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Forsaking the “Mere”: Embodying the Art of Impassioned Performance/s in Peter Shaffer’s *Lettice and Lovage*

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Abstract

Aims: *A playwright’s acquirement of a talent for the uniqueness of stagecraft is a potential acknowledgement that can be accorded to Peter Shaffer. His acumen to perceive vibrant life stories that are conveyed in the most suitable artistic expression is most felicitous in the way that we have come to appreciate Peter Shaffer as a playwright.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The play Lettice and Lovage focuses on a compelling tale of a burgeoning camaraderie between Lettice and Lotte, a story about how two women cross each other’s paths and are overawed in their ability to see the banality of human existence caught in the wrangles of prosaic colloquiality of their surroundings.*

Outcome: *Lettice and Lotte, though binated in their obvious professional appearance, are seen as characters who eventually want to alter strictures of established discourse that prey upon the possibilities of human intellect. The need to renounce the claptrap of “mediocrity” and the horrors of the “sameness” of human imagination is what the play seriously contests.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The play’s projections of the stage are a symbolic return to the unceasing phantasm of theatre, to have sustained human imagination since times immemorial. The paper dwells on this intellectual enquiry of how the play awakens its audience from the long silent stupor of a perpetual intellectual stasis that has eschewed human capacities as “beings” who can rightfully exist in the vibrancy of an ever-creative and flourishing experience of life, but are often overwhelmed by the insinuating hold of “mediocrity” making the creative imagination compellingly ordinary.*

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Lettice and Lovage by Peter Shaffer is a play of significant literary eminence. As a play, it empowers a unique distinction of exemplary stagecraft and puts forth a story that is compelling in nature. It first premiered at the “The Theatre Royal, Bath, on 6th October, 1987 and subsequently at the Globe Theatre, London, on 27th October, 1987”. As Madeline McMurragh-Kavanagh mentions about the playwright, “The playwright is fully aware that story-telling is central to the dramatist’s art, stating, “it is my object to tell tales; to conjure up the spectres of horror and happiness [...] to perturb and make gasp: to please and make laugh: to surprise””. (qtd. in McMurragh-Kavanagh 2) It is this realisation that gives a certain intellectual entitlement to Peter Shaffer’s works, who can embody a conspicuous flair for theatre. The play’s inaugural moment is located in the spatiality of “the Grand Hall of Fustian House” (Shaffer 1; act 1, sc. 1: A) weathered in the mist of history and forgotten memory. It is Lettice Douffet who holds the charge as a ‘tour guide’ to awaken the past in her enticing accounts of the house. As a tour guide, she tells the story of the house and its antecedents, establishing a vantage point from where the causality of events eventually flows. It is to be seen that Shaffer’s predilection for viewing history is an act that compulsorily comes across as one of the major strands in his art of dramaturgy.

“Act I” makes an interesting foray into character development which is central to Shaffer as a playwright. The initiatory curtain-raiser is a dramatic rendezvous with Miss Lettice Douffet, a role played by the actor Maggie Smith. “She is a lady in middle life, appointed by the Preservation Trust to show people around the dreary place. She wears clothes of a slight theatricality and boldness, in contrast to her hearers, who are encased in raincoats and plastic hats and carry umbrellas”. (Shaffer 1; act 1, sc. 1: A) Shaffer himself mentions in an interview that the role for Maggie Smith was especially curated to befit the character of Lettice. He says:

Tennessee Williams is the great writer for women, but in England not so many people are writing plays for women, and I thought, “Yes, I do admire you extravagantly. I love working with you, you are a kind of marvel of our age. I would love to write you something.” And so I did, actually, set out right from the start to write a play for her, and to celebrate

her extraordinary gifts of glee and glitter and perfect timing and wit, above all, wit. Her presence is witty. (Wood)

The play is unique in its appeal as it portrays women as protagonists, it also brings to fore the centeredness and the need for women to be partakers of social claims in their understanding of a shift in society. However, it cannot be concluded that Shaffer is a feminist but *Lettice and Lovage* is an exploration to knowing women's position with certain clarity. As Taisha Abraham mentions in the chapter, "Introducing: Feminist Drama and Feminist Theatre Scholarship", "Feminist interventions in representational systems have also focused on aligned concerns such as exposing the "gaze" of the spectator" (Abraham 15). Truly, it is remarkable that Lettice and Lotte bring out that aspect of Shaffer's dramaturgy, wherein the positioning of women in the text with reference to the play, is brought within the ken of intellectual enquiry. There is a critical view shared by Madeline McMurragh-Kavanagh who states that Shaffer's "epic-styled" or tragic plays have not so much of the representational space for women, "As readers will have noticed, Peter Shaffer's best-known plays are male-dominated zones" (McMurragh-Kavanagh 124). However, the acknowledgement later seems to suggest that women find a more just representational space in his later plays:

...Suddenly, we find that women dominate Shaffer's stage, marginalizing or completely eradicating male presence; in addition, we find that these women emerge as powerful, autonomous, independent protagonists whose dominant characteristics include sharp perception and, above all, the capacity for survival. (McMurragh-Kavanagh 133)

