic languages with the same proficiency. Artaud (1998) looked forward to this theatre of cruelty, whose void would provoke a feeling of nausea for being alive in modern times. The evincing of this feeling of void and lack of guidance meant by Artaud (1998) are powerful aspects in contemporary drama and contemporary theatre performances.

In this scenario, there are no closed boundaries delimiting what a play is anymore. Those boundaries have been suffering constant breakings and rearrangements; they are very supple in the present days. Nonetheless, there is still a difference when we talk about a play on the page, on the stage and on the screen: the eye that looks at it. When reading a play, the reader is responsible for imagining the scenes and characters without any exterior help. The play performed on the stage imposes all these elements on the watcher, but without giving a direction to the watcher's eye. When someone watches a play it is possible to listen to the text and see the sequence of images at the same time, but it is the watcher who decides where to focus his/her attention. In this case, the watcher is responsible for what he will see. When the play is adapted into a movie, we have the eye of the director determining what the camera will hit, according to their understanding of the play they have read. The movie audience does not have the possibility the theatre audience has of choosing where to focus. In this sense, watching a film is like reading a piece of criticism. In both

cases we read on the second degree, we read *apud*. Furthermore, there are many possibilities of reading and approach involving the reader of drama, the audience in the theatre and the watcher in a movie. There are different kinds of language involved. That is why we can conceive a play as a holistic construct that takes place in the tension produced by the clash between materiality and imagination.

Deviation and Fragment seem to be the two most significant features of this second model. Deviation is mostly understood as deviating from realism, but then we must apprehend realism in a broader sense, as Sarrazac (2012, p. 64) reminds us,

*No teatro, como na literatura romanesca, o desvio constitui a estratégia do escritor realista moderno. Esclarecemos, todavia, que não se trata aqui de um realismo fundado na imitação do vivo, esse realismo estritamente figurativo, na tradição de Balzac e Tolstói, que Lukács coroa com o título de “grande realismo” a fim de depreciar toda a literatura dramática da modernidade, dos naturalistas a Brecht, passando pelos simbolistas e expressionistas. Não, o realismo do desvio assemelha-se antes a um realismo menor no sentido deleuziano do vocábulo. Não deixa de ter a ver com o realismo ampliado de que fala Brecht ou com o que Günther Anders, a propósito de Kafka e Brecht – dois mestres da parábola, a arte do desvio por excelência – definiu como um realismo experimental: A ciência moderna da Natureza coloca o seu objeto, para sondar os segredos da realidade, numa situação artificial, a situação experimental. Ela fabrica uma estrutura, em cujo cerne instala o objeto, deformando-o justamente em virtude disso; mas daí resulta uma constatação da forma<sup>1</sup>.*

In other words, Deviation is the strategy adopted by contemporary playwrights to flee from the routine of ordinary life that is many times used in plays as an attempt to reach a sincere realism. On the other hand, the notion of Fragment derives from a way of writing that is confrontational and denies

1 “In theater, as in Romantic literature, deviation is the modern realist writer’s strategy. However, that is not a kind of Realism founded on living imitation, strictly figurative, in the tradition of Balzac and Tolstoy, which Lukacs defines as ‘Great Realism’, so as to depreciate the whole dramatic literature of modernity – from the Naturalism of Brecht to the Symbolist and Expressionists. Differently from that, this Realism of Deviation rather resembles Realism in the Deleuzian sense of the word. It has things in common with the enhanced realism related with Brecht, or with what Günther Anders says about the purpose of Kafka and Brecht – two masters of the parable, the art of diversion par excellence. Anders defines that as Experimental realism. Modern Natural Science poses an experimental, artificial situation: it manufactures a structure and installs the object, deforming it, but nonetheless stressing the realization of that construct as a form” (translated by the author).

the structures of the traditional and absolute drama. The traditional and absolute drama is built from the perspective of one organizing principle, in a logical sequence that restrains empty spaces, ruptures and successive beginnings. Fragment stimulates the plurality of forms, stimulates ruptures and multiplies perspectives by adding several points of view. As Sarrazac (2012, p. 89) says,

