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Dara

Revisioining Aurengzeb on the London Stage, 2015

In March 2015, SFB 948 held a conference on “Foreign Heroes” on the European stage between 1600 and 1900 as a period when contact with Europe’s ‘others’ was intensified through worldwide travel, trade, colonisation and, finally, imperialism. As the conference demonstrated, entanglements of the foreign and the heroic afforded not only stage spectacle, but also often generated a mirror against which Europe could project its own political and social concerns.¹ In the twenty-first century, theatre has developed a significant inter- and transcultural dimension,² and audiences in European theatres are increasingly given opportunities to see plays and productions not about, but *from* other parts of the world. In 2015, audiences in London’s National Theatre had an opportunity to see *Dara*, the adaptation of a recent Pakistani play which presents an intriguing intersection of the foreign and the heroic because it uses a subject matter which, three-and-a-half centuries earlier, had formed the material for a “heroick play”, as John Dryden named the (short-lived) genre which he himself helped significantly to create.

Dryden’s eponymous play about the last of the great Mughal emperors, Aurengzeb (1618-1707), was first performed at London’s Drury Lane theatre in 1675. The play is characteristic of heroic drama in that it scrutinises notions of authority, specifically monarchical authority, and uses an East Indian, ‘exotic’, context to perform this scrutiny. For their translation of local, English affairs into foreign or even exotic settings, heroic plays drew both on myth and on history.³ In the case of *Aureng-Zebe*, Dryden employed fairly recent material and used a figure who was not only still alive but also a ruling monarch. Aurengzeb had come into power in 1659, after a violent battle with his brothers, and especially the crown prince Dara, over the succession of his father Shah Jahan, whom Aurengzeb kept prisoner in the Taj Mahal.

Like other serious plays of its period, Dryden’s *Aureng-Zebe* is very rarely performed today. This is understandable given heroic drama’s

penchant for bombastic rhetoric and stage spectacle instead of dramatic action, but less so if one considers the ongoing relevance of questions of political authority, intrigue and power play. Operas, or rather the semi-operas of Dryden’s time, use the same heroic patterns and rhetoric but have survived more successfully; at least a handful of them are frequently revived, and often now with clear political implications. For example, Peter Sellar’s production of Purcell’s *The Indian Queen* (for which Dryden wrote the original text, while Sellar changed the libretto significantly) was performed in London at the English National Opera back-to-back with the National Theatre’s *Dara*, and with an explicit postcolonial sensitivity that left no doubt about the violence and injustice which the European conquest of Central America entailed. Attention to the victims of power is also interwoven with the treatment of the heroic in the National Theatre’s production of *Dara*, which premiered in the NT’s Lyttleton auditorium in January 2015.

This play, at first sight, also confronted its London audience with ‘exoticism’. While the stage set was kept elegantly simple, it nevertheless managed to suggest, through latticed walls and atmospheric lighting, the beauty of Mughal miniatures, which feature prominently in the production’s programme. The costumes and on-stage, ‘oriental’ music helped to evoke an impression of exotic beauty, if only to juxtapose it with the violence that unfolds between this play’s Aurengzeb and his brother Dara. The play makes a significant departure from the perspective under which the Aurengzeb (hi)story is usually treated: with the great mogul at the centre of attention and, in particular, as a man of noble and heroic disposition. The historical Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) at first sight seems a much less heroic character than his now more famous brother. Although he decided to fight for the throne and was defeated by Aurengzeb, he was, above all, a Sufi mystic and poet. After a trial for apostasy, because he promoted the understanding between Islam and Hinduism, Dara

was sentenced to death. Before his official execution, he was killed in prison by assassins sent by his brother.

To the author of the original *Dara*, the acclaimed Pakistani playwright Shahid Nadeem, the story of Dara and Aurengzeb has significant repercussions for the Asian subcontinent today and its ongoing religious conflicts, notably those between Pakistan and India. Nadeem's play was therefore performed in 2010 by Ajoka Theatre, Pakistan's most well-known theatre company, for audiences not only in their home country but also in India. Ajoka sees theatre as a promoter of social change, and its tour of India was intended to advance "peace and goodwill between India and Pakistan (true to Prince Dara's vision for South Asia)", as the National Theatre's programme for its own *Dara* emphasises ("Shahid Nadeem and Ajoka Theatre" n.p.). Nadeem's play emphasises that Dara, as a Sufi, would have ruled for Indians of all religions, and that this is one of the reasons why he was beloved by the people – in contrast to his puritanical brother Aurengzeb, who tried to enforce Islam on all his subjects. With his spotlight on Dara, Nadeem intended to undermine the heroic reputation which Aurengzeb still enjoys in the subcontinent today:

It is an extreme irony that Aurengzeb, the killer of his brothers, nephews, his own offspring, the destroyer of the Mughal Empire, has been projected as a Muslim hero, as a role model by our partisan historians and biased scholars. And Dara? He is almost non-existent. Dara, the great scholar, the sensitive artist, the passionate and devoted Sufi, the patron of arts, the prince of the people, the visionary, has been almost wiped out from the history books. [...] If we want to reverse the retrogressive process of religious extremism and bigotry, we have to revisit this critical and dramatic point in our history. (Nadeem 8-9)

Nadeem's revision de-heroises Aurengzeb, presenting him as a bigot, and instead heroises Dara, Aurengzeb's victim, who thus becomes a martyr for his vision of a tolerant form of Islam.

