

## PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: Pandemic and Theatre Throughout the Ages

AUTHORS: Mesut GÜNENÇ

PAGES: 76-87

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1674736>



INTERNATIONAL

**JOURNAL of HUMAN Studies**

ULUSLARARASI İNSAN ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ

ISSN: 2636-8641

Cilt/VOLUME 4 Sayı/ISSUE 7 Yıl/YEAR: 2021

Alındı/RECEIVED: 31-03-2021 – Kabul/ACCEPTED: 03-06-2021

## **Pandemic and Theatre Throughout the Ages\***

*Çağlar Boyunca Pandemi ve Tiyatro*

**Mesut GÜNENÇ<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The theatre, based on action, movement, and screening, was restricted by diseases and epidemics and also served as a mirror by carrying them to the stage. From Athenian society to the Elizabethan era and today, outbreaks, plagues and communicable diseases caused theatres to be closed and performances to be restricted. The plague was a global problem for human beings and like Covid 19; plagues abolished social, regional, and racial differences. The emergence, survival, and spread of outbreaks posed a threat to theatres and playwrights, while at the same

### **Öz**

Aksiyon, hareket ve gösterime dayalı tiyatro, hastalıklar ve salgın hastalıklarla sınırlandırılmış aynı zamanda salgınları ve hastalıkları sahneye taşıyarak ayna işlevi görmüştür. Atina toplumundan Elizabeth dönemine ve günümüze salgınlar ve bulaşıcı hastalıklar tiyatroların kapanmasına ve performansların kısıtlanmasına neden olmuştur. Veba insanlar için küresel bir sorundu ve Covid 19 gibi; vebalar sosyal, bölgesel ve ırksal farklılıkları ortadan kaldırmıştır. Salgınların ortaya çıkması, hayatta kalması ve yayılması tiyatrolar ve oyun yazarları için tehdit

<sup>1</sup> Doktor Öğretim Üyesi, Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi, mesut.gunenc@gmail.com, Orcid: 0000-0002-7077-1914

\*This article is a revised version of the online presentation of the International Symposium on Representations of Pandemic in Literature. 26-27 March 2021, Atatürk University, Erzurum.

time the pandemic served as a resource and communication tool for plays that depicted societies that were affected both psychologically and physiologically. In this study I will try to explain the effect of the pandemic on theatre, plays such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Ten Plagues and Coronation for Poppea* and *Beat the Devil* and playwrights within historical periods and how theatre became a communication tool sharing same concerns and fears among societies because theatre, which is restricted and closed from time to time, is one of the most effective vaccines.

oluştururken aynı zamanda pandemi, hem psikolojik hem de fizyolojik olarak etkilenen toplumları betimleyen oyunlar için bir kaynak ve iletişim aracı olarak hizmet etmiştir. Bu çalışmada, pandeminin tarihsel dönemlerde tiyatro ve *Oedipus Rex*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Ten Plagues and Coronation for Poppea* ve *Beat the Devil* gibi oyunlar ve oyun yazarları üzerindeki etkisini ve tiyatronun toplumlar arasında nasıl aynı endişe ve korkuları paylaşan bir iletişim aracı haline geldiğini açıklamaya çalışacağım çünkü zaman zaman kısıtlanan ve kapatılan tiyatro en etkili aşılardan biridir.

**Keywords:** Emic, Theatre, Plague, History, Drama.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Küresel Salgın, Tiyatro, Veba, Tarih, Drama.

