

EXPLORING POLITICAL CONFLICT AND METADRAMA IN CAROL CHURCHILL’S WORKS: A THEATRICAL RESPONSE TO GLOBAL CRISES

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Abstract. This article examines the representation of political conflicts in the plays of Carol Churchill, focusing on her unique approach to political theater. Churchill’s works, such as *Mad Forest*, *Far Away*, and *Seven Jewish Children*, respond to pressing political issues, including the Romanian revolution, the Bosnian conflict, and the Middle Eastern strife. Central to her political dramaturgy is the use of metadrama, which allows Churchill to intertwine artistic representation with real-world events, creating an intellectual dialogue with her audience. Drawing on Brechtian principles, Churchill's theater challenges traditional narratives by incorporating complex social and political dynamics. The article explores how Churchill’s works engage with the epistemological and ontological dimensions of theater, particularly in *Mad Forest*, which emerges from a collective creation process that involved Romanian and British participants.

Keywords: Carol Churchill, political theater, metadrama, *Mad Forest*, *Far Away*, *Seven Jewish Children*, Romanian revolution, Bosnian conflict, Middle Eastern conflict, Brechtian influence, collective creation, theatrical representation, epistemology, ontology, political dramaturgy, social change.

In Carol Churchill’s theater, political plays are seen as the author’s creative response to urgent political issues, showcasing political conflicts. For instance, her play *Mad Forest* was inspired by the 1989 Romanian revolution, *Far Away* addresses the Bosnian military conflict, and *Seven Jewish Children* explores the armed conflict in the Middle East. Churchill, as a prominent artist, approaches political theater in a highly original way. In her political works, metadrama remains a central element, allowing her to creatively interweave artistic representation with real-world events, creating an intellectual dialogue with the audience.

The term "political theater" was first used in 1929 to describe the work of E. Piskator, who believed that theater could play a major role in politics. Piskator argued that the primary role of theater was to call for the overthrow of capitalist power structures. However, unlike the renowned theater figure and theorist Bertolt Brecht, who was initially Piskator's assistant, Piskator did not write his own plays. In the first chapter, we focused on some of the characteristics of Brecht's epic theater, particularly its connection to metadrama. These features include the "reasonableness" and analytical approach of the theater; the explicit use of theatrical machinery on stage; the avoidance of emotional identification between actors and the audience; and the montage-like structure of the performance, where scenes are not connected through clear cause-and-effect relationships.

Brecht's ideas about theatrical realism were truly revolutionary for his time. He believed that realism in theater should be broad and politicized, free from aesthetic constraints, and independent of convention. Realistic theater, for Brecht, meant exposing the mechanisms that drive society's functioning, representing dominant viewpoints from the perspective of those in power, and focusing on solutions that can address humanity's most pressing problems. Epic theater, therefore, was not intended to offer straightforward evaluations or one-dimensional narratives, as seen in the agitprop theater that preceded it. For example, the main characters in Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, such as Mackie the Knife and Azdaq, are morally complex figures, blending traits of nobility with criminal behavior and cunning. This multidimensional portrayal of characters was central to Brecht's epic theater, distinguishing it from the simplistic narratives of earlier forms [1].

Brecht's innovative theatrical ideas were adopted and refined by a generation of skilled playwrights in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly those influenced by German and French Brechtian traditions. These ideas also continued to shape British theater throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Carol Churchill, a notable playwright within this Brechtian legacy, takes Brecht's theatrical principles and develops them further, creating her own distinctive forms of political dramaturgy.

D. Jernigan, a researcher who has closely analyzed Churchill's work, observes that the British playwright's political orientation is deeply connected to the epistemological and ontological layers of her diverse dramatic techniques.

According to Jernigan, Churchill's plays address the relationship between theater and reality, particularly how power structures use theater to maintain the status quo [2]. This theme of political exploration is especially evident in two of Churchill's works, *Mad Forest* (1990) and *This Is a Chair* (1997), where the epistemological and ontological issues are intricately linked with the author's use of dramatic and metadramatic techniques. To better understand the role of metadrama in Churchill's plays, it's important to recognize that the political elements in her work are not just a background theme, but are central to the artistic depiction itself.

Mad Forest is notable not only for its content but also for its unique creation process. Shortly after the 1989 Romanian revolution, Carol Churchill, along with Mark Wing-Davey—who was the director of the Central Drama School in London at the time—traveled to Bucharest with a group of student actors to gain a deeper understanding of the ongoing historical upheavals. They sought to engage directly with the people experiencing the revolution firsthand. The outcome of their research and interactions was the play *Mad Forest*.

While Churchill is undeniably the author of the play, it is an example of "collectively created" theater, or devised theater, as it was shaped by significant contributions from British and Romanian students, as well as staff from the Central School of Drama and Speech. Romanian students, many of whom had participated in the revolution, shared their personal experiences, and both groups conducted interviews with other Romanians. The play emerged from a combination of improvisation, field research, and creative workshops led by Churchill and Wing-Davey [3].

Given that the play was written shortly after the revolution, Churchill was able to incorporate fresh, first-hand accounts from revolution participants. Her approach as a "historian for the stage" [4] allowed her to convey the revolution's atmosphere with remarkable authenticity. One reviewer of the play described it as a vivid "panorama of hope, fear, and paranoia" [5]. The involvement of Romanian students was also crucial, as many of them had been directly involved in the revolution, providing invaluable insight into the events and emotions surrounding it.

The historical events that inspired *Mad Forest* were deeply dramatic. For 21 years, Romania was under the oppressive rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime. The daily life of the population was marked by hardship and

psychological strain, with persistent issues such as power shortages, a lack of basic goods, and severe restrictions on personal freedoms. Under Ceaușescu, families were strongly encouraged to have four or five children, making family planning nearly impossible. The state tightly controlled the media, enforced strict censorship, imposed travel limitations, and operated a vast system of surveillance and informants through the secret police [6].

The tension that had built up over decades of such repression eventually led to an explosive revolution in December 1989. Triggered by the violent suppression of protests in the city of Timișoara, the people rose up and, within just ten days, overthrew the totalitarian regime. The country then embarked on a difficult journey toward democratic change. However, the post-revolutionary period proved to be equally chaotic and, in some ways, even more contradictory than the Ceaușescu era.

In conclusion, Carol Churchill's political plays, such as *Mad Forest*, *Far Away*, and *Seven Jewish Children*, offer profound and multifaceted explorations of contemporary political conflicts through the lens of metadrama. Her work not only responds creatively to urgent political issues but also challenges conventional theatrical forms, creating an intellectual space for the audience to engage with the complexities of power, society, and history. Churchill's ability to incorporate real-world events into her theater—such as the Romanian revolution in *Mad Forest*—demonstrates her commitment to portraying political struggles with both emotional depth and intellectual rigor. Through her innovative use of metadrama, Churchill invites her audience to critically reflect on the ways in which theater can both represent and influence the political realities that shape our world.

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