JACLR

Journal of Artistic Creation & Literary Research

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 1 Issue 2 (December 2013) Article 5

Romina Peña Anllo

"David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal"

Recommended Citation

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61 <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

This text has been blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

Abstract: David Hare (Bexhill, Sussex, England, 5th June 1947) is one of Britain's most political contemporary writers, together with Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. He is a socially and politically committed author, and many of his plays denounce contemporary conflicts, as the Palestinian, or the deterioration of the British public institutions due to the restraints imposed by the government of the Conservative Margaret Thatcher. From the beginning of his career, Hare's plays had political aims. As he says in his collection of lectures on theatre, *Obedience, Struggle & Revolt*, "My desire was to use the theatre to argue for political change, and, at the start, to no other end. But early on it became obvious that the demands of what you would wish to accomplish politically cannot be so easily reconciled with what is artistically possible." (22)

In his trilogy formed by *Skylight* (1995), *My Zinc Bed* (2000), and *The Breath of Life* (2002), he presents an uncompromisingly objective commentary on the state of the nation. The plays are all debates, issue-oriented that conjugate the "theatre of ideas" and the way to attract the massive audience attention with an updating Shavian witty perspective. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how, in the play *Skylight*, Hare's prototypical nature as a political writer is dissembled under the mask of an unfulfilled love story, approaching the socio-political theme form a more novel and intimate perspective. In order to achieve his

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

objective, David Hare implicitly juxtaposes the character of a poor area primary school teacher, Kyra, with the figure of Margaret Thatcher.

Kyra Hollis is a thirty-year-old primary school teacher; she lives in a threadbare flat in the suburbs of London. But Kyra's life was not always as tough as it is now. For six years, she lived in the upper-class home of Tom Sergeant, wealthy fifty-year-old restaurateur, along with his wife Alice and son Edward. Notwithstanding the idyllic relationship that the four of them had during their living together, Kyra became Tom's lover without his wife's knowledge of the affair. Abruptly, Kyra abandoned the house when Tom's wife discovered the swindle. The play is set several years later, when his wife dies of cancer; her son Edward, seeking help for his father, goes to Kyra's place. That same day, some time after Edward's visit, Tom also goes to her flat, accusing her of abandoning him, and giving rise to the entire action of the play.

Keywords: Hare, Political, Social, Thatcherism, Love, British.

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Romina PEÑA ANLLO

David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal

0. Introduction

David Hare's important concerns are changing the world, even though his tendency to place political ideas into his works has been strongly criticised. (Zozaya & Aragay 8) Nevertheless, he understands his work as a powerful vehicle, and rejects the nineteenth century idea of "art for art's sake". Hare's core theme of the nineties is to confront socio-political issues on an intimate backdrop. For instance, in *My Zinc Bed*, Hare uses the character of the businessman Victor Quinn to portray his hunger for a change in the British society; he, as many socialist writers of the seventies, saw how society changed, but in the opposite direction expected. In the interview hosted by John Harris with the English musician Paul Weller, the latter is of the opinion that Thatcherism "radicalised a lot of people. You couldn't sit on the fence, seeing what was being done to the country (…) and that was reflected in my work," (Harris 23) and this point of view is also shared by David Hare. Contrary to the way in which he explicitly unleashes his anger against Thatcherism in plays such as *The Secret Rapture* (1989), a new period in which the author exposes this same idea begins with *Skylight*, but via a "one-room" approach. Even though he defined *The Secret Rapture* as his "most personal and private play," (Hare 1991: 158) a new level of intimacy is reached in *Skylight*, in opposition with his previous epic treatment of public themes, thus showing how the political is also personal. Its theme is a replay of *The Secret Rapture*, here transposed to a completely intimate scale, where "all political reference is submerged in an anatomy of the relationship between two individuals." (Innes 227)

David Hare fits into the pattern of traditional political playwright. Although he claims that "I don't really think of the audience when I write," (Hare 2008: 8) the several allusions to the reality of the protagonists' lives transcend the framework of the simple love story. To my way of thinking, those inferences signal an intention to actively help the audience in their critical approach to the past and current state of the nation. The author conceives lectures and plays to be "alike in relying for their true vitality on the richness of the interaction between the performance itself and the thoughts and feelings created by the unspoken reaction in the room." This arises out of a desire to encourage each person attending to the play "to make its own mind up about each of the actions. In the act of judging, the audience learns something about its own values." (Hare 2005: 5)