### Plague and Theatre in Ancient Period

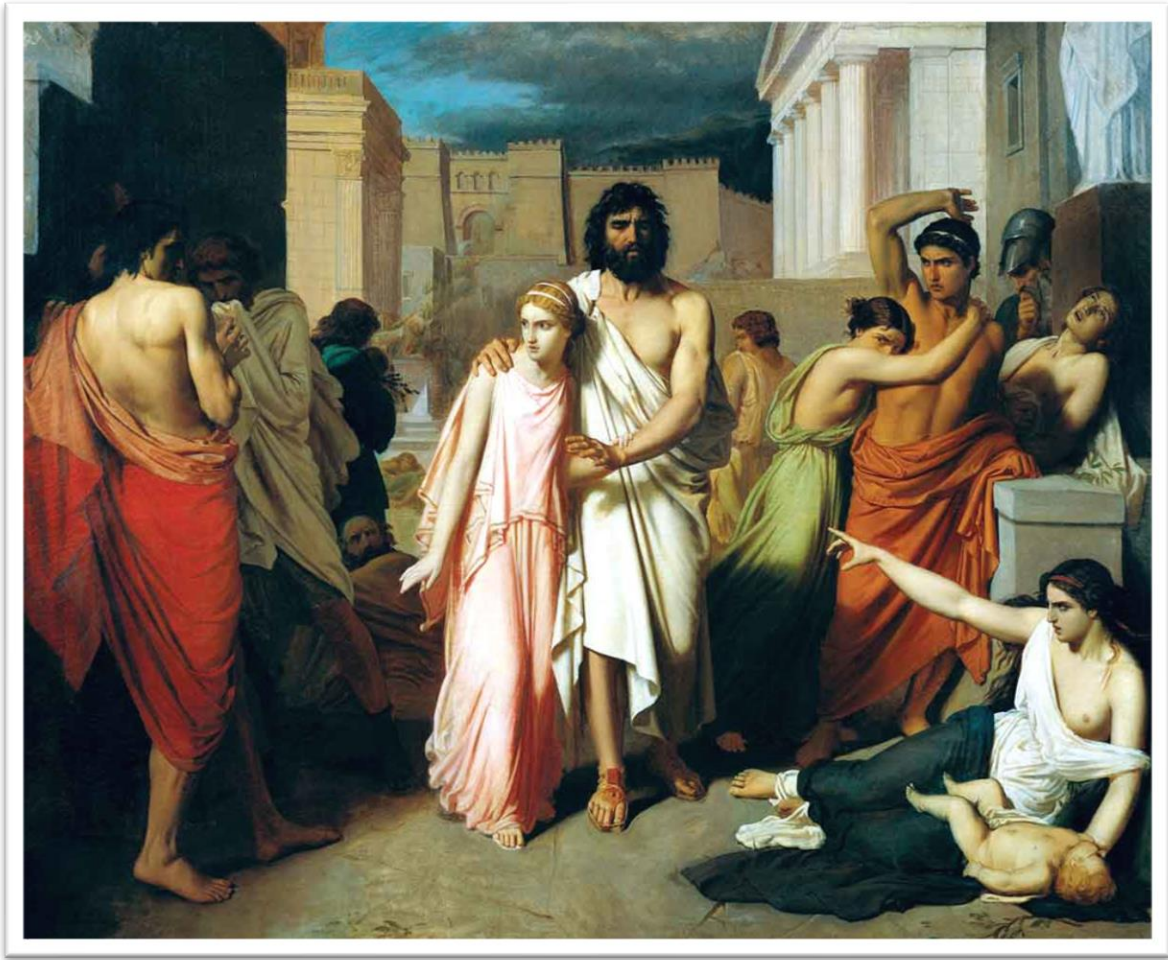
Disease and pandemics have been depicted on stage since the early ancient Greek tragedies. The tragedy emerged to resolve the psychological necessities of a battle-ready democracy that had been ravaged by decades of conflict and an outbreak that destroyed about a third of the populace between 430 and 427 BC. From this vantage point, the Dionysus Theatre was a communal environment in which the performers conveyed the undeclared misery of the people. The plague of Athens in ancient period appeared “in 430-26 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War, fought between city-states of Athens and Sparta. The historic account of the Athenian plague is provided by Thucydides, who survived the plague himself and described it in his book *History of the Peloponnesian War*” (Huremovic, 2019, p. 10). The plague left its mark most vividly and instantly in Athens in those years, at the annual spring festival of Dionysus, and later in the tragic dramas made around 420 BC (Mitchell, 2009, p. 374).

Responses to the plague epidemic, distinctive playwrights try to shape a form which portrays current conflicts in their plays. Sophocles, together with Aeschylus and Euripides, was a renowned ancient Greek playwright, wrote his idiosyncratic tragedy *Oedipus Rex* which was performed around 430-26 B.C. during the time of plague as described by historian Thucydides. Both Sophocles and Thucydides share similar times while describing challenges to cope with the pandemic. “In the historical case (Athens) and the dramatic case (Thebes), the populace turned to the temples looking for a divine solution to the disaster” (Kousoulis, Economopoulos and Rebelakou, 2012, p. 156). Sophocles also uses the chorus in one part of the play to blame the Ares as the culprit of the plague.

