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A METATHEATRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY COMIC POTENTIAL BY ALAN AYCKBOURN

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Abstract

Comic Potential play by Alan Ayckbourn revolves around a futuristic world where androids are used in television programming. This study explores Comic Potential as a metatheatrical play through the analysis of the play using different conventions of metatheatre such as self referentiality, breaking the fourth wall, the play within the play in detail and emphasizing the constructed nature of the play. It focuses on how these elements contribute to the overall meaning, themes and impact of the play. Ayckbourn by utilizing these devices blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Highlighting the artificiality of the television industry and the performances within it, the play prompts the audience to question the nature of theatre itself and its relation to reality. The paper also endeavors to explore the boundaries between humans and humanoid robots and raises thought-provoking questions about the nature of humanity. The influence of Bertolt Brecht's 'epic theatre' as opposed to the Aristotelian theatre will be touched upon.

Keywords: Play-within-the-play, Breaking the fourth wall, Illusion and Reality, Artificial Intelligence, Alienation Effect

Introduction

Alan Ayckbourn, a highly celebrated playwright has established himself as a master of comedy and social commentary through his prolific body of work. Renowned for his ability to seamlessly blend humour with profound insights of human condition, Ayckbourn has become one of the most influential and widely performed playwrights of his generation. His works often explore themes of marital dysfunction, complexities of modern life, infidelity and human relationships. His play Comic Potential is a science fiction comedy published in the year 1998. The main characters of the play are Adam Trainsmith (a young writer), Chandler Tate (Chance, director), Prim Spring(programmer), Lester Trainsmith (Adam's uncle), Turkey (sex worker), Carla Pepperbloom (Regional director), Trudi Floote (technician), JCF 31333(Jacie Triplethree, an android actress). Comic Potential differs from other well-known plays of Ayckbourn in several ways such as, it is set in near futuristic world where the use of humanoid robots called 'actoids' have become common in television industry, while most of his other works are set in contemporary times. This play delves into the realm of science fiction and employs metatheatrical devices. These distinctive elements contribute to the play's unique voice and qualify it to stand out from Ayckbourn's other plays. Some of his well-known plays are Absurd Person Singular, A Small Family Business, Woman in Mind, The Norman Conquests etc.,

Metatheatre

The term Metatheatre was first formulated by Lionel Abel in 1963. He defined metatheatre as “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized” (Abel 63). It is a literary technique where a work of literature draws attention to its own nature as a theatrical or literary creation. Abel conceived metatheatre as manifesting both comedy and tragedy, where the audience can laugh at the characters while feeling sympathetic concurrently. It is an artistic way to examine the interaction between illusion and reality. It elicits the audience to examine the circumstances where it becomes complicated to distinguish life from art and illusion and reality. By subverting theatrical conventions, metatheatre is a powerful tool to critique societal norms, conventions, power structures and cultural values. Richard Hornby identified five types of metatheatre namely, the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, literary and real-life reference and self-reference.

Play-within-the-play

Play-within-the-play refers to the theatrical technique where a play or performance is embedded within the larger context of another play. It is employed in an array of ways by markedly differing writers with different motives. It is such a complex dramatic convention that it cannot be easily defined like the other techniques. Some of the commonly observed plays within the play are as follows. One kind of example is where the actors in play within the play are entirely disconnected from the other characters of the drama and the play performed by them seems to have no clear connection to the main action. There is a fairly clear-cut division between the two levels of acting. This is a simple kind of play within the play which is different from the main play in tone and character. It is chiefly used to provide some comic relief after some serious scenes. For Example, the plays, “Sir Thomas More” and “The Maid’s Tragedy”. Another type of play within the play is one performed by characters from the main play itself. It allows the dramatist to make the association between the two planes of dramatic action far more alluring and nuanced. This device is more recurrent than the one first mentioned. The inner play is deftly integrated into the context of main play. It has thematic and moral significance. It provides the spectators a peek into the themes of the main play. Ex, A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In another type of play-within-the-play, the demarcation line between the main and inserted play is blurred. This is a complex use of this device, resulting in shifts of identities and deliberate confusion of the spectators (both on stage and in the theatre). The spectators may wonder whether the characters are still acting their parts or speaking in person. In some of the plays this device becomes so complex such as in Massinger’s The Roman Actor where there are two inserted plays. First play is staged to drive home a moral effect whereas the second one is used to demonstrate how a play can be mistaken for reality. In plays like The Spanish Tragedy and Women Beware Women the opposite technique is employed where the reality is mistaken for a play. In most of the plays, the outer play is the main play and the inner play issues only secondary observations on it which is usually confined to one or two scenes. The inner play is not presented for its own sake but for its deeper significance. This also establishes a certain barrier between the audience in theatre and the play, because the spectators in theatre see those characters only through the eyes of the spectators on stage. The next type of play within the play is to present the actors without disguise before the beginning of the actual play, to show the preparations for the performance and thus to emphasize its illusionary nature. The Downfall and Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon, makes very effective use of this device. The play does not pose to represent any realism but is bluntly depicted as a piece of make-believe and hence disillusioning the audience. It is an effective way of playing with dramatic conventions.