It is interesting to note that Lettice Douffet is not just an ordinary tour guide but someone who is extremely imbued by her late mother's talent for enactment of tales, who was a theatre artist, herself. Her mother's valued inspiration is a life force that is played out in her daily professional transactions, wherein she exemplifies her talents by displaying her gift of chronicling eminent lives as if in a "performance", stylising her narrations as a tour guide, in the likeness of a stage performance, quite like her deceased mother. A talent she takes after her mother, who was someone who played historical figures as characters in theatre. It is here that Peter Shaffer identifies the more serious questions about life and its middling daily transactions that the play brings within the ken of enquiry, a showcasing that

is done conspicuously through his representational women characters. The unfolding of the plot has interesting dimensions wherein Lettice allows her audience to revisit the bronzed images of a certain past, chronicled in sixteenth century England. The initiatory discourse by Lettice on the "...Grand Staircase, constructed in fifteen sixty out of Tudor oak" (Shaffer 1; act 1, sc. 1:A) of the house, is a spatial reference that marks an awakened illustration to the past but it also enlightens us to the character of Lettice Douffet who, as a tour guide enlivens her audience with her tales replete with anecdotes from the past. Her recounting of the English history begins with a tale about a feast laid down by John Fustian in the honour of the majesty, Queen Elizabeth I. This occasion serves as a replenishment to a wanting imagination of the "tourists" who visit the otherwise old environs of the house. Peter Shaffer's positioning of the story in a house with many anecdotal references is also a way of retrieval, one that is conveyed through the medium of professional story telling. The play historicises the staid and sombre nature of the house into becoming a place that could work up a wonder as Lettice puts it, "...I am there to enlighten them" (Shaffer 12; act 1, sc. 2). What plays out in the gradual unfolding of the plot is that Lettice Douffet is seen as a tour guide, who is accused of deviating from the mainstay of "accuracy" in her renditions. It is Lotte Schoen who is from the "Preservation Trust" and is someone who contests her actions, Lotte. You are not expected to make things *out* of the house, Miss Douffet. Merely to show people round it. (Shaffer 12; act 1, sc. 2)

The play's projections of the two characters of Lettice and Lotte appear as people who represent conspicuous character traits divided in the binary of two very different individuals choosing to live their life choices. Lettice Douffet is a "tour guide" and is someone who is recognised as a "romancer" and who is fairly indulgent when it comes to telling her audience, episodes from the past. Whereas, Lotte is in the position of authority. She believes in order and decorum as far as expending her professional life is concerned. It is through the vantage point of history that the Fustian house brings two very different individuals together, standing at two very opposite ends in a marked exercise of rendering history and the way that it is conveyed in the theatricality of a story-teller like Lettice Douffet, someone who is consumed in the tales of adventure while Lotte the

other, not so. In the play, Peter Shaffer positions women's essentialness as characters who are individuated in their representational life choices. They are also however separated in the divide of the "mere" and the "fantastical".

LETTICE. I respect accuracy in recounting History when it is moving and startling. Then I would not dream of altering a single detail.

LOTTE. That is gracious of you.

LETTICE. In some cases, however I do confess I feel the need to take a hand...I discovered this need working at Fustian House this summer. It is wholly the fault of the House that I yielded to it.

LOTTE. Of the House?

LETTICE. Yes.

LOTTE. You are actually blaming the House for those grotesque narrations?

LETTICE. I am. Most definitely... Fustian House is quite simply the dullerest house in England! It is actually impossible to make interesting! Not only is its architecture in the very gloomiest style of Tudor building—nothing whatever happened in it! —over four hundred years! A Queen almost fell downstairs—but didn't. A girl did fall—not even downstairs—and survived to be honoured by the poor. How am I expected to make anything out of that?

LOTTE. You are not expected to make things out of the house, Miss Dubuffet, merely to show people round it.

LETTICE. I'm afraid I can't agree. I am there to enlighten them. That first of all.

LOTTE. Enlighten?

LETTICE. Light them up! "Enlarge! —Enliven! —Enlighten!"—That was my mother's watchword. She called them the three Es. She was a great teacher, my mother.

LOTTE. Really? At what institution?

LETTICE. The oldest and the best. The Theatre. (Shaffer 12; act 1, sc. 2)

