Hannah Dobrogosz

Play Analysis

The Political vs. the Personal in *This is a Chair*

Caryl Churchill's *This is a Chair* explores the magnitude of personal and political conflicts on everyday life. The play analyzes the types of people, institutions, or situations that have the most power over individuals in a society. It pins the local against the large in a quest to determine where the ultimate truth lies. In its analysis of power structures, the play also looks at the ways in which labels and simulations command power in society. Churchill also crafts brilliant and specific dialogue that employs the use of language games to show power dynamics between characters. By exploring the impact of local and large truths and socially contrived power structures, *This is a Chair* exposes the dissonance of life in the modern world.

In *This is a Chair*, Churchill borrows components of Brechtian Epic Theatre to put the local and the large adjacent to one another. Throughout the play, eight different scene names are announced or displayed. Each scene name introduces a large political conflict or concern that is impacting or disturbing society. Then, instead of having a scene that revolves around or even references the conflict introduced, Churchill inserts exchanges between ordinary people dealing with their own personal issues. This format forces the political and the personal into a conversation with one another and begs the question, which one has greater significance?

The first scene of the play is titled "The War in Bosnia," but then shows couple Mary and Julian grappling with a change in their plans together (Churchill 41-43). Because Bosnia happens to be at war at the same time of this exchange, does that make Mary or Julian's feelings any less valid? Though Julian and Mary are experiencing a conflict in their relationship, does that make the war in Bosnia any less important? Every scene lends itself to similar questions. In the fourth

scene, should Deirdre not worry about her upcoming procedure because the harm done to animals and third world nations through the ivory trade, or should she not even bat an eye at the ivory trade because she must endure an upcoming medical procedure (Churchill 47-48)? What is the truth and what deserves attention?

Churchill's placement of political and personal problems side by side illuminates that both spheres contain truth. Just because a political conflict, such as a union strike, may reach a larger number of people, it does not mean there is a lack of truth in a single person facing individual struggles such as drug addiction or loss. There can be varying degrees of truth and they can all carry weight. Western philosophy, dating back to Plato, has used the model of a tree in analyzing the structure of knowledge and truth, but Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that truth is actually rhizomatic (Leitch 1448). A rhizome grows horizontally with peaks and valleys, showing the potential for many points of truth, unlike a tree which grows from the ground up and points to an ultimate truth. *This is a Chair* proves the rhizomatic nature of truth by placing political and personal truths together. Yes, Northern Ireland may be struggling to reach peace, but also, Muriel won't eat her dinner and her father is threatening her (Churchill 55). These are both truths and they can co-exist in the same world. Some truths are greater and some are lesser. Truth is not one singular organization but an endless, varying structure.

This is a Chair further fits the rhizomatic structure because it relies on synthesis and constant motion (Leitch, 1449). The political scene titles paired with ordinary, pedestrian scenarios synthesize the personal and political spheres and show the endlessness of both. In a growing, globalized world, there will always be political unrest, corruption, and change. While some struggles may be resolved, new issues will never stop manifesting. This does not mean that human beings will abandon their personal lives. In the same way that the political world will

always be moving, peoples' personal lives will also always be in motion. Like a rhizome, neither sphere ends. *This is a Chair* uses examples of both political and personal conflict to show that both continuously occur, whether or not both receive equal attention. Sometimes they collide and sometimes one takes precedence over the other, but both will continue to prevail.

Though Churchill clearly acknowledges the rhizomatic and multiplicitous nature of truth, she is not satisfied by how such a structure manifests in our society. She crafts scenes in the play that use ordinary people experiencing some degree of stress to highlight the flaws of humanity. How can some people be so blinded by whether or not their daughter finishes her dinner that they completely ignore the issue of censorship and how it alters the information they receive (Churchill 44)? Are people so defensive over their own family drama that they don't notice the Labour Party sliding to the right (Churchill 45-46)? Even though Churchill shows that personal problems can be considered valid, local truths, she still seems concerned that despite the large political conflicts consistently challenging society, these are the issues that receive so much attention. How can cancelling a date feel like the end of the world when other people are living in a warzone? Churchill is an inherently political writer and while she may acknowledge and depict the rhizomatic nature of truth throughout this play, she is aware of the dangers associated with this system. *This is a Chair* highlights Churchill's dissatisfaction with society's preoccupations and seeks to pull individuals out of their tunnel vision and provide them with a broader lens for taking in the world.

The final scene of the play, titled "The Impact of Capitalism on the Former Soviet Union," is Churchill's final shake to the audience. The title is announced or displayed in some fashion, then the play ends. Because Churchill is clearly skeptical of society's obsession with personal conflict, this ending is her way of inviting the audience to join in the conversation. The

title flashes, the play ends, and the audience is transformed back to a room full of individual people preoccupied by their own individual lives. In true Brechtian fashion, Churchill hopes this ending provokes audience members into wanting to change how they live their lives and view the world. She doesn't want audiences to leave the theatre still only worrying about their personal lives, but rather considering how they are a part of a larger society that needs their attention.

As Churchill explores and criticizes peoples' preoccupation with the personal sphere, she also analyzes the ways people assume roles in relationships and the power dynamics associated with those various roles. All characters in the play assume very specific roles in accordance with who they are communicating with. Some, Muriel's parents for instance, do not even have names beyond their roles and are merely labeled "Father" and "Mother." In assuming roles such as parent, brother, friend, or lover, the characters of the play become simulations of what they perceive as the proper way to portray said roles.