*Tradicionalmente, o fragmento designa o caráter incompleto ou inacabado de uma obra; nesse caso, e a crer nas definições vigentes, o essencial não parece encontrar-se no que resta dela ou no que foi composto, mas sim no que não chegou até nós, no que falta. Paradoxalmente, nossa época transformou o que era a confissão de um fracasso, uma perda ou uma insuficiência na afirmação de uma escolha estética<sup>2</sup>.*

However, all these features contemplated by this second model of the contemporary theatrical panorama seem not to be the focus of Blake Morrison – the playwright in the centre of this paper. Blake Morrison is an English poet, anthologist, critic and playwright. He was born in Skipton, Yorkshire, in 1950, and was educated at Nottingham University before pursuing postgraduate studies in Canada and at University College in London. According to the Cambridge Guide to Literature in English, he worked for the Times Literary Supplement between 1978 and 1981, when he was editor for both The Observer and the Independent on Sunday. Morrison is now Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Chairman to the Poetry Book Society and council member of the Poetry Society, a member of the Literature Panel of the Arts Council of England and Vice-Chairman of English PEN. Since 2003 he has been professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College in the University of London.

Blake Morrison has also written non-fiction books, such as his memoir *And when did you last see your father?* (1993), a moving narrative about his father's life and death which won the J. R. Ackerley Prize and the Esquire/Volvo/Waterstone's Non-Fiction Book Award. This biography was made into a film in 2007, starring Colin Firth. A second memoir called *Things my mother never told me* was published in 2002. He is also the editor of the Penguin Reader of Contemporary British Poetry (1982). When the matter is theatre,

2 “Traditionally, the fragment refers to the incomplete or unfinished character of a work; in this case, according to the current settings, the key does not lie on what remains, or on what was done, but on what is missing. Paradoxically, our time transformed what once meant the acknowledgment of a failure, a loss or insufficiency, into the affirmation of an aesthetic choice” (translated by the author).

Blake Morrison's works are predominantly what we convey to call adaptations. He adapts from classic plays such as in *The cracked pot* (1996), an adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. Both *The cracked pot* and his version of Sophocles's *Oedipus* (2001) were produced and performed by Barrie Rutter's theatre company Northern Broadsides. The same theatre company went on to perform his version of *Antigone* in 2003 and published *Antigone and Oedipus* (2003) in a double volume the same year. Morrison's plays also include *The man with two Gaffers*, a version of Carlo Goldoni's *Il Servitore di due Padroni*, and *Lisa's Sex Strike*, his adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, which transforms the classic text into a comedy set in a northern mill town. *Lisa's Sex Strike* toured with Northern Broadsides in 2007. His latest play is *We are three sisters*, written in 2011, which is based on Chekhov's *Three sisters*.

On February, 4th 2015 I visited Prof. Morrison in his office at Goldsmith College, when he granted me a very generous interview. He was so kind as to answer my many questions concerning *We are three sisters* – the play I was examining during my doctoral studies at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). During the interview, Prof. Morrison told me he had begun the research about the Brontës and Chekhov ten years before, studying Chekhov's plays and style and the Brontës' poems, novels and writings along with Juliet Barker's biography *The Brontës, Wild Genius on the Moors*. He said that he felt encouraged when he saw there was more to it than Susannah Clapp had initially pointed.

I was encouraged to see how many of the ideas or themes that preoccupied the Brontës also feature in Chekhov's play: work, love, education, marriage, the role of women, the dangers of addiction to drugs or alcohol, the rival claims of country and city, a background of social change and political unrest. And there is evidence that the parallels are not mere coincidence. According to his biographer, Donald Rayfield, one of the books Chekhov ordered for the library of his hometown, Tagarong, and which he kept for nearly a month before sending it on, was an account of the Brontës by Olga Peterson. I know nothing about Peterson's biography, perhaps it is just a translation or a rip-off of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte*. But, in any case, Chekhov would not have had to read a biography to be aware of the Brontës; by the end of the 19th century they were internationally famous. It is enough to say that a rough outline of their story might have lodged at the back of his mind (BROWN; MORRISON, 2014, p. 32).