By linking the cities of Athens and Thebes, he emphasizes the devastating impact of both war and plague.

*Oedipus Rex* mentions a plague, a pandemic that devastated the city of Thebes, along with historical values that dominate the play. The plague is not the main subject of the tragedy; however the impact of the plague is felt on the bard. In fact, the plague provides a backdrop for the development of the plot of the story. There are many references to the plague and its repercussions in the first section of the play. The Priest, who is the representative of the community affected by the disease, begins with an epidemic narrative clearly articulated in the prologue:

The god of plague and pyre / Raids like detestable lightning through the city, / And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste, / All emptied, and all darkened; Death alone / Battens upon the misery of Thebes (30-34, Ristani, 2020).



Oedipus and Antigone, or the Plague of Thebes, by Charles Jalabert, 1843, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille © Bridgeman Images.

The dominant plague that emerges in these lines is not just a static ground where dramatic action can be resolved, but the play's true framing logic and working backbone. The discussion between



the Priest and Oedipus reveals the destructive plague that prevailed over Thebes. The king has attempted to act to mitigate the damage by ordering Creon to the oracle of Delphi to request a redemption scheme. “The oracle announces that the plague is a result of religious pollution and that the god Apollo requests that the people of Thebes exile the previously unknown “miasma” (a word of Greek origin with a sense of moral noxious pollution). At the moment that Tiresias reveals to Oedipus that the king himself is the cause of the plague (lines 350–353), the pandemic becomes a secondary issue” (Kousoulis, Econompoulos and Rebelakou, 2012, p. 156). The contagious illness in Oedipus generates a resounding vocal rhythm and therefore a guiding dramatic factor; it is this that pushes the plot's creation, pushes the action forward, takes Oedipus to the forefront, and propels the hero's peripeteia (inversion, fortune from good to bad). Oedipus' destiny turned out to be horrific, not just because of the plague, but also because of his own individual decisions. However, Oedipus' choices and journey of self-discovery actually led to incurable wounds like plague.



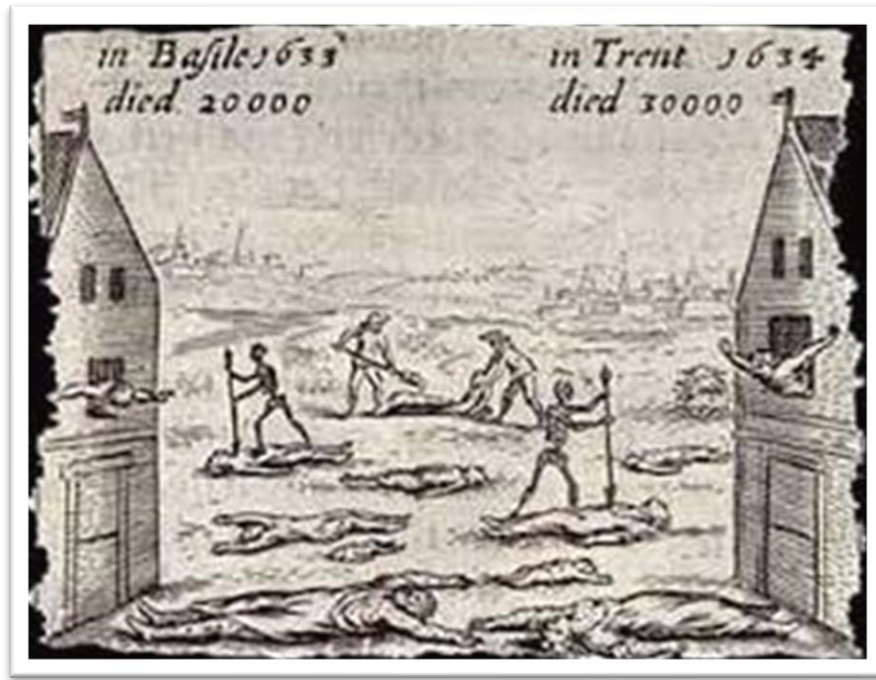
Two women lying dead in a London street during the Great Plague, 1665. Etching after R. Pollard II. (Ristani, 2020)

