# BLAKE MORRISON IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRICAL SCENE

Valter Henrique de Castro Fritsch
*Universidade Federal do Rio Grande*

**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses issues related to the various aesthetics that compose contemporary British dramaturgy. I point to features that divide the way theatre is viewed today in at least two aesthetic strands - one allied with more traditional patterns of writing for the theatre that derives from the Aristotelian model, and another that aims to cause a break with dramatic action, characters and all that constitutes the most classic view of dramatic text. This article also aims to place the poet and playwright Blake Morrison in the panorama of contemporary British theatre and show how the author fits into the many varying aspects of contemporary dramaturgy.

**KEYWORDS:** Contemporary British Theatre; Blake Morrison; Imagery Studies; Contemporary Dramaturgy

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo discute questões relacionadas às diferentes estéticas que compõe a dramaturgia contemporânea britânica. Aponto características que dividem a forma como o teatro é encarado hoje em pelo menos duas vertentes estéticas – uma aliada a padrões mais tradicionais da escrita para o teatro que deriva do modelo Aristotélico e outra que visa causar uma ruptura com a ação dramática, personagens e tudo que constitui a visão mais clássica de texto dramático. Ainda é do interesse deste artigo localizar o poeta e dramaturgo Blake Morrison no panorama do teatro britânico contemporâneo e de que forma o autor se enquadra em vertentes tão distintas da dramaturgia contemporânea.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Teatro Britânico Contemporâneo; Blake Morrison; Estudos do Imaginário; Dramaturgia Contemporânea

> *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.*
>
> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

Drama has always been a complex form 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 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. (MAST, 1982, p. 287.)

One of the major characteristics of the British drama is its eccentricity. There is a marked resistance of British theatre to incorporate post dramatic theatre and other artistic tendencies that are present, for instance, in French and German contemporary theatre. To the English playwright Howard Brenton (2009), a play is as tight a form as the eighteen-century sonata. Brenton defines a theatrical text as an event that generally lasts two or three hours, is performed in chunks, and consists of a group of people presenting an enacted story to another group of people sitting in front of 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 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 channel and moving to France. In this paper, I will highlight some features of the contemporary British drama and in which ways the poet and playwright Blake Morrison is placed in the contemporary scene.

In the epigraph that opens this paper, Peter Brook 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 scenarios, 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 traditional sophisticated American and European theatre traditions have accessories that, ultimately, could be suppressed. Heavy machinery and scenarios, 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.

As an art of encounter, theatre is the place (physical or imaginary) where people from different cultures and with different backgrounds can meet and share the same artistic event (although, precisely for having different backgrounds, none shares the same artistic experience). Nevertheless, it is very difficult to define what this art precisely is, because it is an amalgam of what is being performed on the stage and what is conceived on the paper, by the playwright or by the person, or group of persons, who decide what the play is. In other words, one of the most difficult tasks for those who adventure in the field of theatre studies is to define what a play is. Is it the text written on the page to be performed by actors, or is it the performance itself? Does it belong in literary studies or in performance theory and research? One of the most challenging problems in theatre theory is to define, in a satisfactory way, the nature of drama, because it seems to belong in both areas. In this paper, I aim to bring this question to the forefront and analyse its aspects, in an attempt to find an adequate way to approach British Drama, that is at the heart of this paper.

I propose that this text be seen as a patchwork, this is because I am engaged in combining in it both my background as a researcher of literature and my experience as an actor and director.

A patchwork may be described as an organized craft composed of different colours and fabrics that create a piece that is unique. The art of drama does the same by collecting pieces of life to create a character, to conceive a plot or to present an image. The processes involved in the craft of reading a play, however, demand more than just putting pieces together. In a certain way, the dramatic genre is a challenge that defies the reader to understand a text to which no specific key is provided – the key is outside it. It demands that one understands that it is a text written to be performed on the stage, so that its final destination is not the reader, but the audience.