So, I learned from Morrison that Chekhov indeed had some contact with the life of the Brontës. The important thing to highlight is that the process of creation Morrison is engaged to, and his plays, are conceived in a traditional way of writing theatre, very close to the Realism Chekhov was engaged in. Our chat made me think about many questions concerning Morrison's artistic works for the stage, such as – is there a place for realism in contemporary theatre – even in British contemporary theatre? Is a play contemporary because it has been written nowadays, or because it fulfils a certain amount of features that we recognize as contemporary in performance arts? What is the role of Morrison's play in the contemporary theatrical scene?

Contemporary British theatre presents a certain resistance concerning foreign influences, although it is also a fomenter of a myriad of provocative artistic movements, such as the *In-Yer-Face Theatre* and the *London Pop* movements, for instance. So, although we do have innovation on British Contemporary theatre, it is important to recognize that these changes are not always welcome, and that the influence of French and German theatre in Britain is not necessarily regarded as a positive influence. British audience and critics seem to maintain their preference for the traditional approach of theatre as we detailed in the first model we present before. I recall a situation that could exemplify the preference of British people to the traditional theatre form. Once, I was in a conference of Associação Brasileira de Professores Universitários de Inglês (Abrapui), and after my presentation about contemporary theatre, I had a chat with professor Peter James Harris, a British professor, living now in Brazil, author of the book *From Stage to Page – Critical Reception of Irish Plays in London Theatre*. My presentation was about the possibilities of a dramaturgy of actors based on the principles defended by Eugenio Barba (2010) and his Theatre Anthropology. Professor Harris discouraged me of such studies by claiming they were just a trend from the sixties, and that if one is engaged in a serious study on drama, one should rely on classics. Another good example is the reception of Katie Mitchell's radical staging of contemporary plays on British stage, as Lane (2010, p. 16) tells us,

Mitchell is still an anomaly. Critics and audience are still coming to terms with her European-influenced style of directing and adventurous audio-visual theatrical experiments: following her production of Martin Crimp's new translation of *The Seagull* she received hate mail from spectators. Despite artistic entrepreneurs such as Mitchell, British theatre remains a place where the assumed

mode of communication is that of realism, and where work that break these conventions is misinterpreted as an irritating interruption to a standardised form of dramatic theatre, compared to it in a reductive manner.

Nonetheless, the apparent fondness for Realism that British theatre seem to have is not only a matter of preference but also a cultural construction that is bound to the way the British experience drama. Ryngaert (2013) says that each subject, each story and each culture have their own ways to experience theatricality. It seems that the choice for Realism to portray the everyday life of the Brontës, presenting a type of microhistory, or microbiography, describing the ways of the Brontë family in the small village of Haworth is appropriate, especially when Morrison explains his motivations concerning Realism.

I wasn't interested in transposing scenes from the fiction. I wanted this was the story of the Brontës lives. It wasn't an adaptation of a novel. I wasn't trying to conflate Charlotte and Jane, Emily and Cathy. No. I was telling the story of the sister's real lives. I wanted it to seem a plausible realistic version of their lives, and that is a tradition Chekhov is also working – Realism. So, it is not surreal, it is not fabulist and it is not an allegory; it is a realist drama (FRITSCH apud MORRISON, 2015).

There is also another aspect that we have to take in consideration, namely, what directors and playwrights expect from an actor's performance of a theatrical character. Blake Morrison has a very interesting contribution to such discussion. Talking about his aesthetical choices and his preference for Realism, he highlights a very important fact, which cannot be ignored when we talk about the tradition of theatre in Britain – the role of the spoken word and proper delivery of speech. It comes from British tradition the importance of an adequate pronunciation, enunciation and intonation of words and sentences in order to be understood by the audience, especially those ones bound to canonical literary texts. We must have in mind that the expression in English to watch a play by Shakespeare is not to watch Shakespeare, but to hear Shakespeare, for instance. So, as Morrison explains, there are more cultural layers that cannot be simplified just by naming contemporary British theatre conservative. Talking about his own play, *We are three sisters*, he says,

Well, I think it might be seen as an old fashion play, especially because the subject that matters is the early 19t century, the setting and so on. On the other hand, you could say it is also metafictional or postmodernist to the extent that