What unfolds in the onward progression of the play is that Peter Shaffer puts characters in opposition to each other whereby the element of drama gets more

pronounced with this clash, an idea shared by Kavanagh herself. It is the lure of the fantastical that drives Lettice Douffet and this she gets from her affinity with theatre due to her mother. For Lettice Douffet, the idea of the stage-space is emblematic of a refuge, a space inhabited with the possibilities of life stories. Her opportunity to revisit the warmth of her mother's memories. She finds the present situation overcome by a ponderousness of overwhelming "mediocrity". Her sustenance comes from people's ability to entrust their instincts to the wonderful claims of theatre finding extension in her ability to "transform" her audience to a past as a tour guide. For her, the visitors to the Fustian House are an audience beckoning for a tale infused with the wonders of the past and to be enamoured with a wondrous regalement of the human spirit. On the other hand, her views are met with stiff resistance by Lotte Schoen, who works for the Preservation Trust and is someone who is held by the codified strictures of professional propriety, an idea that makes her appear quite lacklustre in comparison to Lettice Douffet. Her idea about the affairs of the house is localised to the immediacy of a professional parlance only to be reckoned with a strictural code of professional mannerisms. However, Lettice represents the dauntless passion of theatrics pronounced in her ability to show and tell beyond the ordinary. Theatre, for her is a place which abounds with stories and also stories that come to life. For Peter Shaffer too, Lettice becomes his mouthpiece. This dichotomy is a marked fault line that separates Lettice and Lotte. Lettice finds this passion transformative. For her to be in the role of a story-teller is an opportunity to dilate the constrictions of myopic imagination. She recounts that her absorption of the many stories that her mother narrated in her childhood embellished her mind with an amazing sense of wonder and an inexhaustible desire for the phantasmagorical. She mentions:

Lettice.... On a child's mind the most tremendous events were engraved as with a diamond on a windowpane... And to me, my Tourists— simply random holidaymakers in my care for twenty minutes of their lives—are my children in this respect. It is my duty to enlarge them. Enlarge—enliven—enlighten them. (Shaffer 14; act 1, sc. 2)

As a play, *Lettice and Lovage* envisages the idea towards the exposition of arts to be playing a pivotal role in human history and it is here that this case of representational art-form like theatre is pitted against the subsumed reality of

ordinary life. For Shaffer, the ordinariness of our physical reality can be countered with a desire to move beyond the drabness of the mundane and theatre could be providing that opportunity to overcome that lingering sense of stasis. For Peter Shaffer, theatre is an advancement to an awakened life spirit and a subliminal space. An extraordinary “simulacra”, a space infused with passion, a realm extraordinary. It is this idea that finds coherence through the character of Lettice Douffet, who not only tells accounts from history but passionately executes them, as some kind of performance. Michael Patterson in his book, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* mentions:

Moreover, theatre depends on transcendence. On the one hand, the actors must transcend their own individuality in order to assume the role of a stranger. On the other, the audience must escape from their own self-centred preoccupations in order to become involved with the events on stage. And this process, which occurs both in the empathetic playing of realism and in the social emphases of Brechtian theatre, is an inherently political act, for the origin of political thought is in the willingness to identify with others, to share their problems, to experience transcendence. (Patterson 2-3)

The gradual progression of the play leads to the juxtaposition of Lettice and Lotte as characters positioned in the conscious verity of an altered world. What began as a difference of opinion between the two characters, gradually coalesce into a similar response as to how the two women look at their world. A verbal tirade that ensues in “Act 2” leads to a more placated consensual understanding that their world is bereft of beauty. The initial acrimony finds a gradual tendering of heightened emotions as they both find themselves on a same page. This leads to a gradual bonhomie between the two. The last act is simply an act of reconciliation. As Lettice and Lotte together enlarge this feeling of trust and togetherness, it is for the larger interest of the humanity that their professional expanse which was once their marked territories of individuated world-views are now embracing the camaraderie of shared altruism to find meaning in life’s beauty and splendour. As Lettice mentions, Lettice. ...It transpired that we both harboured an enthusiasm for the heroic figures of the Past. People of spunk, as she would say. Especially those whose distinction earned them death at the hands of the Mere... (Shaffer 38;

act 3). Madeline McMurragh-Kavanagh further mentions, “*Lettice & Lovage* is ‘about love [...] not love in the romantic sense, but [...] love of the spirit’. In a play where women dominate Shaffer’s stage for the first time, this form of love permeates the stage action”. (qtd. in McMurragh-Kavanagh 138)

The play is a way to affirm the idea of bringing together Lettice and Lotte in a state of awareness. As individuals who stood steadfast to their opinions now begin to understand that the world they inhabit is a world that needs change. A change of opinion perhaps, where art can be a rescuer to an erstwhile human discourse that has shifted its gaze to the quotidian slow pace of the sameness of life. Towards the end they both join hands, themselves altered and having shared their own life stories with a sense of sororal affinity. Their new association is a celebration towards a renewal of hope. The play goes on to reflect the inadequacies of the present world by using the trope of story-telling but now with a difference. Lettice and Lotte decide to start their very own “... *E.N.D. Tours*—dedicated to showing people *the fifty ugliest new buildings in London!* ...” (Shaffer 52; act 3)

The bedrock of their venture springs forth from their newfound commitment to change societal perceptions that have hitherto found a submissive acquiescence to the drabness of modern life. Shaffer’s idea is to reawaken the human urge for passion and the need for aesthetics. It is this idea that finds a voice through the characters of Lettice and Lotte who reclaim the idea of showing and telling the world of its lack and it is where the art of story-telling is a way to bring people together into newer relational bonds towards our need to know more about ourselves rather than to be passively silent.

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