In his wish to rouse the public's interest without being excessively didactic, he reaches a new stage in his career as a playwright, favouring "private" plays that enable the author to take his audiences to the heart of his characters' spiritual lives without "sermonising." (Wu 80) The entire action of the play occurs in Kyra Hollis's apartment in a humble suburb of London within approximately eighteen hours. It consists of her dialogical intercourse with her ex-lover Tom Sergeant, a successful fifty-year-old businessman, and his eighteen-year-old son Edward. They both and unintentionally visit her on the same evening, but not at the same time, after four years of no contact. Through Tom's premeditated carelessness, his wife Alice discovers one of Kyra's love letters to him and decides to disappear. Throughout the two acts that compose the play, Kyra and Tom turn out to have two very distinct ways of viewing life. *Skylight* and the ex-lovers' polar lifestyles represent an allegory about the struggle for the soul of England (Donesky 191). Tom embodies the money-oriented values proposed by Thatcherism, whereas Kyra is a woman of true convictions, trying to reinvent herself by teaching math in a poor part of the city.

This is an argument of public morality within a private stage. Many critics understand it as a "Love (story) in a cold climate" (Peyser) or, according to Lindsay Christian, "An affair (that) flames and falters." (Tribune Business News 2012) Some other specialists such as Feingold consider that Hare "seems more interested in the dynamics of personal relationship" (The Village Voice 41). On the other hand, it seems to deal with one of the British historical

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

periods that worries Hare the most, with the subsequent painful outcomes of Thatcherism's politics upon his fellow citizens. This is demonstrated by Hare's ability to conceal his socio-political view behind an apparently irrelevant love-story. This play is not an exception, *Skylight* is usually not considered as a political play, "yet it contains a clash of values as strong as any portrayed in *Plenty* or *Racing Demon*." (Boon 2007: 97) As Christopher Innes points out about Hare and his colleague Howard Brenton, "their political perspective remains the same, Marxist-radical, and their formative experience in the Agitprop movement continued to influence their drama, effectively redefining realism on stage (...) in a play in which material things are literally subordinated to ideas." (198)

Needless to mention the sharply designed intention of the author, the play comes into scene in an appealing subtle romantic-play-disguise for a mid-ninety's audience, which possibly was tired to hear about the Baroness Thatcher and the archaic Liberalism she represented in a straight way. All along the eighties, a new group of alternative comedians, most of whom have long since become contented members of the canonical literary tradition, "made it obligatory to do routines focused on the people Ben Elton called "Thatch" and "Normo Tebbs", a working class laid waste" (Harris 23). However, already in the nineties, the audience appeared to need something new, and Hare was able to give them an innovative product shaped as a love-story, but without renouncing to the topic that had always worried him. The content of the play was not new: how Margaret Thatcher, described by *The Economist* Editorial as "a freedom fighter", unbelievably divided the modern British society. Hare's intention was probably to create a whole moral and political debate capable to stimulate the audience, and, as the actress Judi Dench confirmed, he "never failed to do that." (Boon 2003: 25)

At the same time, Hare allows relationships to become a metaphor for polarised social attitudes. Tom is the kind of Thatcherite man who thinks happiness is something you can purchase, as symbolised by the perfect skylight room he builds for his ill wife in the play, "The sky! The greenery! The light! I gave her everything." (*Skylight* 54) With him the emptiness within material possession is stressed in the text. He is a man of sharp intellect but of limited vision. On the other hand, Kyra is a woman strongly committed to the people that really need help. This echoes the Shavian juxtaposition that takes place in *Major Barbara* (1905), in which the pragmatism of the millionaire father is faced by the idealism of his daughter, and, as in the case of *Skylight*, the division at the heart of modern Britain is revealed. This notion is in consonance with Feingold who believed that "this conflict is the continuing tension between Thatcher's Tory England and that of the Lib-Lab opposition." (40) This same tension gains a more personal ground in the play, due to the reduced number of characters. After almost two decades working with complex and populated stages, as in *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991), or *The Absence of War* (1993), *Skylight* signals a break with the previous style, presenting a strictly domestic and sometimes distressing script, since "it is often in the private plays that you get the best public statements" (Morley 51).