I am working from original texts transposing and reinventing them. Reinventing and reinterpreting an original text. One of the first plays to make an impression on me was Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. The idea of them stepping outside Shakespeare's play and talking about things, a minor character being brought to the centre of the stage, for me it was great. It is a kind of game, working with an original text, and trying to do something with that original text, you know, from a different context. So, I don't know how my plays fit really to contemporary British drama. As I said, I don't even consider myself a playwright but a poet and novelist. So, I never really thought about my relationship to contemporary British theatre. One thing that I should add is – because I work with this particular theatre company and director, Barrie Rutter, who is currently rehearsing *King Lear*, and he has demands and prejudices about what theatre must be. First of all, authentic colloquial speech; it was important the Brontë sisters to sound like people living in the early 19th century Yorkshire; they have those accents; they use the idioms of that time. Secondly, simple realist setting; no videos, no fancy lighting effects, and also a high importance to English proper pronunciation. The way educated people would speak at those times; delivering the text and the language properly. Rutter believes a lot of drama schools are not preparing the actors to deliver the text properly; people don't deliver lines like they should. So, he focus on that; he focus on clarity. If you go to a Northern Broadsides production, you hear every word. And this is wonderful for the writer, because the audience is going to hear every word. So, I think working with him and his company was also an influence on my writing of plays; knowing exactly what he was expecting and what he wanted to do probably influenced the play (FRITSCH apud MORRISON, 2015).

Blake Morrison's choice of approaching the life of the Brontës from his reading of Juliet Barker's biography means that some aspects of their lives come into focus more than others. Morrison uses his prerogative to be the master of his fictional world as he condenses some events and interferes with the temporal sequence of events. This way, he manages to fit three lives into the limits of a five-act play, so as to explore, dramatically, the possibilities about what their lives could have been.

In conclusion, as for the goals of this paper, I consider as contemporary all the plays that are written in the present days, and not only those associated with innovative features. Especially because the focus of the paper is a British author and, as I suggested, British theatre can be faced in multiple ways concerning the matter of innovation of form and structure clashing ideals and aesthetics of a more traditional approach to theatre. And, although Blake Morrison is working on adaptations of classic plays – a movement very recurrent in European

innovative theatre – he does his adaptations without breaking the boundaries of form and structure, which seems to be the way British audiences are more comfortable with. The movement of entwining facts and fiction performed by Morrison, the borrowing of Chekhov's play to build up his own fictional version of the life of these three Victorian writers and the imagery produced by these processes is, in a sense, close to the expected aesthetics of contemporary drama. Morrison blurs the limits that separate reality and fiction when he writes his biographical play based on Chekhov's fictional play. Conversely, the connections established between Chekhov, Morrison and the Brontës reveal other layers of reality that escape from our ordinary expectations. I do believe Blake Morrison discloses through his adaptation a door to multiple possibilities of reading by establishing a possible connection with Anton Chekhov and the Brontë sisters. By transposing the huge emptiness of the Russian landscape to the wild emptiness of the English moors and by bringing the three sisters from Haworth to the centre of the stage, Morrison conquered his place in contemporary dramaturgy with a text that brings many features of the present aesthetic demands of drama disguised by an apparent traditional approach to theatre. I also believe that Morrison presents a text with a rich imagery, surrounded by subtleties that defy the reader/audience to decipher the delicacy of the small details that compose his artistic creation.

## Blake Morrison e a Leitura do Teatro Britânico Contemporâneo

### Resumo

O presente trabalho discute questões pertinentes ao teatro contemporâneo britânico e como o dramaturgo Blake Morrison se insere no panorama teatral inglês. Morrison utiliza como pano de fundo para a elaboração da peça *We are three sisters* o texto *As três irmãs* (1902) do dramaturgo russo Anton Chekhov. O diálogo entre a Rússia de Chekhov da virada do século XIX/XX e o cenário (interiorano) do norte (industrial) da Inglaterra no período vitoriano, quando equacionados por Morrison no contexto dos dias de hoje, convidam-nos a traçar considerações que muito têm a nos dizer sobre os parâmetros da dramaturgia contemporânea.

### Palavras-chave

Blake Morrison. Teatro britânico contemporâneo. Dramaturgia contemporânea.

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