Plays within the play are all not metatheatrical. In Richard Hornby’s viewpoint, meta theatricality, “requires that the outer play has characters and plot; that these in turn must acknowledge the existence of inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance” (Hornby 35). Hornby posits that there are two general kinds of play within a play, the inset type and the framed type. In the inset type, the inner play is secondary and the outer play is primary. It is the other way around for framed type. The degree of association between the inner and outer play is variable in both these types.

In Comic Potential, the plays-within-the-play can be described metatheatrical because they fall in line with what Hornby posits. There are two clearly discernible layers of performance. The outer main play focuses on the story of a young aspiring writer named Adam Trainsmith who wants to produce a good comic story. In the course of materializing that script, he falls in love with Tracie Triplethree, an android actress and elopes with her. The confusions that ensue as a result of their forbidden romance embodies the rest of the story. There are two plays within the play in Comic Potential. The first one is the soap opera Chandler is directing in the television studio with the characters namely a doctor, a young man, nurse (played by Tracie)

and mother. They are all actoids. It involves a highly dramatic scene of a son undergoing a surgery and his mother crying uncontrollably. The action of this play within the play is on and off as it is interrupted by the happenings of the outer main play. The action of this inner play never attains completion. The second play within the play occurs in Act 1 Scene 3 when Adam, Chance and his technical team rehearse Adam's script with the characters, namely, Tracie playing herself, doctor and mother from the previous inner plays playing the role of farmer and his wife respectively. Once again, the action of the inner play is hindered by the narrative of the outer play when Mr. Trainsmith arrives with Carla to scrutinize whether the script Adam has proposed is worthy of producing. Owing to time crunch Adam is asked to narrate the plot rather than endeavor to enact it. So, he describes the plot of the scene which involves Jacie, an actoid playing an actoid. She is brand new and transported to the studio in a lorry. The lorry skids owing to heavy snowfall and Jacie falls out of the lorry. The farmer carries the badly hurt Jacie home and his family do not realize that she is an actoid and not a human. They raise her as their own daughter. She becomes very popular in a short span of time and local people elect her as the mayor. But soon she is exposed as an actoid and people furiously hurl stones at her and drive her out. They leave her by the side of the road on snow once again. After he finishes narrating, the action of the inner play resumes. The crew enact the scene from the script, the plot of which Adam was narrating, in front of Mr. Trainsmith to give him a glimpse into the characters and the roles they are playing. The outer play characters are aware of the existence of the inner play. The characters of the inner plays are conscious of the fact that they are involved in a performance. The two layers of performance are sharply distinguishable from one another and this proves the point that the plays within the play in *Comic Potential* are both meta theatrical. The inner plays divulge significant details concerning the themes such as impediments and hardships involved in making a soap opera a success, exploration of artificial intelligence (AI), its capabilities, limitations and AI's relationship to humanity, satire of the formulaic nature of television, media and the commodification of emotions. However, what they reveal are only subordinate to what the main play reveals. Hence, they are inset type plays within the play. Plays within the play elicit the characters to assume the roles of the spectators and critically comment on the stereotypes. This in turn benefits the audience in theatre to receive multifaceted perspectives on the issues in question.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

In theatre, the fourth wall refers to the imaginary boundary that separates the stage or performance space from the audience. It is a convention that treats the stage as a world unto itself, where the characters exist and events unfold without any acknowledgement with the viewers. Breaking the fourth wall is a central aspect of the meta-theatrical elements. It involves drawing attention to the performance techniques, dramatic and narrative structure of the play. In *Comic Potential* so many characters intentionally break the fourth wall to address the audience and comment on the events and characters on stage. For instance, the play revolves around actoids, artificial actors, programmed to perform in a specific way. Chance, Prim, Trudi fret over the technical fault of one of the actoids in the soap opera they are shooting. Chance keeps commenting and gives feedback on the performances of the characters when they don't deliver their dialogues and gestures with precision. This act on his part directly calls attention to the theatricality of the drama. Chance takes a dig at the relentless pursuit of high ratings in television. This exposes the commercialized and superficial nature of television, highlighting the artificiality that often lies beneath its glossy exterior. He questions the idea that success is solely determined by viewership numbers and sheds light on the artificial manipulation of emotions and storylines to cater to the audience's preferences highlighting the audience's willingness to embrace unreal portrayals. For instance, Chance educates Jacie about some of the knacks of pulling off a good comedy. He gives her an example of a scene which involves Jacie picking up a hot kettle which burns her hand. To make a good comedy out of this scene, Tracie after getting hurt by the kettle should either react big or react small. The one thing she should avoid is giving a genuine expression of the pain. Chance warns her that nothing would bore the audience as much as bringing in genuine emotions. One more instance is where he directs these lines with contempt at the audience, "Who cares? Show them an old episode, they'll never know. When's that going to bother our viewers? They're all subnormal, anyway..." (Ayckbourn 5).