Only three characters stage the play, being only two in the heart of the play, as Edward only opens and closes the play following a circular structure. From the second Act, tension rises as the social and political abyss between Kyra and Tom grows. Concurrently, it is in these scenes where Hare expresses his ideas in a more explicit way. In a dialogue between the two ex-lovers, Kyra acknowledges the fact that it was not until she abandoned the comfortable life with him that she realised how tough was the daily living of common people:

> KYRA: It's you, Tom. The fact is, you've lost all sense of reality. This place isn't special. It's not especially horrible. For God's sake, this is how everyone lives!
> TOM: Oh please, please let's be serious...
> KYRA: I mean it.
> TOM: Kyra, honestly...

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

> KYRA: No, this is interesting; this is the heart of it. It wasn't until I left your restaurants...those carpaccio- and ricotta-stuffed restaurants of yours...it wasn't till I deserted that Chelsea milieu...
> TOM: Which in my memory you liked pretty well...
> KYRA: I do like it, yes, that isn't something I'd ever deny...but it wasn't until I got out of your limousines...until I left that warm bubble of good taste and money in which you exist...
> TOM: Thank you. (*Skylight* 79)

Tom criticism becomes more aggressive after the second Act as he grows increasingly exasperated by her resoluteness about not going back to her previous life with him. He uses recurrent pejorative allusions to her precarious condition, becoming very offensive in some occasions: "You've chose to live in near-Arctic conditions somewhere off the North Circular. (...) Put a bucket in the corner to shit in, and you can take hostages and tell them this is Beirut!" (*Skylight* 78) Her decision to teach "kids at the bottom of the heap" (85) is unconceivable for Tom, who thinks that she works "in one dreadful place." (81) The fact that she "is helping them because they need to be helped" (87) reinforces the ideological antagonism between the two, which lies in her belief that one's own personal duty is stronger than those ruled by public authorities. The author, who seems to conceive "the soul as the ultimate moral authority," (Donesky 117) uses the character of Kyra to endorse the role of "probation officers or social workers" who "try and clear out society's drains," (88) rather than upper-class professional positions such as lawyers, journalists, politicians, and bankers, who "sit pontificating in parliament, in papers, impugning our motives, questioning our judgements." (87)

1. Hare's response to Thatcherism: a "rear-view mirror" strategy

In the biography of Hare's life, the author Richard Boon quotes the playwright's description of his mother as having an apathetic and stolid personality, in Hare's words "my mother was a generous woman, sweet, kind-hearted, but fundamentally terrified with life. Her wish was to avoid it. (...) Their idea of perfect happiness was doing – and saying - nothing. Feeling nothing was better still." (Hare 2005: 17) Possibly, this antecedent in the playwright's life may have represented the source of inspiration for creating feminine characters which could be considered an antithesis of his ineffectual mother. In more than two thirds of Hare's plays, passionate, idealist, and merciful females are found. As Susan Balée highlights, "when Hare's women are good – as they are in *Skylight*, *The Secret Rapture*, *Plenty*, *Amy's View*, the movie *Strapless* – they are very, very good." (603) In Hare's earliest plays these women are killed or driven mad, while in *Plenty* (1978) and *Secret Capture* (1989) both end with an affirmation of their vision of the world, giving way to an increasingly self-reliant feminine figure. In the case of *Skylight*, Kyra represents this prototype of strong and independent woman, in front of whom society still stands reluctant. She ironically describes herself as a woman who:

> "works in the East End. She only does it because she's unhappy. She does it because of a lack in herself. She doesn't have a man. If she had a man, she wouldn't need to do it. Do you think she's a dyke? She must be fucked up, she must be an Amazon, she must be a weirdo to choose to work where she does" (*Skylight* 87)

Through her angry words, she is making a mockery of the expectations of society in respect to independent women like her. Nevertheless, Susana Nicolás Román does not curb her interpretation to a mere feminist approach, but identifies a broader level of social criticism in favour of an individual who fights against the social and urban fragmentation (10). Nicolás Román also affirms that all this social reality suggests a desperate pursuit of the meaning of life, which Kyra seems to have found in "a future doing a job I believe in," but which is not shared by Tom, who is always looking for a more pretentious "idea of the future." (74)