### Pandemic in Elizabethan and Jacobean Theatre

With more plays and performances from ancient times, the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre are possibly the most notable examples of pandemic dramaturgy because of the bubonic plague. The “theatre companies in London, of the 16th and 17th centuries – they determinedly weathered multiple closures due to outbreaks of plague” (Latham, 2020). Shakespeare’s plays, in fact, establish clear relationships with the plague itself, accompanying quarantine and self-isolation constraints, as they do today. A huge outbreak devastated Straford-upon-Avon in 1564. Shakespeare as a lucky new-born survived the plague. However, he has heard too many stories about the pandemic and the people who died because of it. In his professional career, Shakespeare witnessed plague as an existential threat both

for his professional life and theatre. These were obscure periods for theatres and actors because they were forced to work in other jobs. One of his biographers Jonathan Bate states that “Plague was the single most powerful force shaping his life and those of his contemporaries” (Cohen, 2020). Based on all these and what happened, Shakespeare represented psychological effect of the plague in Elizabethan society and his distinctive plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*.

In *Romeo and Juliet* the actual role of the plague is portrayed in the second part of the play. We witness the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt (Juliet’s cousin) and as Romeo tries to stop them both, Mercutio receives a fatal blow from Tybalt's sword and utters the following words that curse both houses: “A plague o’both your houses” (3.1. 94). The priest Lawrence, confidant and assistant of the Romeo and Juliet, gives Juliet the potion which will make Juliet look dead, to prevent her from marrying with Paris and writes his complete arrangement in a letter to send Romeo with a messenger however the letter never reaches to Romeo because the messenger is in quarantine which was an official strategy and lasted six weeks in the second part of the sixteenth century during Queen Elizabeth reign. If there was no plague and concomitant quarantine, the messenger could reach the letter to Romeo and the lovers would not die. Like villain(s) in this tragedy, the plague, although never stated again except Mercutio’s line, harms dreams, relations and lovers.



<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/londondisease.html>  
<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/londondisease.html>

In the other idiosyncratic play *King Lear*, written under quarantine and “the mood in the city must have been ghastly – deserted streets and closed shops, dogs running free, carers carrying three-foot staffs painted red so everyone else kept their distance, church bells tolling endlessly for funerals” (Dickson, 2020), Shakespeare, modifying the anonymous historical play and eliminating the happy

ending, creates his Jacobean tragedy. In Shakespearean tragedy, Lear curses his eldest daughter: “a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my / Corrupted blood” (2.4. 257) and adds “thus the time plague when madmen lead the blind” (2.4.54). It is observed that the real source of sadness that guided Shakespeare's later works was the plague. It may even be thought that Shakespeare changed the traditional ending of the play with his traumatic mood. Lear's journey of self-reliance actually lead to lose both his kingdom and his mind and causes incurable wounds like Oedipus. The stages that enable both King Lear and Oedipus to see the truth and self-discovery are similar to the stages of the plague. King Lear and Oedipus have become extinct day by day, lost their eyes and have reached a tragic end, just as the plague caused damage to the human body.

The other famous tragedy is *Macbeth* which portrays how a nobleman loses his mind and transforms into a deadly virus. Neither Macbeth nor Scotland is the same. Like the devastating and deadly impact of the plague, Scotland is an assassinous land. Ross clarifies a short knotted speech which presents the poor country: “The dead man's knell / Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives / Expire before the flowers in their caps / Dying or ere they sicken” (4.3.195-198). The other character Lady Macbeth loses her mind because of her murderous ambition. Lady Macbeth, stating “Out, out damned spot” (5.1.31) persistently tries to purge her hands in the sleepwalking scene. After the assassination of King Duncan, she is generally unable to sleep. She is disturbed by the nightmares she sees even when she sleeps. She always washes her hand to get rid of Duncan's blood however like the plague in the body; she cannot get rid of blood on her hand.

Shakespeare's last play that I have analysed in this study is *The Tempest* in which Prospero is reminiscent of the "red plague" (1.2.364) on Caliban. Shakespeare's character Caliban has received distinctive attention among scholars and critics. Harold Bloom clarifies Caliban as “the grotesque and pathetic slave” of Prospero (xv). Nadia Lie and Theo D'haen define “Caliban as a cultural icon conveniently allowing for the most varied kinds of research and reflection” (i). Caliban, the native of the island, lives in his own way until the island is occupied and exploited by Prospero. Prospero first approached Caliban well, taught his language, and then began to use it as a slave. Caliban, who gradually learned the language of Prospero as the virus inflicted damage to the body, was gradually exploited and damaged both mentally and physically. Caliban clarifies this exploitation with his famous cry: “You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language” (1.2.364–66). This cry is a brief definition of Caliban's life and like how the virus damages the body and causes psychological disorder, Prospero, abusing Caliban, causes psychological disorder and physical wounds.

