

The Healing Power of Theatre in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*

[MAJEED MOHAMMED MIDHIN](#)

SAMER ABID RASHEED FARHAN

UNIVERSITY OF ANBAR, IRAQ

ABSTRACT

*Recently, theatre is not only used to entertain and enlighten people but also to heal. The old shaman role finds its way in the theatre of the world today. Theatre in prison is highly manipulated by playwrights to intervene with the tools and expertise they possess. This can be clearly shown in contemporary theatre especially theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker. In *Our Country's Good*, the role of the theatre is celebrated as a place where lost voices are regained and heard. For Wertenbaker, theatre has the incentive "to make one listen" (1999). Though the play is about community, or applied theatre, it is also a journey of personal discovery. The artist figures are writers and actors. Phillip, who is aware of the power of theatre, asks Ralph to write and direct parts of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* to be acted out by convicts. Though unprofessional actors, the participants prove to be genuine. Obviously, there are some fascinating female*

characters in Our Country's Good, who again find that they have acting skills. Mary Brenham, for example, who starts out as passive in the first scene, takes the main role in the play within the play. Her engagement with the theatre helps her to find her voice. Similarly, Liz Morden, an aggressive girl, finds a way to speak and communicate with other people which was impossible for her initially. For her, theatre becomes a way of expressing herself and her situation.

In this paper, I am going to see how Wertenbaker used theatre as a healing power for those who are psychologically and socially isolated. Though theatre in prison is not something new, what is fascinating about Wertenbaker is the use of underrepresented female character who is marginalised to do a play by which she finds her cultural voice.

WERTENBAKER'S PHILOSOPHY OF THEATRE

Having fought her way into the male-dominated theatre scene, Wertenbaker embraces theatre as an effective means of reflecting women's marginalization. In an interview, published in a book entitled *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (1997) by Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, Wertenbaker sums up her influential views on theatre, which she sees as "a public arena [where the] writer tries to filter something in a deeper way". It is a public place through which the writer, unlike the journalist, can debate and "pull the strands together" (1999, p. 145). Moreover, Wertenbaker's preoccupation with theatre and acting goes further than mere showing but rather presenting "theatricality as an opportunity for people who have been atrociously brutalized and debased to discover, through the playing of scripted roles and the interactive process of rehearsal, aspects of the self that have been submerged, in some cases well-nigh obliterated" (Crow, 2002, p. 133). Significantly, those people who are brutalized and silenced are usually women. For Wertenbaker, the theatre is a place which provokes thought and interrogation. Likewise, it is an effective tool by which "gender issues can be shown to be intricately related to power dynamics: the performance of a play, poem or story by a woman, in a woman's voice, on stage or some public space, can still be a powerful thing, made more powerful by the

presence of an audience" (Goodman, 2000, pp. ix-x). Like Barker, Wertenbaker emphasizes the role of theatre as an agent of change. She affirms that:

I don't think you can leave the theatre and go out and make a revolution ... But I do think you can make people change, just a little, by forcing them to question something, or by intriguing them, or giving them an image that remains with them. And that little change can lead to bigger changes. (Sullivan, 1993, p. 140)

Accordingly, on a number of occasions, Wertenbaker refuses to put her works within the rigid parameters of a purely political or feminist stance. Rather, her plays are liable to a more open critical reaction. She prompts the individual's imagination to decide which path he should take. Moreover, seeing the theatre as 'the Court', Wertenbaker argues strongly in favour of the artist avoiding being delivered a verdict. She insists on the vital role of the audience as "the jury to make that pronouncement". So, the function of the theatre is "a metaphorical trial", to use Bush's words (2013, p. 71).

As a radical playwright, Wertenbaker, like other women playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, addresses big issues such as using myths, the acquisition of a voice and women's aspirations to find an equal place in a male-dominated culture. In the following pages, I am going to concentrate on Wertenbaker's plays, which cover three decades (1980s-2000s). In doing so, the role of theatre, the function of art and the dilemmas of women artists are revealed. Plays, such as *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), *Our Country's Good* (1988), *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991), *The Break of Day* (1995) and *The Line* (2009) reflect the function of art and the situation of artists as they live in two different worlds: Communism and Capitalism. Both worlds impose on artists a particular type of censorship. The first is tested by how artists are loyal to the ruling political party while the latter is through the market ethics.