When the play migrated to the National Theatre, being performed by a cast of British actors of South Asian origin for a predominantly British audience, its plea for religious tolerance was maintained but received new inflections with special resonance in its new cultural context. Tanya Ronder's adaptation of Nadeem's play was commissioned precisely because, as Anwar Akhtar writes in the NT's programme, the story of Dara "still speaks to us today" – also in Britain:

Is there any relevance in a story over 350 years old to today's horrific events in Syria, Iraq and Gaza? Does Dara's story say anything about arguments today over religion in schools in Britain? That relevance cannot be overstated. [...] The need to separate Islam [...] from its corruption by those who use it for power and empire. (Akhtar n.p.)

Members in the audience who would have read this during *Dara*'s production run will inevitably have linked such statements to images connected with Islamist terror (and its own self-fashionings in terms of martyrdom and heroism) current in early 2015: from suicide bombers to a British-born terrorist, "Jihadi John", who beheaded hostages in front of a running camera. Associations like this make the Aurengzeb of the National Theatre's *Dara*, who pronounces himself openly as "the keeper of our faith" (III.2, Ronder, *Dara* 63) and who cold-heartedly gives his brother over to Sharia law during his trial (ibid. 65), even less likely to be perceived as a hero than the Aurengzeb in the Pakistani *Dara*.

As Tanya Ronder writes in the preface to her published play, she saw the story of Aurengzeb and Dara as "a gift of a vehicle with which to enter into the different interpretations of Islam. Here were two brothers who had vastly contrasting understandings of this profoundly important faith." (*Dara at the National* 5) However, the play does not present these contrasting understandings neutrally. Specifically, it employs a combination of victimisation and heroisation of Dara to communicate its bias to the audience. Dara's trial in the long third scene of Act III is the climax of the play and gives the character ample scope to project his tolerant and humane vision of Islam against the narrow-mindedness of the prosecutor, who acts according to Aurengzeb's will. Dara even says literally, "Your thinking is so narrow" (ibid. 77). In Act IV, the audience sees how Dara is to be killed with a sword; as the stage direction in the published play specifies: "The EXECUTIONER unsheathes a massive sword" (ibid. 109). The next scene shows how his father, Shah Jahan, unsuspectingly receives a basket with Dara's severed head. In Act V, one week after the event, Aurengzeb is presented as a frantic fanatic:

[...] we must clean this city up, we will not sit, exposed, on the mosque steps, we will be simple and humble, all. We will purge this Empire of its vices, stifle the creature within. Round up the liquor sellers, cut their hands and feet off if they've not stopped selling within a month. Tell the

Imperial gardeners to plant no more rose beds. Ban the use of silk, cotton, only cotton. [...] (ibid. 114)

This command means the final death blow to the beauty of Mughal culture which has been constantly evoked during the performance, and which the relentless treatment of Dara has also already undermined. The final scene jumps forward in time, presents Aurengzeb's impending death and foreshadows the decline of the Mughal Empire. A weak old man, Aurengzeb repents what he has destroyed, and the whole scene thus seems to put a final verdict on his intolerant rule.

The National Theatre's *Dara* was obviously meant to be an intervention into Britain's contemporary discourse about Islam and the threat of Islamism to British society. The play's direction of sympathy towards a hero of tolerance who falls victim to a narrow-minded interpretation of Islam entails the vilification of his opponent Aurengzeb, and the *Guardian's* theatre critic felt that the play was well-done but flawed by its "hero worship of Dara" (Billington n.p.). It must be granted, however, that Aurengzeb is not reduced to a caricature and presented simply as the 'ugly' face of extremism. By showing the audience glimpses of the brothers' past, the play gains a personal dimension that prevents it from too blunt a message. And, perhaps most importantly, *Dara* is expressly not a play against Islam. It critiques an intolerant version of Islam, and it showcases the destruction of culture by intolerant regimes. But it is at the same time meant to show a British audience that there are other versions of Islam than the one that causes them fear, that there is a tolerant Islam for which deeply humane people like Dara find it worth to die.

Of course, in the twenty-first century the foreign and the heroic are entangled in different ways than in the Restoration period. Plays of the seventeenth century staged exotic worlds and characters to project political issues of their own culture and society. In today's globalised and post-heroic world, both the foreign and the heroic have arguably become less stable concepts and involve a wide range of cultural contacts and conflicts. And yet, like Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe*, the National Theatre's *Dara* is also a play that reflects about urgent contemporary issues. Dryden's heroic play may no longer be performed, but the material on which it drew can still be staged and generate new meanings that are pending between heroisation, victimisation and martyrdom.

1 A volume derived from the conference, *Fremde Helden auf europäischen Bühnen 1600-1900*, is forthcoming.

2 See, for instance, Christopher Balme's important work on postcolonial theatre, such as Balme (1999), or Palgrave's series of Transnational Theatre Histories, which is co-edited by Balme.

3 In an earlier issue of this journal, Christiane Hansen discusses Dryden's *The Indian Emperour*, whose action is set in the Spanish conquest of Mexico (Hansen 2014).

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