STUART HALL

SERJEANT MUSGRAVE’S DANCE

Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance is john arden’s second play to be put on at the Royal Court. It is in every way a development out of, and a distinct advance over Live Like Pigs. In the earlier play, Arden made a stubborn plea on behalf of a Gipsy family which refused to be housed, fed, organised, put on the electoral roll, inspected by the Welfare Officers, and generally buggered about in a new housing estate. The play made its case for a kind of rough anarchism at the level of feeling rather than through persuasive argument. The very existence of this family—disturbing the smug middle-class complacency of the estate by fighting and screaming, making love at the open window, pursuing the old vendettas of love and hatred in public—proffered a challenge to the self-satisfied neighbours of the Gipsy family. At the end, the respectable are so outraged that they take sticks and stones, and, supported by the local officials, storm the house. The Gipsies’ crude but direct feel for life unleashed the most primitive responses in the neighbourhood: and the play seemed to do roughly the same thing to the audience.

In Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance, Arden works in the same way, assaulting the audience directly, getting under the skin of their prejudices and complacencies, insisting that they go through and feel his material, refusing them any escape from the play through intellectual rationalising. The play is more tightly built than Live Like Pigs though still, perhaps too loose. It denies at every turn straight-forward realistic presentation or apprehension. It makes use of metaphor and images and poetry instead, in its comment upon war. And in spite of Doomsday For Dyson, The Offshore Island, and the “bomb” references in The Hostage, Paul Slickey and Look Back in Anger, this is the first full creative piece on the theme of peace and war which really makes any sense at all.

The play is set in a mining town in the North of England eighty years ago. Four soldiers—Serjeant Musgrave and three privates—arrive as deserters from the army. They have come with a single minded mission—to persuade the townspeople of the terrors and brutalities of a colonial war. And they bear with them, in a Maxim gun case, the skeleton of their comrade, needlessly slaughtered during a punitive raid on a colonial town, to display as final proof. The dead soldier was, in fact, a native of the town, and the lover of Annie, a serving girl in the local pub. The soldiers are dedicated men—held together by the driving mania of their Serjeant, who has a deep religious vision about his Cause, which he pursues and is pursued by, almost to a point of fixed insanity.

The soldiers arrive during the middle of a lock-out at the mines, and the local mine-owner and the parson welcome the appearance of the troops. The Serjeant, biding his time for a dramatic revelation of his purpose, pretends that he is on a recruiting mission, and the Mayor immediately plans a deal with the troops to take off, in the service of the Queen, a crop of local agitators.

The central development of the play takes place in the Second Act, which is set in the local public house where the troops are quartered. Here the tensions implicit in the soldiers’ mission begin to break through. Musgrave insists with his men that the Cause be kept pure. The younger men fall in with the miners, but the watchful Serjeant—appearing to join in the merriment—in fact holds them steady, and breaks up the drinking session before the men are drunk. There is a moment when Musgrave grasps the miners’ leader by the arm, telling him that they are brothers, offering him a pint of beer; yet, by his manner, Musgrave chills the proceedings, so that the miners’ suspicions that they are being tricked into the army surge forward again. In the third scene, the three privates bed down in the stables; each is approached in turn by the serving girl, Annie, who in her direct way offers to sleep with each of them. High in the background, in the loft of the pub, perched on his pillows and then tossing in disturbed sleep, lies Serjeant Musgrave, warning his men without words that the Cause of peace and the Cause of love are, ultimately, irreconcilable. One of the privates is too old; another is willing, but restrained by the puritanism of Musgrave, whose code he feels, but cannot understand. The third—the youngest of the three—cannot contain his passion and, fighting it all the time, makes love to Annie and resolves to leave his Mission and go away. The second private awakes, discovers him, and in the scuffle, runs him through with a bayonet; Musgrave, high in his room, starts awake, and his piercing scream cuts through play and audience.