Anne Ubersfeld, in her widely acclaimed book *Reading Theatre*, presents an important theoretical contribution to the study of the dramatic genre, whether 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 centred on the role of the theatrical sign in the field of semiotics. Ubersfeld 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. (UBERSFELD, 1999, p.2)

From the premise that theatre is not meant primarily to be read, Anne Ubersfeld argues for 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 media in order to save the performance, it is a consensus that it does not reach the same level of artistic value as the live performance. Ubersfeld 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 refers to the inadequacy of the traditional methods in academic studies, once 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 the present day, 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 argues for the position that each aspect of a theatrical performance has its own dramaturgy. It is the meeting of all these dramaturgies that creates a theatrical event. So, in Barba's 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 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, 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 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 spectators can find their place"(UBERSFELD, 1999, p.8). 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 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. (UBERSFELD, 1999, p.16)

Aristotle seems to solve that matter in his *Poetics*, when he affirms that although the text is meant to be performed, it has to be just as capable to read as any kind of poem - whether tragedy, comedy, epic or poetry (ARISTOTLE, 2000, p.62). 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 double text/performance, 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.

The main point to be considered in my reading of Morrison's works is the study of the symbolical patterns revealed by images in the plays. So, I believe it is important to clarify what I mean when I refer to an analysis of the symbolical patterns, because it is different from the approach Ubersfeld proposes from the perspective of semiotics. According to Lévi-Strauss, the mythical image has the same origin of music, both are born inside language, (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1997, p. 23). Nevertheless, they refer differently towards the world – music centres on the dimension of sonority, and myth on the dimension of meaning. Lévi-Strauss remarks that both sound and meaning find themselves profoundly bound to the structure of language. Akin to the contents of a song, that can be divided into minor parts, as are the musical notes, the mythical narratives can also be divided into segment parts that Lévi-Strauss calls mythemes. The mytheme is the essential part of the myth, the one that is bound to creation through the arrangement with other different mythemes, as we can do when composing different songs with the same notes arranged in a different disposition. Mythemes can awaken in man some feelings that are not rationally known by him, archetypical contents that reveal something apparently unknown. In the kind of analysis we are performing, it is important to examine which feelings are these, if these mythemes can be considered as sentences, or if it is possible to divide them in minor parts.

Gilbert Durand (1999) also poses such questions in order to understand the minor parts of mythemes, or the minor parts of a symbolical or fictitious narrative. His studies rely on signs, symbols, icons, archetypes, figures, images and idols. Durand explores such modalities in the book *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, where he devises some schemes that organize the images generated by man in any culture. Studies on the symbolical images have improved a lot after Durand. In his view, the study of images depends on the cultural and symbolical patterns of a determinate society rather than on its language. Still, Durand also

highlights the importance of Jungian studies about the unconscious, which have helped him

devise his structural division of the archetypical images produced by symbolical constructs:

> The study of the meaning of images entails, however, a second consequence. By adopting this approach one inverts the prevailing habits of classical psychology which were either to model the imagination on the descriptive development of thought, or to study the imagination from the perspective of "rectified" logical thought. Now in the case of the imaginary, the rejection of the first Saussurean principle of the arbitrariness of the sign entails the rejection of the second principle which is that of the "linearity of the signifier". The symbol, not being of a linguistic nature, does not develop uni-dimensionally. Therefore the motivations which organize do not form long chains of reasons – in fact they do not form any "chain" at all. Linear explanation such as that given by logical deduction or introspective narration is not adequate for the study of symbolic motivations. (DURAND, 1999, p. 33)

Durand devises a scheme of archetypical images, arranged inside what he calls the order

of the imaginary. To him, there are images widespread around the globe that provoke similar

narratives, or even that are organized inside similar schemes that reveal their archetypical roots.

Among those archetypes we have the images of the warrior maiden, of the lovers who are not

allowed to be together, of enemy brothers. Those images are widespread in the world through

the different legends, myths, performances and literature of different cultures. Such archetypes

were previously studied and explored by Carl Gustav Jung, whose theories inspired Durand.

