

Chapter 2

THE GHOST AS THE MACHINE IN ALAN AYCKBOURN'S *HAUNTING JULIA*

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Introduction: A Ghost Tells the Truth on the Stage

As long as ghost-beliefs are heard, there have been instances of those attempting to simulate hauntings. In order to represent the past, bringing a ghost onto the stage is a brightly practical method of bringing past occurrences and referring to the present ones while creating dramatic tension. No wonder that the ghost is always one of the most typically employed traditional devices in theatre. The earliest surviving dramatic ghost play goes back to the story of Clytemnestra in the third play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, *The Eumenides* in ancient Greek. Apart from tragedies in which the vast majority of ghosts appeared, ghosts are seen in comedies such as Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. In Renaissance, Robert Greene's morality play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* includes one of those, too. Shakespeare's contemporaries and successors developed a collection of practices for the presentation of ghosts on the stage. Shakespeare, himself, uses his ghosts in the four of his tragedies and in one romance.

Goldman (1975: 28-29) links ghosts with the real life condition and the stage :

A theory of ghosts might in itself make a good theory of drama, and the historical version of this theory might note that at about the time when audiences cease to believe in ghosts they begin to be haunted by memories. People have always had memories, of course, but I would suggest that they are not *haunted* by memories much before Rousseau. In any historical period, drama must find its proper ghosts, sources for haunting that an audience can accept as both meaningful and mysterious. These need not be anthropomorphic— it is necessary only that we believe in them. Today, for example, we are haunted by unconscious memories as well as conscious ones; by our childhoods, our bodies, our institutions; by money and class; by race and sexuality; by a century of doubts as to the limits of human freedom. These are the ghosts that walk the modern stage.

In fact, what makes Goldman's idea problematic is that he introduces two types of drama. The first type, which can be epitomized by *Hamlet*, which presents the struggle of a man with a very real, very distinct ghost. The second one, which might be called modern and which would likely be best typified by Ibsen; for Goldman the

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British critic and historian John Russell Taylor (1971: 162) once could say that “no one would ever be attempted to classify Ayckbourn as an important dramatist,” within the new generation in the second half of the twentieth century. However, the critic Guido Almansi (1984: 110) in his discussion of Ayckbourn included in the book *Modern British Dramatists* a justifiable dispute on Taylor’s claim, countering anyone who would label Ayckbourn as strictly a farceur. Similarly, it is important as Susan Rusinko (1989: 174) has argued in *British Drama: 1950 to the Present* that “initially, although Ayckbourn enjoyed popular success with audiences but was dismissed by the critics as a writer of well-made plays and a stage trickster, he has gradually emerged for the British as more than an English Neil Simon.” She added that as Ayckbourn’s preoccupation with the “darker elements” (1989: 174) in his plays have become more prominent, particularly his obsession with the sterility of modern suburbia, he has been critically rewarded for the courage of his thematic convictions.

This study analysing the family in a contemporary British play, *Haunting Julia*, takes a different approach from the previous studies. Instead of relying on Ayckbourn’s handling usual middle-class families in his former works, it explicitly focuses on a father and daughter relationship, and questions and challenges and, in some cases, reevaluates the concept of the family in the eye of the playwright. In order to examine its concerns, this study relies on three supporting frameworks: sociological considerations, specific theatrical treatment of familial themes of Ayckbourn and his unconventional supernatural and paranormal new way in which fun is close to being a synonym for life. The former one provides the necessary social and historical background informing the changing structure of the British family, while the latter ones introduce the theatrical tradition that the playwright is persisting and, in most cases, modifying.

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