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Social context becomes more explicit in the plays written during the eighties (Innes 218), whereas in the following decade the key factors for the rebirth of the theatre were a clear reaction against the materialistic values promoted by Thatcherism (Billington 89). From my point of view, the character of Kyra might follow the feminine profile of Margaret Thatcher. After eleven years tolerating her politics, the socialist David Hare used Kyra's character to act as a catalyst for his criticism against what happened in Britain during those years and the effects that were produced in the country. According to the journalist John Harris, "Margaret Thatcher may have had no understanding of the arts but her ideas created a cultural earthquake;" (23) as a consequence, *Skylight* emerged as a post-Thatcherite drama in which not only love, passion, sex, and circumstances are questioned, but also social and politics appear as a fundamental factor in the lives of Hare's contemporaries. The "rear-view mirror" strategy used by the author evokes a will to approach the socio-political issue from a subliminal angle, without ever openly mentioning it. In this way, the character of Margaret Thatcher is reflected in that of Kyra, but in a diametrically opposed way. At the same time, Tom replies to Kyra's ideology in the continuous debates throughout the play. The two characters come from two completely different backgrounds: Tom is a self-made entrepreneur coming from "bog-ordinary people" (*Skylight* 81), but refuses to acknowledge the critical situation of a broad segment of the society, whereas Kyra, who spent her childhood in a upper-middle class family being "pushed by nannies beside stormy English seas," (*Skylight* 72) is fully committed to the toughest background of London suburbs. Margaret Thatcher, pursuing Tom's line of thinking, represents "by instinct, inclination and effect (...) a polariser. She glorified both individualism and the nation state, but lacked much feeling for the communities and bonds that knit them together." (*The Guardian* Editorial)

The series of differences between Kyra and Thatcher becomes more evident as the play progresses. One of the first examples of this contrast is reflected in their opinion and use of media. Thatcher had a strong control over mass media, while Kyra refuses to be dominated by them, and prefers to be driven by her sensibility and intuition. Ordinary speech and people interests her much more than television or newspaper:

> KYRA: I just noticed the papers were full of...sort of unlikeable people. People I couldn't relate to. People who weren't like the decent people, the regular people I meet every day at school. So I thought, I start reading this stuff and half an hour later, I wind up angry. So perhaps it's better I give it up.
> TOM: So what do you read?
> KYRA: On the bus I read classic novels. Computer manuals. It's like a game. Name a politician you actually admire. So what is the point of sitting there raging at all the insanity? (*Skylight* 33)

It is said that Margaret Thatcher used to tackle enemies whom she knew she could beat. Hare agrees with this in an interview for the Daily Telegraph: "Real courage is rare in politicians. It is commonly attributed to Margaret Thatcher, and nobody can take away from her extraordinary bravery she showed on the night of the Grand Hotel bombing. But one of the things you noticed about her politically was that she tended to take on enemies whom she knew she could beat." (Boon 2003: 142) This approach is the opposite of the idealism with which Hare lavishes Kyra, who moved from a comfortable life with Tom and his upper-class family to a much difficult situation. Tom reinforces this contrast when he disapproves Kyra's current lifestyle: "you're the only person who has fought so hard to get into it, when everyone else is desperate to get out." (*Skylight* 80) She does not need to win any battle; the day-to-day life is enough for her. Hare sets Kyra in an almost poetic framework, the epistemological value of her word has nothing to do with power or battles, and it is the raw purity of life.

A further example of the differences in their systems of beliefs is the one relating to the banking system in Britain. Tom nostalgically remembers the financial opportunities offered by the banks in Mrs Thatcher's government times:

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

> TOM: There was a time...what was it? Four years? Five years? Just through that little opening in history you could feel the current...You walked into a bank, you went in there, you have an idea. In. Money. Thank you. Out. Bang! They gave you the money (*Skylight* 32)

Kyra, by contrast, exposes a completely opposite opinion about that entity, looking down on the materialism promoted by Thatcherism.