In *The Love of the Nightingale* (RSC, 1988), the theme of violence and silencing women is pertinent. Here, Wertenbaker resorts to myth to dramatize this theme with a contemporary tone whilst at the same time showing the role of theatre in transmitting it. In her speech about the translating and transmitting of Greek tragedy and myth into the

modern stage, Lorna Hardwick, a Professor in Classical Studies, states that

[p]erformed translations enable audiences to experience interaction between ancient and modern. They can also be indicators of changes in modern perceptions of the ancient play and in how practitioners use the transformative powers of theatre. (Hardwick, 2007, p. 358)

Likewise, delving into the past in order to comment on the present is one of the themes in Timberlake Wertenbaker's plays. The imaginative element of the past and its potentialities give audiences an opportunity to experience and revise the ancient in order to deal with the present and make a comparison between the old and the new. So, using historical facts and juxtaposing them with fiction, Wertenbaker "invites contemporary analogy", as Val Taylor has pointed out (1991, p. 333). Moreover, as a playwright, Wertenbaker repeatedly "turns to history to reveal and challenge human behaviour, depending, like Brecht, not on its universality but on its changeability" (Freeman, 2010, p. 210). In other words, the human propensity to change and adapt is a recurrent theme in Wertenbaker's works. So, eliminating this trait of human potentiality for change becomes the driving force for the ruling political system to stand against any sign of activity.

In his study of *English Drama Since 1940*, David Ian Rabey argues:

Wertenbaker's drama often ranges from the domestic to the mythic within each play, identifying social situations which depend upon dispossession and restriction of human potential. Moreover, she demonstrates how these effects are the deliberate and intrinsic effects of language systems and terms of response which define the rights of the individual in exclusively patriarchal and imperial terms. This authoritarianism is specifically paternalistic in nature; that is, it pretends fostering care whilst simultaneously eroding systematically any belief in a possible separateness and difference of individual interests. The ultimate threat of this governing system is to deprive the individual of speech, and of the right of expression of selfhood; but hope persists, in the defiant

reactions of her marginalised protagonists. (2003, p. 138)

This marginalisation of Wertenbaker's protagonists and the role of theatre to regain their voice is a recurrent theme in the next two plays.

HEALING POWER OF ART: *OUR COUNTRY'S* (1988)

In "Theatre, prison and rehabilitation: new narratives of purpose", Bridget Keehan points out:

A repeated theme in the discourse on theatre practice in prisons over the last 20 years can be summarised as follows: theatre and drama projects have a positive effect on those incarcerated and may contribute towards rehabilitation. Related to this is a concern with explaining how theatre and drama projects achieve this and how their contribution to rehabilitation can be proved. (2015, pp. 391-394)

Likewise, Julie A. Rada asserts that

As an artist, I respond to culture, and perhaps uncover my responsibility to culture, through creative means. Prison abolitionists and cultural theorists have long suggested that prison is a core structure shaping society, not just for the millions caught up in the justice system, formally, but for all of us. The practices of power, domination, and surveillance, and the resistance to and navigation of such forces shape social relations, institutional structures, and intimate relations. (2019, pp. 58-59)

The role and function of theatre are taken further in Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (Royal Court, 1988). Again, Wertenbaker focuses on the redemptive power of theatre. Significantly, the artist figures are not as professional. They are amateurs. The play is based on Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* (1987) and an actual event during the first British exile of 160,000 convicts to Australia between 1787 and 1868 as it is recounted in Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*. Wertenbaker tries to raise old questions about the revolutionary, political and social function of theatre within society. This public means

of theatre, which is hailed by oppressed people, is not well received by politicians. So, artists find it hard to situate their places without being censored or obliterated. In her answer to the question about the play as “a wonderful defence of the theatre and its value to individuals and society, as well as a classic example of how in oppressive times the arts are censored, if not obliterated”, Wertenbaker’s argument shows her genuine belief in art, especially theatre, as an important redemptive tool because of its publicity. She states that “[i]n a society that’s not very much in touch with itself, art will be uncomfortable and I think that’s the situation in England at the moment. It’s an extremely uncomfortable country in all kinds of ways and [consequently] art is not going to be very appealing in that kind of discomfort” (Stephenson & Langridge, 2017, p. 141).