This biting remark serves as a call for the audience to be more discerning and demand higher quality programs. It encourages them to question their viewing choices. He also critiques their role in perpetuating the artificiality of television. Another example of the fourth wall getting crumbled is when Adam teaches well known comic devices to Jacie such as 'double take' and 'custard pie'. By directly explicating the way comic scenes are achieved on television, Adam breaks the fourth wall. Carla speaks extensively about what a highly competent field television is and how an aspiring writer like Adam has to face so many hardships before getting his script approved. Jacie who serves as a character in the play within the play as well as the

main play is very well aware of the fictionality of her character in the play. All these instances are examples of the technique of breaking the fourth wall at its best. This technique enhances audience engagement, deepens the emotional impact of the performance and offers unique perspectives on the relationship between reality and fiction.

Illusion and Reality

In meta theatre, the tension between reality and illusion is a recurring theme that allows for a deeper exploration of the nature of truth and fiction. Illusion in meta theatre refers to the fictional world created within the play. It is the realm of make-believe, where some actors portray characters and events and the rest of other characters play the role of audience on stage. The theatre audience suspend their disbelief to engage with the story. This illusion is an essential aspect of theatre, as it allows the audience to immerse themselves in the fictional narrative and experience an emotional connection with the characters and the journey. However, meta theatre also highlights the constructed nature of this illusion, inviting the audience to question its authenticity. This is achieved through the techniques of self-referentiality, breaking the fourth wall and direct address to the audience. The audience is constantly reminded that they are watching a theatrical production, with scenes constantly interrupted by backstage crew members or director's interventions. By juxtaposing illusion and reality, meta theatre also invites the audience to question their own perceptions and the narratives they encounter. It keeps them on the toes and actively involved in the theatrical experience. *Comic Potential* play is set in a television studio where actors are portraying both real-life characters and fictional characters. The studio, with its cameras and props, represents the illusion of the television world, while the real-life characters and their emotions operate within the realm of reality. Throughout Act 1 of the play, reality and illusion are juxtaposed by placing side by side the plays within the play and the outer play. For instance, Chandler keeps orchestrating the performance of the actoids through the programmers. In the course of direction, he lashes out at Prim, "Hell, this is depressing. Give the mother more tears, more tears please" (Ayckbourn 7).

His words expose how the on-stage world, which is the plays within the play, is juxtaposed with the off-stage world, which encompasses the conversations of the real-life characters, and how these conversations interrupt the action of plays within the play. This juxtaposition emphasizes the difference between the illusion created for the viewers and the reality experienced by the actors.

At one stage reality and illusion becomes completely blended in meta theatre and creates a dynamic tension. Act 1 introduces the romantic relationship between Jacie and Adam. These relationships exist within the realm of reality, with genuine emotions and desires. But as the play progresses into Act 2, the line between genuine love and role-playing becomes increasingly blurred. Role-playing within a role is when one character plays the role of another character in the play. For instance, in Act 2, Adam elopes with Jacie and they are checking into a hotel. When the receptionist there enquires about Jacie's lack of luggage, she right away switches into the role she played from a long-forgotten episode and blurts out a dialogue that suits the context here. She goes on and on with her role-playing that Adam has to play the director and cut her short. The receptionist totally gives in and trusts her words for the truth. One more instance is, when Adam is attacked by the sex worker's man Turkey, Jacie reacts like lightning. She turns him around, plants her knee on his back and forces him to the floor. Just when the audience come to think of it as her real true wrathful reaction for attacking her boyfriend, she turns our expectations on its head by uttering, "Special vice unit. You are well and truly nicked, mister" (Ayckbourn 102). Then only it dawns on the audience that she is once again role-playing. During these occurrences only the audience are aware of the fact that Jacie is role-playing whereas the other characters except Adam are deceived into thinking that all her emotions are original. They don't even have the slightest clue that she isn't even a human in the first place. Dramatic irony is dexterously employed to bring out the merging of illusion and reality.