M. W. Steinberg

Violence in Serjeant Musgrave 's Dance: A Study in Tragic Antitheses

Serjeant Musgrave ·s Dance is largely an exploration of the place of

violence in society and our varying responses to it. Although the setting

of the play is nineteenth-century England, the contemporary relevance

of Arden's theme is obvious as increasingly in our twentieth-century

society violence is becoming accepted as an inescapable mode of

political expression by extremists whose political dogmas provide passion and conviction, or by those who, bitterly frustrated or alienated,

can find no more satisfactory outlet. Arden is very much aware of the

dilemma facing many thoughtful and morally responsible persons in a

liberal society: on the one hand, they are inclined to accept the ultimate

objective of the rebels and to share, uneasily and reluctantly, the view

that violence is in fact a more effective moving force for rapid and

radical change away from present immoralities than rational debate and

moral persuasion; on the other hand, they are unwilling for humane,

moral reasons to pay the price that violence requires for the change, an

unwillingness that is reinforced by the fear that the means will taint and

corrupt the ends, so that, even if successful, the revolutionary force will

succeed only in establishing a new form of tyranny. It is with this dilemma and the consequences of the tragic antitheses of our responses to the

social challenge that Arden is primarily concerned.

The action of Serjeant M usgrave 's Dance at the outset involves three

clearly defined groups: first, the Mayor, who owns the coal-mines and

dominates the town, supported by the parson and the constable, who

represent respectability and authority; second, in opposition to this

group, are the colliers, who by means of a lockout are being starved into

submission or futile violence; and a third group, who are the dramatic

centre of the play, the army deserters, Musgrave and his followers,

rebelling against the tyranny of the army and the callous inhumanity of

the governments that use violence to exploit colonial peoples, a policy

that tolerates and indeed creates a positive acceptance generally of

violence as a means to an end. Apart from these groups, but involved in

the antagonisms and suffering are three other characters, Mrs. Hitchcock the inn-keeper, Annie her servant, and Joe Bludgeon the bargee,

who, indirectly and directly, by word and deed, comment on the action,

further complicating and to some extent clarifying the issues. Though

the groups are clearly defined, the characters within and outside their

groups respond variously to each other, at times sympathetically, at

other times antipathetically, as their motives overlap or conflict, or as

misunderstanding or mistrust and temperamental differences and varying values determine their behaviour.

Of the several issues examined concurrently in Serjeant Musgrave's

Dance, the simplest is the conflict within the town between the coalminers, on the one hand, and those who, in current jargon, might be

called the Establishment, on the other, a group consisting of the coalmine owner, who wields real power, economic power, in the town, the

clergyman-magistrate, a rather sycophantic and blinkered traditionalist

whose shallow conception of his duty as a man of God contrasts markedly with the fervent religious zeal of Musgrave, and the constable, whose

conception of his duty is determined by those with power and who,

therefore, identifies law and order with maintaining the status quo.

Behind the Establishment group stands the power of the State and its

military machine, revealed at the end by the entry of the Dragoons. The

threesome in the first group are fairly evenly balanced dramatically

against the threesome in the other: the slow-witted and the pugnacious

colliers, in their own ways, are in juxtaposition to the parson and the

constable; the intelligent and strong collier, Walsh, who if necessary is

willing to use violence to overcome the workers' disadvantages, is

matched against the shrewd and ruthless mine owner who is willing to

starve or freeze his locked-out miners into submission, or by bribery or

trickery to get their leaders carried off by the army recruiting squad to

remote colonies. Arden's sympathies are clearly with the miners in this

confrontation.

At the dramatic centre of the play, however, are the issues arising out

of the actions of Serjeant M usgrave and his band of deserters from the

army. The common bond that unites this group under the authoritarian

leadership of Serjeant Musgrave is their rejection of the army and its

bloody purposes-war and the subjugating of colonial peoples. But

theirs is not a simple or single-minded reaction; the issue is not merely

pacifism versus militarism. Hurst, for example, embittered by his experiences and trained to kill, comes back to wreak vengeance on those

who used him as they did-his response is personal and verges on the

psychotic. He has a vendetta to settle with society and longs for violence

to even the score. For Sparky the personal motive is also strong; but,

unlike Hurst, he wants to protest against violence, not use it; he has seen

his best friend Billy Hicks killed, shot in the back in a faraway land by

natives who hated the presence of British soldiers on their land. He accepts the teaching of Musgrave that the army and the policy of colonialism that leads to violence are wrong. Attercliffe goes beyond the