Our Country’s Good follows the fortunes of 18th century convicts who are sent to Australia as a form of punishment for their vile actions. As mentioned before, these people are a mixture of amateurs, thieves, whores and ruffians. To redeem their behaviour, the governor, Captain Arthur Phillip, and the young Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark, a theatre enthusiast, arrange for the outcasts to put on a performance of George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer*. Instead of traditional means of punishment, this experience becomes an eloquent argument for the transformative power of theatre both as a means of giving voice, and a sense of communality to a group of social outcasts. This is quite clear in the character of Liz Morden, the hardened thief, who is given a new identity after the performance. From the outset of the play, their perilous situation is reported by John Wisehammer, one of the convicts, who are: “Spewed from [their] country, forgotten, bound to the dark edge of the earth”, (1, 1, 185). Ostensibly, they are severed from their birthplace for the good of their country. But, in reality they are used in an experimental field.

The play as a whole focuses on actors. In other words, the figures of the artist are represented by unprofessional actors who have changed through the power of art. In my interview with Sophie Bush, dated February 9, 2016, she points out that “there are several interesting things that are happening in *Our Country’s Good*; it is very much about amateur theatre in the sense of ordinary people finding their own artistic spirit rather than about artists who are artists by profession, and it’s about people finding solace through art in adverse

circumstances.”

This view is shared by Phillip, the governor of the colony, who feels that the convicts will not change unless they are offered something genuine instead of the routine process of floggings and hangings. So, for the good of the colony, Phillip suggests that the convicts should “see real plays: fine language, sentiment”, (1, 3, 189). His confidence in the ability of human beings to learn makes him view theatre as an effective means since “no one is born naturally cultured? I'll have the gun now”, (1, 3, 188). Metaphorically speaking, theatre is associated with ‘the gun’ to denote its powerful nature. On the one hand, theatre is a good means of instilling good values and behaviours in the convicts. On the other hand, it is used to domesticate and change oppressed people. In other words, it is a conjunction point between cultural and non-cultural background. In her speech about applied theatre as research, Sarah Woodland argues that

[a]ppplied theatre can be seen as operating at the ‘cultural interface’(Nakata, 2007) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges. I conceive applied theatre as an art of living- an embodied, relational act of making of selves, worlds, and cultures in art, and in life.... As such, aesthetics encompasses the embodied aesthetic engagement and meaning making that occurs within the process of ensemble building and creating works; the resulting works as they are experienced in a community-based event; and the radical potential of such affective encounters to embody ethical participation and social justice. (Woodland, 2019, pp. 42-43)

However, to achieve the governor's suggestion, the Second Lieutenant, Ralph Clark, is chosen to put on a play in order to change the daily lives of the convicts and expose them to refined and sentimental language. Ralph becomes the director of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. What attracts Wertenbaker to the Irish writer is her early emphasis on the subject of theatre which is as follows:

The argument the theatre is a waste of time and resources, pointless, silly corrupting, evil, dangerous the theatre is

pleasurable, good for the mind, good for the body, enriching, humanising. (Bush, 2013, p. 118)¹

Faced with this debate, a heated argument over theatre and its role in society ensues among the authorities of the 'Repressive State Apparatus' and the 'Ideological State Apparatus'. The first represents the whole state, such as the army, the government and the administration of prisons which "function by violence". The latter represents religious and cultural institutions such as churches and the arts which "function 'by ideology'" (Althusser, 2001, pp. 96-97). Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* witnesses the application of these two devices. In the first part of the play, the authorities inflict their policies by violent actions such as floggings and hangings as stated previously. In the second part, the authorities adopt theatre as an ideological device "to redirect the fervor and passion of dissident action into more socially accepted enterprises" (Sullivan, 1993, p. 143).