To Jung, the term archetype "applies only indirectly to the collective representations,

since it designates only those psychic contents which have not yet been submitted to conscious

elaboration and are therefore an immediate datum of psychic experience" (JUNG, 1990, p.5).

To Jung, the archetype is more than just an archaic image shared among diverse cultures. It is

a bridge that links the two sides of human conscience. It is at this point that Durand's theory

meets the Jungian view of images. Both consider the twofold aspect in consciousness. One side

relates to the direct access we have to the contents of the world, in which we feel as if we

understand the processes of the world; it is presented to us as a perception or a feeling. The

other instance is the indirect one, in which for some reason the content of the world cannot present itself to our conscious mind, so it is changed into images elaborated inside archetypical structures. It is easier to provide an exemplification to this than to explain it: if you ask someone to imagine a tree, a dog, or a house, taking into account the differences in individual experience, the persons will imagine a tree, a dog or a house (probably different trees, dogs and houses). However, if you ask people to imagine love, or death, the object is an abstraction, so the person has to provide an image through his/her indirect consciousness. The object being absent, it is represented by an image, and this is what Jung and Durand call a symbolical pattern.

So, symbolical imagination belongs in the world of indirect consciousness and is inhabited by archetypical and symbolical patterns. The symbol is, in this sense, a way to represent abstract things or things that are difficult to perceive, such as hatred, passion, or the soul. Durand points that the symbol is arbitrary, as it is not directed by the rules of the sign. Although the signifier is always presented in the concrete level, the signified is open to as many interpretations as one is able to provide. The element fire, for example, has a signifier that is easy to apprehend, but it may symbolize different things, in different circumstances. Therefore, the way I choose to heal the fracture provoked by the text-performance opposition is to embrace the studies of the symbolical images in order to understand and to stimulate the potentialities of the dramatic text. I choose to perform a reading of theatre in the intersection proposed by Ubersfeld, but with my focus on the symbolical patterns that can be understood both in the text on the page or in the possibilities of performance on the stage of Morrison's works and his place in contemporary British Drama.

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 of 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[1]. 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, Blake Morrison's works are predominantly what we usually 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* (and is also the main subject of my dissertation).

---

[1]English PEN is the founding centre of a worldwide writers' association with 145 centres in more than 100 countries. It facilitates and promotes translation into English of published work in foreign languages they consider to be of outstanding literary merit.

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*. On a very cold day – at least for me – I got to his office very early so as not to lose my schedule. The day I arrived, first thing you saw on entering the University campus was a very beautiful garden of daffodils, which seemed to be a welcome. Daffodils are the flowers associated with the poet Oliver Goldsmith, who lends his name to the college. The flower holds a very strong signification in the Studies of the Imaginary – to which I have dedicated most of my academic life to study. Daffodils are precisely the flowers Charlotte Brontë, as a character in Morrison's play, talks about in her opening lines.

> **Charlotte:** We'd barely arrived when she fell ill. We came in a dog chart with two wagons full of furniture trailing behind. There were daffodils in the garden and white clouds over the moor. We were all excited. We'd no idea what was coming. (MORRISON, 2011, p.5)

I was thrilled when I arrived at Goldsmiths and saw so many daffodils, whose symbolic meaning can be associated with new beginnings and rebirths. It meant a new beginning for the Brontë family, as well and it was definitely a new beginning for me. After three years studying Blake Morrison's plays, I was going to meet him and have a chat with him. Among the many things we discussed that day, he told me how he came to the idea of writing *We Are Three Sisters*. The critic Susannah Clapp, who was familiar with his other adaptations for the theatre company Northern Broadsides, advised him to go for Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. She thought that approximating that work to the life of the Brontës would make another good adaptation. Morrison remarked that Susannah Clapp was approaching the subject as a Chekhovian, not a Brontëite. She was thinking simply of the fact that Chekhov's play has three sisters and a wayward brother, and imagined that something could be made out of that.