Sociologist Jean Baudrillard was interested in the process of simulating roles and developed the term "simulacra" to define the pretend representations that people have assigned to concepts. In simulacra, things lose their reality because they are replaced by their name and peoples' perceptions and knowledge (Leitch 1555). Baudrillard argues that signs have completely destroyed anything outside of themselves and created an inauthentic world (Leitch 1555). The roles that people assume in society and in interpersonal relationships are all just simulacra of what is or was considered the proper way to perform.

Father and Mother in the second and sixth scene of *This is a Chair* are reduced to their signs and are limited by the perceived duties of their roles. Father imitates what it means to have power by threatening, "Muriel, if you don't eat your dinner you know what's going to happen to

you" (Churchill 44, 55). He lives out a simulation of his fatherly role, but he is also simulating what it means to be a man and what it means to have power. Churchill does not assign this character a name because he is not a person but rather a simulation of his role. Mother, who only repeats the same line of dialogue, is also stripped of her humanity and reduced to her role. She imitates what it means to be a mother and what it means to be a wife. She is stuck repeating her single line, "Yes, eat up, Muriel" (Churchill 44, 55), which encourages her daughter without challenging her husband. She does not challenge the pre-determined hierarchy established by these roles and instead assumes her authority over Muriel while accepting her inferiority to her husband.

Other characters throughout the play also imitate tropes in their role fulfillment. In the third scene, Ted and John simulate what it means to be concerned brothers wanting to protect their sister (Churchill 45-46). Polly imitates the role of the concerned friend when discussing Deirdre's procedure (Churchill 47). Eric and Maddy imitate concerned citizens when they think they hear a bomb, though their concern does not run so deep that it keeps them from going to bed. These simulations prove the dissonance of the modern world. People have devolved into role-filling machines and their only hope of survival is to keep imitating. Baudrillard's lens is effective in analyzing this play because it exposes the disconnect that plagues people in relationships and across society. It highlights the danger of signs and their ability to dictate lives.

Simulations and role-fulfillment are connected to power and the ways in which individuals strive to claim power in society. Some roles in society are deemed inherently more powerful than others, while others that exist on a more even playing-field must find other ways to gain and establish power. *This is a Chair* shows the ways in which language and knowledge can lead to power struggles. Jean-Francois Lyotard builds off of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept

of language games and how all communication can be seen as negotiations of power. When Father commands Muriel, he is fulfilling his role as an authority figure while also using his language to manipulate Muriel. He uses multiple tactics in his language game, bargaining, flattering, and threatening, as different modes of dominating her (Churchill 44, 55). On page 10 of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard states that to speak is to fight, so when Muriel remains silent throughout her father's coaxing, she is submitting. Her silence shows how she fulfills the role of "child" to her father and is destroyed by her powerlessness. She is doomed by her role, and therefore there is no language that can put her at an even fight against her father.

Characters such as Julian and Mary fulfill roles of a more equal caliber, therefore much of their power struggle revolves around knowledge and language. Mary enters the scene with knowledge that Julian does not have, which, according to Lyotard, puts Mary in a position of power over Julian. As Mary begins to try and relay her knowledge to Julian, he attempts to undercut it with his language. She says, "I've made a stupid mistake," to which Julian replies, "Never mind," in an attempt to control the situation. Then, when Mary shares her knowledge that she has double-booked herself for the afternoon, Julian again tries to stifle her with his language by uttering, "So you have to make a phonecall or…?" (Churchill 41). Then, over the next two pages, Julian says, "Don't worry" three separate times, settling into his loss. Here, Churchill is illuminating how modern relationships can be damaged by power discrepancies.

Power and knowledge can be politically and socially destructive as well. Lyotard argues that knowledge is power and relates this to the government. On page 9 he says, "In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government." *This is a Chair* was written as the world was becoming increasingly globalized and digitized, so people thought they were becoming more knowledgeable citizens, but what do the words "Hong Kong,"

"Genetic Engineering," or "The War in Bosnia" really mean to people not directly experiencing these things? The government and the media pretend to be empowering citizens by keeping them informed and presenting them with simulacra of these political issues, when in reality, people are more clueless and helpless than ever. By awarding citizens tidbits of knowledge, the government is handing over false power that only makes citizens more powerless.

In scene six, Eric and Maddy perfectly embody the helplessness of modern citizens. When they hear a loud explosion-like sound, they speculate that it could be a bomb because they have compiled their own knowledge of what a bombing may sound like, and they rely on this knowledge to try and draw a conclusion. Then, they talk themselves out of their conclusion with other tidbits of knowledge they've accumulated because they don't know enough to confidently say the sound was a bomb (Churchill 56-57). Truth becomes unreachable and instead of taking any course of action, Eric and Maddy go to bed. In this case, knowing a little is almost as dangerous as knowing nothing. Entities with power that filter and distribute knowledge on their own terms render everyone beneath them helpless. Citizens that look to the media and government for answers will always live in uncertainly and fear because they are receiving pieces of filtered knowledge.

This is a Chair illuminates the frustration of life in the post-modern era. It captures Churchill's distaste for role fulfillment and simulacra and contains a call to action for audiences to disrupt the current cycle and become active catalysts of change. As Churchill explores rhizomatic truth, she outlines the dangers of avoiding the bigger picture and collapsing into chaos. *This is a Chair* scrutinizes the selfishness and blindness of humanity and pushes for a society interested in enacting change rather than replicating the past.

Works Cited

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