The representative officers of the authorities take two opposing sides over theatre. One side views theatre as a subversive force for the social and moral fabric of society which places their authority in danger, while the other side shows no interest. The first side is voiced by Ross who is very conservative towards theatre:

[...] I know this play – this play – order will become disorder. The theatre leads to threatening theory and you, Governor, you have His Majesty's commission to build castles, raise armies, administer a military colony, not fandangle about with a lewdy play! (1, 6, 210)

Ross, like Tereus in *The Love of the Nightingale*, reacts strongly to the production of the play because it stimulates revolution and revolt, which threatens the political system. His suspicion and fear of theatre recalls Tereus's speech: "These plays condone vice". (*The Love of the Nightingale*, 5, 303). So, "we have no theatre or even philosophers in Thrace", (5, 304). This casts a brilliant light on the Marxist-Leninist 'theory' of the state as "a [repressive] 'machine' which enables the ruling classes (in the 19th century the bourgeois class and the 'class'

¹ For more explanation, see Wertenbaker, notes for *Our Country's Good*, 17 June 1988, TWA (Timberlake Wertenbaker Archive), BLMC (British Library Manuscripts Collection), Add 79272.

of big landowners) to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion (i.e. capitalist exploitation)",² to quote Louis Althusser (2001, p. 92), a French Marxist philosopher.

The religious camp, which is represented by Reverend Johnson, concentrates on the moral issues. Reverend Johnson is not completely satisfied with the content of the play. He says, "I hear many of these plays are about rakes and encourage loose morals in women", (1, 6, 207). Therefore, marriage will lose its value as a sacred bond between two souls since "actresses are not famed for their morals", (1, 6, 202). Being an Irish writer, Reverend Johnson expresses his fear that *The Recruiting Officer* will "propagate Catholic doctrine", (1, 6, 205) while Lieutenant Will Dawes views it as a waste of time, saying: "Put the play on, don't put it on, it won't change the shape of the universe", (1, 6, 204). But he sees no harm in it "[a]s long as I don't have to watch it", (1, 6, 209). Similarly, Captain Tench sees the play as an unnecessary waste of time: "It is at most a passable diversion, an entertainment to wile away the hours of the idle", (1, 6, 204). He further claims that, "It's two hours, possibly of amusement, possibly of boredom, and we will lose the labour of the convicts during the time they are learning to play", (1, 6, 209). His capitalistic thinking leads him to suggest another option which is more practical from his point of view:

I would simply say that if you want to build a civilization there are more important things than a play. If you want to teach the convicts something, teach them to farm, to build houses, teach them a sense of respect for property, teach them thrift so they don't eat a week's rations in one night, but above all, teach them how to work, not how to sit around laughing at a comedy. (1, 6, 207)

The few officers who strongly support and are motivated by the project are Phillip and Ralph. Phillip believes in the potentiality of theatre to

² In his comment on the close relationship between the object of the proletariat and Marxism in Althusser's theory of Marxism, John Fraser states that "[i]n a socialist state this dominance by theory can be enforced only by an apparatus from which the proletariat is excluded. Scientific socialism, that is, will be produced by a form of state of which the class which makes the revolution becomes the 'object', or 'support'. See John Fraser, "Louis Althusser on Science, Marxism and Politics", *Science & Society*, v. 40, n. 4 (Winter, 1976): 442.

redeem the evil-doers. He quotes Rousseau's inflammatory sentence, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains", (1, 6, 203) to refer to the fact that evil is not naturally innate but it is made by blind political policies. So "They can be educated", (1, 6, 204). To persuade other authorities, Phillip delivers a speech about the role of theatre as "an expression of civilization". Significantly, his speech shows his familiarity with the pioneers of theatre:

We belong to a great country which has spawned great playwrights: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, and even in our own time, Sheridan. The convicts will be speaking a refined, literate language and expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to. It will remind them that there is more to life than crime, punishment. And we, this colony of a few hundred, will be watching this together, for a few hours we will no longer be despised prisoners and hated gaolers. (1, 6, 206)

Phillip, like Ralph, is motivated by the project not only for the convicts' improvement but also for his own self-advancement. So the production of *The Recruiting Officer* becomes a suitable method of rehabilitation for both the convicts and their jailers. For Althusser, the ideological state methods are used "to 'discipline' not only their shepherds, but also their flocks" (2001, p. 98).