My first contact with Chekhov's *Three Sisters* took place when I was studying at TEPA[2] in 2010, taking a course about different styles of acting with two very important names from Porto Alegre theatrical scene – Daniela Carmona and Luís Paulo Vasconcelos. After studying Greek Tragedy, *Commedia dell'Arte*, and Shakespeare, we came to Realism[3] and Chekhov's plays. As I read *Three Sisters*, I immediately thought of the Brontës, and wondered whether that was a coincidence or Chekhov knew about Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell's lives. I commented on this issue with my adviser – Professor Sandra Maggio – and she suggested that I developed the idea and wrote an essay about that. I never wrote the essay, and ended up forgetting about the idea, until I found Morrison's play. These coincidences involving the movements in the process of research remind me of Jung's reference to synchronicity, when he says that

> The conceptual relationship of minds, defined by the relationship between ideas, is intricately structured in its own logical way and gives rise to relationships which have nothing to do with causal relationships in which a cause precedes an effect. Instead, causal relationships are understood as simultaneous — that is, the cause and effect occur at the same time." (JUNG, 2012, p.18)

Synchronicity or not, when I looked at the daffodils in the park I felt I was bound to this research in a symbolic way. 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. 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

---

[2]*Teatro Escola de Porto Alegre* is a Drama School located in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, in Brazil.

[3] For the purposes of this paper, Realism is meant to refer to Theatrical Realism. Theatrical Realism was a general movement that began in the 19th-century theatre, around the 1870s, and remained present through much of the 20th century. It developed a set of dramatic and theatrical conventions with the aim of bringing a greater fidelity of real life to texts and performances. It was founded by Constantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre.

> 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. That is the focus of discussion in this section. My questions are: 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 fulfills a certain amount of features that we recognize as contemporary in the arts of performance? What is the role of Morrison's play in the contemporary theatrical scene?

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 Becket- "We're not beginning to... to... mean something?" (BECKET, 2003, p. 24). 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 very difficult to recognize as theatre at all. Hamm's question reveals the joy and the horror of being exposed. Beckett plays with such lines by showing that characters have to take the risk of being read and interpreted by others. Beckett 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 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 the stage. Contemporary theatre seems to maintain such features, which demand from the readers/audience an active role, 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 fifties.

In the present scene, we have at least two models, each of which, represents 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 of the past, in a constant movement of killing and resurrecting the *avant-guard* movements from the fifties. We see exponents of this kind of theatre in names such as Sarah Kane, Heiner Müller and Valère Novarina, 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 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, 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. (RYNGAERT, 2013, p.8)

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 helped 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, 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, p.156). Artaud looked forward to this theatre of cruelty, the void exposed by which 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 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 his understanding of the play he has 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 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. (SARRAZAC, 2012, p. 64)[4]

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

---

[4] In English: In theatre, 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. (SARRAZAC, 2012, p. 64). ( My translation.)

era a confissão de um fracasso, uma perda ou uma insuficiência na afirmação de uma escolha estética. (SARRAZAC, 2012, p.89) [5]

However, all these features contemplated by this second model of the contemporary theatrical panorama seem not to be the focus of Blake Morrison when he writes *We Are Three Sisters*. 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 in 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 I presented above. I recall a situation that could exemplify the preference of British people for the traditional theatre form. I was once in a conference of ABRAPUI[6], and after my presentation about contemporary theatre I had a chat with Professor Peter James Harris, a British man, now living 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 and his Theatre Anthropology. Professor Harris discouraged me from such studies by claiming they were just a trend from the sixties, and that if one is engaged in a serious study of 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 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

---

[5]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. (SARRAZAC, 2012, p.89) (My translation.)

[6] Associação Brasileira de Professores Universitários de Inglês.