At the end of the play, it becomes nearly impossible to tell apart illusion and reality. For James Calderwood, "metatheatre is a kind of anti-form in which boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved" (Calderwood 9). For instance, in Act 2, Tracie returns to the studio after being thoroughly bewildered by the notion of love that Adam has thrust on her. She volunteers to be melted, rebooted and erase all her memory, much to the dismay of the others. Mr. Trainsmith even offers her a job as the Regional Director replacing Carla. But Tracie stubbornly stands by her decision. She confesses to Chance that Adam's love for her put his life in danger and that's what instigated her to take the decision to be melted down. As

Adam returns from the hospital, he comes to know that Jacie is tucked away in a box and sent away in a lorry. He is heart-broken and anguished. Out of desperation he jabs at the console which brings the frozen actoids into action. The Farmer and his wife appear and restart part of their earlier sequence of the play within the play, only this time without Jacie. While this goes on, Adam sits in the studio wallowing in melancholy. Only later he notices that Jacie has returned. She is dusty and unkempt and she says, "I-fell-off-the lorry..." (118). She claims that she couldn't bring in herself to leave them all and hence has returned. This part of the play is where the blending of illusion and reality, the blending of art and life reached its zenith and they become downright indiscernible. The audience are left befuddled as to whether Jacie came back due to her love for Adam or was she role-playing her part in the play within the play where she falls off the lorry and the farmer's family finds her.

Metatheatre often raises questions about the authenticity of characters and their roles, challenging the audience to critically analyse the difference between truth and illusion. This exploration can serve as the reflection of the complexities and uncertainties of life itself. Overall, the fusion of illusion and reality in meta theatre aims to dismantle the traditional idea of a clear division between the fictional and the real. It invites the audience to navigate the intertwined layers of the play, questioning the nature of truth, performance and their own perceptions of reality.

Alienation effect

Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright, is closely associated with the development of Epic Theatre. It is a style of theatre that does not resolve issues and leaves matters unsettled. It prevents the audience from getting engrossed in the play and disrupts them from becoming emotionally attached to the characters by employing a device called Alienation or Distancing Effect, also known as *Verfremdungseffekt* in German. It is a technique employed in meta-theatre to deliberately distance the audience from the performance and break the illusion of reality. This Epic theatre keeps reminding the audience that they are watching a play which, after all, is an enactment of reality and not the reality itself. It furnishes different perceptions to the same argument. The main aim of this theatre is to restrain the audience from passively consuming the play and instead instigate an objective thinking in them. It stimulates them to think, act and make judgements. Ayckbourn was heavily influenced by Epic Theatre and Brechtian techniques such as making use of self-referentiality, non-linear narratives, disconnected and fragmented scenes, breaking the fourth wall, indicating the use of stage props and drawing attention to their function. By incorporating them in *Comic Potential*, Ayckbourn encourages the audience to detach themselves from the events on stage, question its themes and reflect on its underlying messages. Aristotelian theatre, on the other hand, seeks to evoke emotional identification and catharsis in the audience. It focuses more on eliciting a heightened emotional response rather than critical reflection. While both Epic and Aristotelian theatres have their merits, Epic theatre's emphasis on critical engagement, social relevance, experimental techniques and collective ownership set it apart from the more traditional Aristotelian approach.

Major Themes

Human humanoid love

Comic Potential play explores the idea of love between Adam, the human and Tracie, the humanoid robot. Their romance sparks discussions about the potential of love and connection between humans and robots. This idea challenges the traditional notions of romance and companionship. The alienation technique highlights the artificiality of the scenario, prompting the audience to re-evaluate their beliefs and prejudices about relationships. One key aspect of the portrayal is the contrast between the artificial and superficial interactions of the humans and the seemingly genuine emotions expressed by Jacie. When Adam first arrives at the studio he is treated with disdain and disrespect by the other characters. They belittle him due to his lack of experience and perceived insignificance. He tries a lot to build a conversation with Chance and the others but to no avail. Adam is such a resourceful person with lots of innovative ideas to produce comic scenes but is hardly acknowledged in the studio. The one person who realizes the presence of Adam and gives ears to his perceptions is Jacie. Though at first Adam has reservations about interacting with a humanoid robot, eventually he develops a deep connection with her. He comes to believe that Jacie is different from the other actoids and has a true comic potential which can be effectively materialized. But Prim and Trudi enlighten him on how an actoid works. They claim that Jacie registers all the dialogues from her previous soap operas and any dialogue that she utters would either be from her programming or from her

past memory. There is virtually no possibility that Jacie can have a sense of humour or true emotions. Adam nevertheless falls in love with Jacie and plans to produce a script with Jacie playing the protagonist. At the end of the act, he also elopes with Jacie when he fears that she runs the risk of being melted down. In the next act, Adam's love for Jacie only amplifies manifold. He is out and out enthralled by the way she pulls out scenarios from the amalgamation of scripts in her head and makes excellent dialogue delivery. He finds her a really compatible partner both professionally and personally.