Throughout *Our Country's Good*, we are told that the crimes committed by the felons are related to their poverty in their homeland. This old problem of deprivation continues in their new space as there is an extreme shortage of food. So both the authorities and the felons find themselves "at odds with each other and their surroundings, and both struggle to survive against the sometimes desperate circumstances of pioneering" (Sullivan, 1993, p. 142).

This is clear in Ralph's surprise at Mary Brenham, one of the convicts, and her newly acquired behaviour through the rehearsal of *The Recruiting Officer*:

I speak about her, but in a small way this could affect all the convicts and even ourselves, we could forget our worries about the supplies, the hangings and the floggings, and think of ourselves at the theatre, in London with our wives and children,

that is, we could, euh – (1, 6, 208)

Mary Brenham can barely speak in the first scene but towards the end she performs the main role in *The Recruiting Officer*. Initially she lacks confidence and does not think she has a voice. So her personal journey is very much one of empowerment and finding her voice through becoming an actress and becoming involved in theatre.

This provides evidence for the role of theatre as an imaginative outlet for the boredom of prison life. The desire of the convicts to be in reflects the modern stories of prisoners with whom Wertenbaker communicated. In a letter to Wertenbaker, Joe White, an actual prisoner who played Ralph Clark in the first production of *Our Country's Good*, writes of drama as “a refuge and one of the only real weapons against the hopelessness of these places” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 166).

Eventually the play is endorsed despite some reticence. Thus, the outcasts are invited to take part in the rehearsal of the play in a transparent atmosphere without being oppressed. In other words, “ideology is not forced upon subjects; its authority and dominance are not maintained by outright or visibly repressive apparatus” (Sullivan, 1993, p. 144). This truth is uttered by Phillip as he theorizes about the rehearsal:

What is a statesman's responsibility? To ensure the rule of law. But the citizens must be taught to obey the law of their own will. I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannize over a group of animals. I want there to be a contract between us, not a whip on my side, terror and hatred on theirs. (2, 2, 246)

Both the oppressors and the oppressed work collectively and cooperatively for their good. With the production of the play, the convicts begin to discover new areas which have not been seen before. Their active participation leads them to self-realization, to discover their potentialities.

However, much of the critical debate of *Our Country's Good* has centred around the character of Liz Morden. Our initial impression of her reveals the impossibility of redemption. She is described by Phillip as “one of the most difficult women in the colony”. She is “lower than a

slave, full of loathing, foul mouthed, desperate”, (2, 2, 245). Consequently, as a social experiment, her hardened behaviour needs “to be made an example of” redeeming “by redemption”, (2, 2, 245). Liz’s taciturn and brusque nature hides her feelings of inferiority. Even when she is accused of stealing, she does not defend herself, although she is innocent. When she is asked to tell the truth, she refuses, saying “it wouldn’t have mattered”, (2, 10, 271). Once again, Wertenbaker uses theatre “as a place where lost voices [...] can be regained” (Bush, 2013, p. 146). Liz’s disbelief that the officers will trust her is overcome by her valuable participation in the play. And, as Mary insists, “This is the theatre. We will believe you”, (2, 1, 243). Liz is given two choices: either to maintain the honour code of the convict community or to continue to act in the play. She chooses the latter, sacrificing her own salvation for the benefit of the players. So, by the play’s penultimate scene, Liz comes to realize that her voice will be listened to. Her confidence in her own language prompts her to defend herself and she announces, “Your Excellency, I will endeavour to speak Mr. Farquhar’s lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands”, (2, 6, 272). In her interpretation of these lines, Bush, the author of *The Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, quotes the positive response of some critics concerning theatre:

Theatre, it seems, can empower women with some degree of linguistic franchise. The ability to command many voices and to play many parts [provides] survival strategies for women. Those women, ostensibly powerful who lack linguistic versatility [...], appear dramatically weak. While those who can switch linguistic codes according to context enjoy greater power whatever their status. (2013, p. 131)

Liz succeeds in engaging with her masters’ language instead of her previous argot of thieves. Her social formation with the other spectrum of society is fulfilled when she is offered an opportunity through theatre. In his comment on Althusser’s thought of ‘theory’ and ‘ideology’, Terry Eagleton argues:

A social formation [...] lacks organic unity and is no way ‘centred’ upon individuals; but it cannot succeed in reproducing itself unless

those individuals are permitted the illusion that the world 'hails' them, shows some regard for their faculties, addresses itself to them as one subject to another, and it is this fiction which ideology for Althusser exists to foster. (Eagleton, 1990, p. 88)

Liz gets self-assurance by placing herself "within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror". Participating in *The Recruiting Officer* gives her a chance to find out the potential strengths within herself. So social formation or integration becomes possible by placing the individual into a similar situation drawn from the performed play. Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, argues that:

[T]he transition within a generation from the solitary to the gregarious form can be obtained by exposing the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species. (2013, pp. 256-257)

Liz overcomes her passivity with the help of Ralph, who discovers her skills. Importantly, by making the characters of Liz and Ralph take the lead roles in act two, Wertenbaker intends to show the hierarchal relation between male and female artists. Ralph, as the director of *The Recruiting Officer*, chooses the cast and gives them instructions on how to act properly. More than that, he encourages them and assigns the most suitable role for each participant. His insistence on including Liz in the rehearsal of the play reveals Ralph's role in Liz's discovery. In doing so, Liz owes him a great deal.

Our Country's Good ends with Ralph's affirmation of the importance of theatre as a therapeutic experiment: "The theatre is like a small republic, it requires private sacrifices for the good of the whole", (2, 11, 280). Liz Morden finds a way to speak to other people and to communicate and interact with others in a way that is not aggressive, through theatre. It is portrayed as an instigator for the individuals to act. In doing so, the marginalized voices begin to be heard. This theme is clearly associated with women. In different parts of the play we see that their aspirations to be empowered are high. In *Our Country's Good*, for example, Dabby Bryant asserts, "We women have to look after each other. Let's learn the lines", (1, 8, 216). In

another place, she says, “A woman should look after her own interests, that’s all”, (2, 7, 258). This fruitful experience, which is done collectively, recalls Wertenbaker’s work with the director, Max Stafford-Clark.

Our Country’s Good serves as a good example of the joint work between the director and the writer. Working with Stafford-Clark, Wertenbaker developed her playwriting through research-driven workshops. This approach was suitable for facilitating the dilemmas of time and a restricted budget which affected playwrights. Bush maintains that:

[b]y the time Stafford-Clark worked with Wertenbaker, Joint Stock [theatre company] had defined the notion of ‘workshop’ within British theatre as a means of helping a commissioned writer research and develop a script by drawing from responses of performers to research, discussion and structured improvisation, and of helping the company as a whole to develop an understanding about the themes of the play. (2013, p. 146)

Moreover, Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* (1988) “celebrates the discovery of resources through language and of subversive strategy through theatre, and this liberal element of celebration is arguably a principal reason for its popular acclaim and success for Max Stafford-Clark’s regime at the Royal Court” (Rabey, 2003, p. 140).

Although Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* focuses on the function of theatre in society, she raises genuine questions about the dilemma of women playwrights and artists in general.

Like other British women playwrights, Wertenbaker devotes her works to dealing with the issues of women writers in their attempts to acquire a positive status. In answer to a question about the positive attitudes to women by contemporary women playwrights, Betty Caplan, an Australian playwright and theatre critic, reports that “there are plenty of women writers confronting the dilemmas of our lives in their plays – Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Sarah Daniels, to name but a few” (Goodman & de Gay, 1996, p. 182). In the case of Wertenbaker, the dilemmas of female artists are connected with the problems of mothering and child-rearing which seem less important to male artists. These issues are clearly manifested by applied theatre.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Majeed Mohammed Midhin is Assistant Professor and Assistant Department Head at the College of Education and Humanities, University of Anbar, Iraq. He has an MA in English Literature from the University of Baghdad, College of Languages (2002). In 2017, he earned his PhD in Literature from the University of Essex under the supervision of Dr. Clare Finburgh and Dr. Elizabeth J. Kuti. His field of interest is contemporary and modern British drama which touches the immediate needs of people in society. Majeed has participated in many colloquiums, conferences and seminars inside and outside the UK.

Samer Abid Rasheed Farhan holds an MA in English Literature with a focus on Early English Modern Drama from Bangor University in the UK. He is currently Director of Public Relations at Al Anbar University, having previously worked there at the Central Library. Current research is in Shakespearean Drama.