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. (LANE, 2010, p. 16)

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 of experiencing theatricality. It seems that the choice of 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 to be 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 & 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. 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, comes from British tradition. We must have in mind that the expression in English to watch a Shakespearean play 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 19th 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 center 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 & MORRISON, 2015)

Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I considered as contemporary all the plays that are written in the present days, and not only those ones that have innovative features. Especially because the focus is a British author and, as I suggested, British theatre can be approached in multiple ways as to the matter of innovation of form and structure clashing with 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 that British audiences are more comfortable with. By discussing the act of reading theatre we are carried to the features of contemporary drama and the way contemporary

playwrights and theatrical directors engage themselves in their artistic works. All the discussion about what is or what is not contemporary trespasses on many philosophical issues and social and aesthetic postures. Nowadays, it is possible to describe at least two different models of dramaturgy - one being the traditional model and the other a deconstruction of what people are used to thinking of as theatre. The changing landscape of contemporary theatre and performance, the roles, functions and working conditions for playwrights are being redefined in a process of construction, destruction and reconstruction of paradigms. There seems to be an urge of dramaturgical practitioners to forge new relationships between stage and audience while challenging the binary opposition between reality and fiction. The production of meanings in this present panorama deals with the potentialities of the imaginary and the ways to access it through the contemplation of otherness. That is the precise place of drama, this meeting point where audience, actors, director and playwrights get together to contemplate, dialogue and decode life.

I am sure Morrison conquered his place in contemporary dramaturgy with plays that bring foward many features of the present aesthetic demands of drama disguised by an apparently 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. He transforms real persons in fictional characters with a powerful capacity of imagination, causing what we define as real and make-believe to be stretched, creating a remarkable set of passages, speeches and images.

## REFERENCES

ARISTOTLE. **Poetics.** Translated by James Hutton. New York: Norton Edition, 2000. 144 p.

ARTAUD, Antonin. **The Theatre and its Double.** Translated by Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Trafalgar Square, 1998. 174p.

BARBA, E. **Teatro – Solidão, Ofício, Revolta**. Translated by Patrícia Furtado de Mendonça. Brasília: Dulcina Editora, 2010. 400p.

BARKER, J. **The Brontës: Wild Genius on the Moors, The Story of a Literary Family**. New York: Pegasus, 2012. 1152 p.

BECKETT, S. **Endgame & Act Without Words** .New York: Grove Press, 2003. 112p.

BROOK, P. **The Empty Space.** New York: Touchstone, 1996. 144p.

BROWN, R. & MORRISON, B. The Brontës and Chekhov in Blake Morrison's We Are Three Sisters. **Brontë Studies**, Vol. 39 N° 1, Haworth: Brontë Society, January 2014, 30-39.

BUSE, P. **Drama + Theory – Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama.** New York: Manchester University Press, 2001. 204 p.

CHEKHOV, A. **Selected Plays – A Norton Critical Edition.** Edited and translated by Laurence Senelick. New York: Norton Edition, 2005. 720p.

DURAND, Gilbert. **The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary.** Translated by Margaret Sankey &Judith Hatten. Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999. 392p.

EDGAR, David. **How Plays Work**. London: Nick Hern Books, 2012. 144p.

FRITSCH, V. H. C. & MORRISON, B. **Interview with Morrison on *We Are Three Sisters***. London/Porto Alegre: 2015. 127p.

JUNG, Carl Gustav. **Synchronicity.** Princenton: Princenton University Press, 2012. 145 p.

JUNG, Carl Gustav. **The Psychology of the Transference.** New York: Princeton/ Bollingen Printing, 1992. 280p.

LANE, D. **Contemporary British Drama.** Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 240p.

LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. **Anthropologie Structurale**. Paris: Pocket, 1997. 386p.

MORRISON, B. **And When Did You Last See Your Father?** London: Granta Books, 1993. 224p.

MORRISON, B. **We Are Three Sisters.** London: Nick Hern Books, 2011. 105p.

PEACOCK, R. **A Arte do Drama.** Translated by Barbara Heliodora. São Paulo: Realizações Editora, 2011. 320p.

RYNGAERT, J. P. **Ler o Teatro Contemporâneo.** Translated by Andréa Stahel M. da Silva. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2013. 272 p.

SARRAZAC, Jean-Pierre. **Léxico do Drama Moderno e Contemporâneo.** Translated by André Telles. São Paulo: CosacNaify, 2012. 240p.

UBERSFELD, A. **Reading Theatre**. Translated by Frank Collins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 256 p.