Plague has a defining role in Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare himself suffered personal losses because of the plague; his sister Margaret, his brother Edmund and his only son young Hamnet died during the plague and Shakespeare also lost his friends and colleagues. Plague also had public gatherings closed down even open-air theatres were forbidden. However it is clear that Shakespeare never leaves London, he stays in the city because as a playwright, his role is to help people during the plague and quarantine periods till the theatres reopened. Like Shakespearean period, theatres were closed down and all theatrical activities were banned nearly sixteen months because of great plague in

London between in 1665-6. Daniel Defoe clarifies its psychologically devastating mood: “for the minds of the people were agitated with other things and a kind of sadness and horror at these things sat upon the countenances even of the common people” (25). The plague deeply affected people of all professions and classes in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

### Plague in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries Drama

The theatrical period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries includes the anxiety felt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well. There were various questions concerning illness, pollution and infectious dissemination. In the nineteenth century Henrik Ibsen, named as the father of modern drama with intensifying realistic elements in his plays, analyses not only harmful effect of microbe but also portrays sickly minds in his work *An Enemy of the People*. In this heated drama of 1882, the doctor learns that his city's water supply is stained with a toxic toxin. Eventually, the surgeon is ostracized and out of town, a poignant reminder of what can happen when a lot of people chose not to believe the scientific facts. There are many "enemies of the people" in this play: the microbe itself; the small town people; the mayor who opposes the doctor's data because he has a personal interest in a new health spa that derives its water from the polluted source; and even the doctor who does not understand how to negotiate the diverse social strata of the outbreak. While doctor is seeking the truth he becomes an enemy of the people. Like Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*, doctors and experts are forced to be silent while they are recognizing a dangerous new virus in our contemporary world. Today, doctors and experts share the same fate with Dr. Stockmann as truth-tellers.

Staging the plague and truth gain political dimensions with Henrik Ibsen in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, Antonin Artaud is the figure who directs the theatre with his transgressive theatrical poetics. But instead of the theatre that adopts the realist-naturalist view, Artaud seeks to restore the function of the primitive rituals in the theatre. The mysteries of existence are hidden in the subconscious; theatre is vital for revealing this subconsciousness and to get rid of the feelings which cause viciousness and catastrophe. If the pus needs to explode to get rid of the disease, it is the theatre that will reveal the subconsciousness and blow the pus. In the Mary Caroline Richards translation of “The Plague”, published in *The Theatre and Its Double*, we read: “(the theatre)... invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, that from, the human point of view, the action of theatre, like that of the plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world” (1958, p. 31).

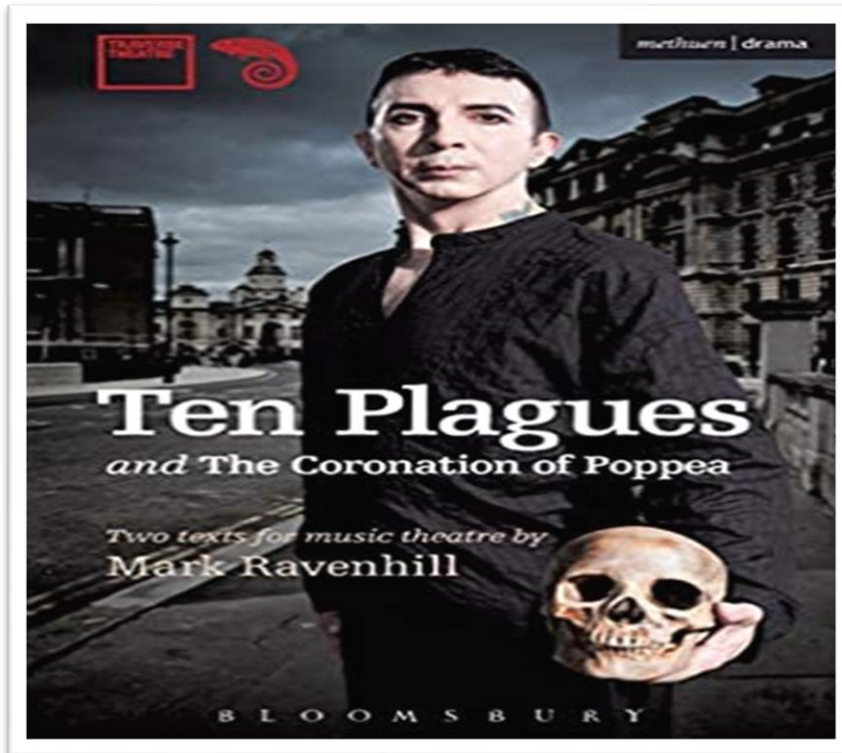
In “The Theatre and the Plague” he contends that the plague, one of humanity's deadliest outbreaks, is similar to the theatre of humanity's great actions of affirmation as an art form in several respects. “The plague ... cleanses. Like a boil, it brings whatever would have noxious, hidden, and festering to the surface--and expels it. Theatre can do likewise. It simulates the dark, unindulged passions, the abnormal feelings, of mankind (the actor is a murderer) and by expelling them at one remove, in performance, cleanses the performer and spectator alike in its collective experience” (Bermel, 1977, pp. 18-19). Artaud claimed that the best solution for community was theatre, which