Another idea that comes into scene is the treatment of people like objects. The best example is set in the way Tom refers to his chauffeur shouting: "Frank isn't people! Frank is a man who is doing a job!" (*Skylight* 49) Frank belongs to those groups of citizens that Mrs. Thatcher forgot with privatisation and taxation, but Kyra continually defends that section of the population, and believes in what she does because "if (she) didn't do it, it wouldn't get done." (*Skylight* 87) She is thus presented as a heroine in opposition to Tom's Thatcherism that neglects the needs of the most unfortunate people, and is admired by Edward, Tom's eighteenth-year-old son, who represents future generations. If Margaret Thatcher was known from her early days as "Thatcher the milk snatcher" (The Economist 21) because of her politics against the welfare State among the poorest groups of society, Hare shows Kyra strictly in the opposite side, as one who says "Where do you think I'm working where I am? I'm sick of this denial of everyone's potential. Whole groups of people just written off!" (*Skylight* 83)

Even though very different, both Kyra and Thatcher have very definite goals and radical procedures; they share, in fact, many similarities. During the years governed by Margaret Thatcher, two opposed visions about the leader of the Conservative party and about the collective understanding of life within Britain, a polarised atmosphere which is also reflected in the play. Hare strongly criticise the politics of the Iron Lady, but, at the same time, he understands her figure as an example of perseverance and strength; this is the reason why he chose her pattern of personality to create his own antithetical feminine heroine, Kyra. There is a parallelism in Thatcher's and Kyra's confidence in their redemptive projects. In her book of memoirs, Lady Thatcher says that she had the same inner conviction as her predecessor William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, whom she quoted as stating that "I know that I can save this country and that no one else can." (Games 1993) In this last quotation, a clear reminiscence to Kyra's words "If I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done" (*Skylight* 87) can be observed. Similarly to Thatcher, Kyra performs "an act of contrition," (*Skylight* 84) resigning herself to the idea that her professional choices have an inevitable cost upon her personal life. Thatcher, in the same way Kyra does, believed passionately in her firm beliefs, reaching a state of isolation due to her decision, as in the case of the Falkland Islands conflict. Her fierce character appeared in her words "This is no time to go wobbly!" (The Economist 21) when asserted her resolution about defending the islands to the last, and even replied to her ally George Bush senior "U-turn if you want to, the lady's not for turning!" (The Economist 21) In the same manner, Kyra renounces to Tom Sergeant, the love of her life, because she is committed to what she really believes in. Both women have fighting personalities, but Hare creates a social warrior as opposed to the political warrior represented by Mrs. Thatcher.

2. Kyra Hollis: the embodiment of an extreme idealism

The bravery required by their jobs is a common feature in the lives of both Kyra Hollis and Margaret Thatcher. They give up their role in the shade of men such as Tom Sergeant and Mr. Dennis Thatcher respectively, and opt for fighting intensely for what they truly believed in. Even though they both share a DNA permeated with radical commitment, Kyra's decision goes beyond Thatcher's conformity to Victorian traditional lifestyle, prioritizing her ideals instead of a comfortable life offered by Tom. What Hare introduces with Kyra is a strong engagement towards social justice, forgetting empty concepts usually prevailing in politics such as popularity or prestige. The author uses his heroine to represent the values promoted by Thatcherism, as the idea of the "self-made man" who does not expect any kind of assistance by the government and struggles to give voice to those who were forlorn by the right-wingers from 1979. Even after the end of Thatcher's government in 1990, the long shadow of her politics remained with the administration of her conservative successor John

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Major. Hare, by dealing with this issue five years later, emphasises his explicit intention neither to forget nor to forgive, because "Thatcher battering-ram persona and apparent lack of hinterland will long continue to haunt writers, her real legacy is to be found elsewhere: in the frightening fact that we are still having to argue that subsidy of the arts is a fruitful investment rather than a frivolous expenditure." (Billington 16)

Apart from the many similarities that Kyra shares with Margaret Thatcher, they can have very antithetical perspectives on some aspects of life. For instance, their attitude towards non-British people is very antagonistic; on the one hand, the Iron Lady exhibited a strong antipathy towards European integration, whereas Kyra is pleased to teach to a group of children formed, for almost its half, by non-native English speakers. She wants the audience to become aware of the difficulty of this task by saying: "Tom, there's nothing I've done in my life which is harder. Forty per cent speaking English as a second language!" (*Skylight* 70) The author, through the character of Kyra, strengthens the relevance of a public educational system, not only as a mere personal interest for the employees, but also because "professionals in British institutions perform their public service to the poor as the heartfelt duty and therefore should be defended against charges that they are serving their personal and aggregate interests in the process." (Donesky 189)

Margaret Thatcher thought nations could become great only if individuals were set free; and that it what Kyra does throughout education, betting on future in the hope that at least one of her students will be able to progress in life, as she concludes with "energy" and "a sudden access of cheerfulness":