personal opting out of Sparky. Like Sparky, he wants no more violence,

but his is the full pacifist position, the rejection on principle of violence

as a mode of action, not just a personal rejection, Thus in the climactic

scene of the play, when Hurst points the loaded gun at the throng, Attercliffe stands in front of the muzzle, prepared to receive the fire in his

own body. Serjeant Musgrave, like Sparky and Attercliffe, has come to

regard violence with horror, but unlike them, and like Hurst, he has

returned to act violently. Unlike Hurst, however, whose personal

violence is that of a dog driven mad who wants to bite, Musgrave plans a

non-personal calculated act of violence that would serve a double purpose: to exact retribution for the lives of the innocents massacred by the

soldiers-an act of justice that was necessary expiation for evil

perpetrated-and by the same act bring home the horror of violence so

that the civilians far removed from war would experience it for

themselves and reject it for evermore. Musgrave keeps his purpose hidden from his fellow-soldiers, compelling them by the force of personality

and his quality of leadership to put their trust in him. Despite the differences, however, there is a common rejection of the army and of war as

an instrument of national policy. Their rebellion against the army and

the political establishment parallels that of the colliers against the social

forces oppressing them. Here, too, Arden's sympathies, as he explores

the motives and actions of the deserting soliders, are obvious.

Complicating the plot in which we have a conflict within the town between the Establishment and the workers, and a conflict between the

group of army deserters and their society that accepts and uses violence

as a way of life, there is an overlapping conflict that embraces both, a

conflict between the townspeople and the soldiers-that is, between the

'insiders,' the settled inhabitants, and the 'outsiders' who come into

their midst and are regarded with mistrust. The initial response to their

coming is clear and understandable, but ironically mistaken. The

Establishment, regarding the army as an extension or reinforcement of

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the local constabulary, an instrument for keeping law and order in terms

of the status quo, welcomes the supposed recruiting force as an aid in

the struggle against the colliers. To the colliers, the bloody red-coats

represent the oppressive force of society that keeps them subjugated as it

subjugates the colonials, that carries off the settled inhabitants from

hearth and home and makes killers and victims of sons and husbands.

They reiterate " These streets is our streets." Serjeant Musgrave

understands this hostility and tries patiently to convince the colliers that

their interests merge with his. Musgrave, however, sees the colliers and

their plight only in terms of his purpose. The condition in the town-the

cold, hunger and antagonism-though bitter to the colliers, pleases

Musgrave for it makes "all fit and appropriate." But he does see that

their quarrel with the authorities and his with his superiors are essentially one for "their riots and our war are the same one corruption"-the exploitation of human beings whether workers in the coal districts or

natives in the colonies. The issues come together in another sense too:

after all, who are the soldiers, "the bloody red-coats, " if not townsfolk

and villagers, who for one reason or another are forced or pressured into

accepting the Queen's shilling. It is for this reason that Musgrave brings

Billy Hicks 'home'-to impress Billy's fellow-townsmen that the issue of

colonialism and violence affects them directly and that the separation

between the two worlds, that of the settled townsfolk and that of the redcoats, is not real. Arden's symbolic use of colour to indicate the parallel

between the colliers and the soldiers reinforces this conviction that their

destinies intertwine. "In the ballads," writes Arden, "the colours are

primary. Black is for death, and for the coalmines. Red is for murder,

and for the soldier's coat the collier puts on to escape from his black. " 8

Musgrave, a red-coat, called Black Jack Musgrave, comes to avenge

killing by more killing, and tries to make common cause with the

blackened colliers whose lives are also metaphorically black. Musgrave

almost succeeds in making the colliers see that his battle is theirs. In the

climactic scene, however, Walsh, the colliers' leader, backs off, partly

because he deeply distrusts soldiers and partly because he Jacks the zeal

of Musgrave that would permit the ferocity the judgment demandedthe execution of twenty-five persons. Though the miners pressed by

hunger and cold, are willing to fight their local oppressors on the local

issue they were not willing to see their fellow-townsmen mowed down by

the 'outsider' element, especially since the shocking massacre would be

for a cause somewhat abstract and remote. Musgrave fails to win their

needed support and is defeated.