worked as the plague, to cleanse the world from violence and cruelty. Artaud argues in his work that there are parallels between the imaginative relationships between the plague and the vision of the theatre and freely connecting thinking about underlying ugliness. He portrays how theatre should be like plague. To him, theatre should be contagious, which invades bodies of performers, making all of them intellectual skills ineffective. He intends to observe pure and sensual energy. Erika Fischer-Lichte supporting Artaudian thought, clarifies that performances, “focusing on the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, on the physical acts of the actors and their capacity to ‘infect’ the spectators as well as on the ‘contagion’ occurring among the spectators” (2005, p. 30), represent sensual energy between spectators and performers and share similar features with process of plague on human body.

### Pandemic in the Twenty First Century Drama

In the twenty first century Mark Ravenhill, one of the distinctive playwrights of the contemporary British theatre, staged his play as two texts: *Ten plagues and Coronation for Poppea* in 2011. In this play Ravenhill, analysing Daniel Defoe’s *A journal of the Plague Year*, which portrays Defoe’s memories how plague killed one third of population of London during the year 1665 and Pepys diaries which contained information how London was affected from the plague, decides to write musical text containing 15 songs. In his play Ravenhill represents how London is infected and how people are fighting for survival regardless of unimaginable death. By the help of eye-witness narratives from 1665 and forming poetic comparisons with modern epidemics, the play narrates the tale of a man’s journey through a city in turmoil.



With the emergence of the Covid 19, nine years later after Mark Ravenhill's work, as in all segments, theatres and playwrights were affected by pandemic. Sir David Hare, one of the considerable playwrights of Britain, caught Covid 19 at the beginning of the pandemic, and wrote the *Beat the Devil* (2020) monologue, which tells about both his fight against the virus and how the government acted in the face of this crisis. In this monologue a middle class man Fiennes represents the process of Hare's illness and how the government shows reaction against Covid 19. Hare tells his struggle to survive and his anger that emerged as a result of this struggle in his play and criticizes "government's slowness in announcing lockdown, the U-turn in contact tracing, the failure to provide sufficient PPE in hospitals, the plight of care homes, and much more, all of which amounts to political incompetence, hypocrisy" (Akbar, 2020). Hare as a political playwright and truth-teller, tries to represent political uselessness and hypocrisy in today's England like his distinctive play *Stuff Happens* (2004).



Variety.com. 2020.

Around the world, due to the coronavirus pandemic, theatres have been closed for about a year and will continue to be closed. However, socio-realist and political playwrights continue to write plays that tell about the effects of the pandemic in a universal sense, government policies and how these policies shape societies. In our country, Dot Theatre started to exhibit its plays in the forest with the discourse "Dot in the Forest" in order to reveal the therapeutic and healing aspects of both theatre and nature. The fact that theatres and people turned to nature with the epidemic evokes people imitating nature in rituals and finding purification in nature in order to convey the message from the gods at the birth of drama 2500 years ago. Historical transformation repeats itself.