Ayckbourn, through these instances, stirs up loads of questions in the minds of audience. This unconventional relationship catapults the audience to wonder what is it that humans expect in a relationship. In the era of late 20th century, when this play was written, humans were ridden with materialistic, fragmented and isolated mindset. Proper communication and connection eluded them even though they longed for it. Humans were incapacitated from offering such emotional comfort to their fellow humans. They were all so self-centred and engrossed in their own selfish pursuits that they had no time for the others. This tendency of humans ended up further isolating the already isolated humans. Adam longs for sincere company and emotional engagement which Tracie exemplarily offers to him. Most of the responses of Tracie are programmed in her which Adam is well aware of. Nevertheless, he falls head over heels in love with her. This stands testimony to the fact that humans are so deprived of genuine emotional connections that they are ready to even jump at something as such as a constructed, programmed connection that the actoid provides. Humans, out of desperation, have resorted to take refuge in this simulated emotional comfort rather than being totally denied of it.

Change in Power Dynamics

There is a significant change in power dynamics between the humanoid robot, Jacie and the humans around her. At the beginning of the play Jacie is portrayed as a mere machine programmed to act in soap operas. She is treated as a piece of property by her human co-workers and remains subservient to their commands. Chance describes Jacie with the following words, "Not she. It. It's an it. It's a dishwasher. It's a floor polisher. It's a tumbler dryer, that's all it is" (Ayckbourn 34). The humans dictate her actions and emotions. However, as the play proceeds Jacie seemingly starts to display emotions and independent thinking beyond her programming. She begins to question the limitations imposed on her and yearns for authentic human experiences. This newfound consciousness challenges the power dynamics between Jacie and the humans around her. Jacie's ability to presumably think and feel like a human gradually empowers her and subverts the control exerted by humans. By supposedly exhibiting emotions reserved for humans such as the empathy and love she shows towards Adam, the clever sense of humour she exhibits, feeling-guilt ridden when Adam is attacked, give her the whip hand over humans. Audience at times feel convinced that Jacie manifests true emotions. For instance, when she claims to have an emotional outburst in the hotel room after Adam confesses his love for her. She frustratingly says, "I don't want to be like this anymore. Its too painful. Nothing's working. I can't control me. Look at me, I'm crying and I have no stimulus to cry" (Ayckbourn 99). But at crucial moments in the play as in when Adam was stabbed with a knife, Tracie chooses a part from one of the soap operas that suits the context and mechanically starts acting it. This scene instils suspicion in the minds of the audience as to whether Tracie shows genuine emotions or is it just a programmed response. At the end of the play, Mr. Trainsmith spells out how much he relies on Artificial Intelligence as old age creeps on him. He is so touched by the seemingly honest emotions that Tracie reflects. The subversion of power dynamics is at its peak when he proposes to make her the directional head replacing the previous head, Carla. Tracie takes up the post and ends the play with her words, "All right, people, let's go to work. Action!" (Ayckbourn 119). Audience at the end feel completely disconcerted by this subversion of power dynamics. The audience cannot help but ponder over the unsettling end of the play if this isn't really the end but the beginning of the era of Artificial Intelligence.

Conclusion

Metatheatre begins by a heightened consciousness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art. But when the metatheatre nears the end, the readers and audience have an epiphany by confronting the life's bizarre likeness to art or illusion. According to Judith Butler, identity is not stable. It is both situational and relational and entails interaction between individuals and the society they live in. Metatheatre in *Comic Potential* propels the readers to cast a doubt on whether their identities are fixed or merely products of their performances. It pulls focus on the performative aspects of identity and questions whether a person's persona that shows outside reflects their true self or is simply a performance meant to deceive others. At the end of the play, the readers' notions of what is real and what is fictional are challenged. By calling attention to the

inextricable nature of theatre and life, Ayckbourn drives home the idea that reality can be shaped and constructed not just within theatrical context but also in broader societal context. So metatheatrical aspects ensure that theatre is not just used as a tool for entertainment but also to elicit critical response from the audience and bring about social reforms in the society.

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