## Conclusion

The existence of plagues or plague allegories has been researched throughout stagecraft history to discover how humans utilized play to absorb such catastrophes. Great societal upheavals “have been marked by reactionary theatrical performances that address the consequences, how people see and feel about the history that has just been formed. The stage is a crucial aspect of understanding civilizations from the past and now” (Latcham, 2020). On stage, we watch not just performances, but also social reaction and evolution. The essence of dramatic creation is evident in those performers, authors, and audience members who see the trip together, at the same time and in the same location. Writers’ and characters’ pleasures are our pleasures, their grief to practice too. It makes theatre a place for suffering to be shared and even acknowledged socially. So the art of theatre leads us not only to experience pain, confliction, chaos, or festivity personally but also as a communal culture. Pandemic is commonly used to describe worries over other matters. All of these theatrical reactions share one thing in common: they are all concerned with factors outside our influence, just as ancient heroes/heroines were. The staging of what is practiced and felt encourages the sharing of experiences. This situation also aims to combine fiction and reality, feel more secure and go beyond daily worries. The global crisis for the past year may seem incredible or difficult to understand. However, “we are beginning to see the importance of remaining connected through self-isolation, and this can be done through the arts” (Latcham, 2020). Unlike King Lear and Oedipus, people can survive the pandemic unscathed, unlike King Lear and Oedipus, in their journey to find themselves by turning to art and theatre at this time.

## References

- Akbar, A. (2020). Beat the Devil review – righteous rage of David Hare's corona nightmare. *The Guardian*, Accessed: 23.02.2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/aug/30/beat-the-devil-review-bridge-theatre-london-david-hare-ralph-fiennes>.
- Artaud, A. (1958). *The Theater and Its Double*. (M. C. Richards Trans.) New York: Grove Press.
- Bermel A. (1977). *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty*. New York: Taplinger.
- Bloom, H. (1992). *Caliban*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Cohen, B. (2020). The Infectious Pestilence Did Reign How the plague ravaged William Shakespeare's world and inspired his work, from Romeo and Juliet to Macbeth. *Slate*. Accessed. 14.03.2021. <https://slate.com/culture/2020/03/shakespeare-plague-influence-hot-hand-ben-cohen.html>.
- Dickson, A. (2020). Shakespeare in lockdown: did he write King Lear in plague quarantine?. *The Guardian*. Accessed: 12.02.2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/mar/22/shakespeare-in-lockdown-did-he-write-king-lear-in-plague-quarantine>
- Huremovic, D. (2019). Brief History of Pandemics (Pandemic Throughout History). D. Huremović (ed.), in *Psychiatry of Pandemics*, (pp. 7-35). Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Kousoulis, A. A., Economopoulos, K. P., Poulakou-Rebelakou, E., Androutsos, G., & Tsiodras, S. (2012). "The Plague of Thebes, a Historical Epidemic in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex". *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 18(1), 153-157. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1801.ad1801>.
- Latcham, B. 2020. Plague on Stage: How theatre helps us in times of crisis. *Palatinate*, Accessed: 10.03.2021. <https://www.palatinate.org.uk/plague-on-stage-how-theatre-helps-us-in-times-of-crisis>.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. (2005). *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*. Routledge.
- Mitchell-B. RN. (2009). "The art of medicine Plague and theatre in ancient Athens". *Perspectives*, 373, 374-375.
- Lie, N. and Theo D. (1997). *Constellation Caliban: Figurations of a Character*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Ristani, M. (2020). Theatre and Epidemics: An Age-Old Link. *Critical Stages*, Accessed:



- 15.03.2021. <https://www.critical-stages.org/21/theatre-and-epidemics-an-age-old-link/?>.
- Shakespeare, W. (1611). 2004. *The Tempest: Sources and Contexts, Criticism, Rewritings and Appropriations*. P. Hulme and W. H. Sherman (Eds). NewYork: W.W. Norton.
- Shakespeare, W. (1597). 2011. *Romeo and Juliet*. B. A. Mowat and P. Werstine (Eds.), Simon & Schuster.
- Shakespeare, W. (1606). 2011. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. B. A. Mowat and P. Werstine (Eds.), Simon & Schuster.
- Shakespeare, W. (1606). 2011. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. B. A. Mowat and P. Werstine (Eds.), Simon & Schuster.
- Sophocles. (1949). *Oedipus the Rex*. (D. Fitts and R. Fitzgerald, Trans). Harcourt, Inc.
- Thucydides. (2017). *History of the Peloponnesian War*, (R Crawley, Trans.). (pp. 89–100). Digireads.com Publishing; Sept. ISBN-10: 1420956418.