> KYRA: I mean, to be a teacher, the only thing you really have going for you…there's only one thing that makes the whole thing make sense, and that is finding one really good pupil.
> (…)
> You set yourself some personal target, a private target, only you know it – no one else- that's where you find satisfaction. And you hope to move on from there. (*Skylight* 109)

Kyra holds steady on her objectives. In the same way, Margaret Thatcher claimed "I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end," (The Economist 33) showing the importance of perseverance in pursuing one's own ideals. The indignation and resentment of Kyra towards the situation of her country is reflected in the constant allusions to "anger" from the second Act; the word, in fact, appears half a dozen times in the play and reaches its climax in her words "I've become my anger." (*Skylight* 97) As pointed out by Homden, this same anger reflects the attitude of many people and groups of artists living in those years, of whom Hare represents an important spokesman, and "can be interpreted at least in part as a form of revenge for his own class alienation and the disillusionment of the post-war, post-colonial, post-Vietnam generation." (236) As a matter of fact, Thatcher's insensitivity towards any kind of theatrical performance which could not be classified as musicals engendered harsh feelings with regards to her figure. According to the critic John Peter, it was the explicitness and bluntness of Thatcher's view that unnerved British theatre in general in the 1980's and left it struggling to find a viable language of opposition, identified with the "theatre of discontent." (Peter)

The dichotomy between pragmatism and idealism is personified in the figures of Thatcher and Kyra, who can be respectively identified with Shirley Conran's *Superwoman* (1975) and George Bernard Shaw's heroine *Saint Joan* (1923). Specifically, the latter may represent the deep spirituality and conviction of Kyra, which is so profoundly hated by Tom, as shown in his words "You see good in everyone now! How comforting!" (*Skylight* 83) The use of the sceptical counterpart of Tom may be understood as a shrewd choice of the author to mediate and bring balance to the otherwise far-fetched goodness of Kyra. In her refusal to consider herself as a "prig" (*Skylight* 40), she reinforces her profile of a martyr who only attends to her duties, thus sacrificing her personal role beside Tom. This appears to be the

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

predestined function of all Hare's feminine characters from the beginning of his career as playwright in the Portable Theatre. An early example is Maggie, the protagonist of *Teeth 'n' Smiles* (1975), in which he "denies the power of the establishment to decide her fate by her own act of choice" (Homden 18) Therefore, Tom plays a pivotal role in ensuring the tingeing of Kyra's generosity. His crude comments about her job and lifestyle often humiliate her throughout the play, as when he tells her that she is "living exactly the same kind of isolated life" after ending up "in this room (...) with ice on the windowpane." (*Skylight* 89) This same confinement resembles the situation lived by Mrs Thatcher during her third and last mandate, when her own party openly recommended that she should resign from her position.

Kyra Hollis frames her ideas with passion, emotion, and faith, and – as in other works of the author – her female character acts as the voice of social consciousness (Innes 227). The author appears very infuriated against Thatcherism, sometimes to the extent that his idealism turns into obsession, being very insistent about the necessity to help ill-fated groups of population:

> KYRA: It's only happened of late. That people should need to ask why I'm helping these children, I'm helping them because they need to be helped…Everyone makes merry, discussing motive…Well I say, what the hell does it matter why I'm doing it? Why anyone goes out and helps? The reason is hardly of primary importance. If I didn't do it, it wouldn't be done.
> *She is now suddenly so passionate, so forceful that Tom is silenced*.
> I'm tired of these sophistries. I'm tired of these right-wing fuckers. They wouldn't lift a finger themselves. They work contentedly in offices and banks. Yet now they sit pontificating, in parliament, in papers, impugning our motives, questioning our judgements. (*Skylight* 87)

Apparently, her words have nothing to do with politics, since helping others should not be a matter of governments or institutions. However, in *Skylight*'s dimension, the personal becomes political and intermingles with an overwhelming context in which there is no difference between personalities and political tendencies where "morality is assumed to be a public matter." (Donesky 119) Hare's insistence about Kyra's good-hearted nature is aimed at reinforcing the assertion that her help is fully unbiased because she is "so eager to defend helping people as a disinterested vocation"; his exaggerated eagerness proves to be unquestionable due to his capacity to set her "on the only ground no one would contest." (Donesky 192) An example of the heroine's extreme kindness appears in the last scene of the play; she is talking to Edward about her decision to give free math lessons to a student:

> KYRA: I have to eat quickly. There's a boy I'm late for. I'm teaching him off my own bat. Extra lessons. Early, so early! I sometimes think I must be going insane. (*She laughs*) I wake at five-fifteen, five-thirty. The alarm clock goes off. I think, what am I doing? What is this all about? But then I think, no, this boy has the spark. (*Skylight* 109)

Kyra is a tough woman and knows how to compromise herself. The heroine offers, in a very direct way, alternatives to the system proposed by Thatcherism, proposing a "positive model of change." (Homden 46) Consequently, she can be conceived as David Hare's alter-ego in her perspective about the need of a public network of social services. Her "anger" and determination are rooted in the author's personal experience as a playwright in the controversial Thatcherite England, and embody the contrasting feelings of a whole generation that underwent the politics of those years.

3. Conclusions

After analysing on a deeper level *Skylight*, it was possible to observe that David Hare cleverly dominates the use of words in the play, in which nothing is randomly put on stage. The whole set of his values appears intentionally in the shape of a love-story. The dual nature of the play consists of entertaining the general audience and, at the same time, of

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

subtly broadening its mind. Even though the play is not considered as part of his socio-politically-oriented works, mainly due to the "intimate, domestic situation" of its setting, it is relevant to remember the author's words when he claims that "what is central to an understanding of the play's political intent is the broader social context: what is outside the window of Kyra's flat is human, social and physical desolation." (Hare 2003: 52) With this story, Hare attempts to present the figure of a woman, Kyra, who understands the vital importance of those same issues and groups of people that are ignored by Thatcherism. By contrast, all the values promoted by Liberalism seem to be treated with disdain and occasionally rejected by the protagonist. As the same author acknowledges, Mrs. Thatcher "wants to do what all Tories have always wanted to do, namely, take away from the poor and give to the rich. That's what she's done." (Boon 2007: 119)

The confrontation between a left-wing, independent, thirtyish primary school teacher and a right-wing, middle-aged, controlling entrepreneur might seem a trivial issue, even less relevant than a social drama that bring to our mind the eighties and Thatcherism. Nonetheless, the theme could hardly be more topical. In the historical analysis carried out by Finlay Donesky about David Hare's work, he mentions "the fact that a paradoxical humanist socialism has been characteristic form of leftism in Britain for the past hundred years – beginning with William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, etc., makes it easier to see how Hare's journey inward was not unusual direction for him to take" (117) In fact, almost all the collective questions that held a privileged position in the Shavian "theatre of ideas" emerge in *Skylight* – education, marriage, religion, government, and class privilege. According to Hare, the writing process consists of working "extremely hard on what you believe about the subject – and the writing process is finding out the truth." (Trussler 114) This is the reason why *Skylight* should be defined not only as a love-story, but also as an undoubtedly socio-political debate, a clash of ideologies.

What first attracted my attention when I decided to analyse this play was that, in spite of the fact of being written in 1995 in Great Britain, *Skylight* is applicable to any Western society of the present day. The questions that concerned David Hare almost twenty years ago can still be found as one of the main issues of our society. The current situation has shown how the aid at a very local level is as important as the one provided by any person holding a public political office, as in the case of Prime Ministers. Oddly enough, the contribution of people in high key positions appears to be less committed than that of ordinary citizens like Kyra in the play. Hare displays a true interest in ensuring that disadvantaged social groups do not remain ignored by society as a whole. Personally, I fully agree with the director Sam Mendes, who, when interviewed by Gaby Wood about the author, said "I have to admire Hare's courage, his willingness to be unpopular in order to say what he feels." (Wood) David Hare's crusade in favour of social justice is properly applied to most of his plays, including *Skylight*, because he is aware of the need to solve certain issues in order to maintain our innermost nature as social beings. Hare expresses his hunger for social justice affirming that "I had already begun the task of trying to resolve certain impossible confusions which still haunt me. You want the word to be different. You want injustice to be addressed. You want a social system which relieves the ubiquitous suffering of the poor." (Hare 2005: 19)

When I ponder over the universality of a work of art, I consider that it is due to its applicability to any temporal and spatial context, without regard to political, social, or economic convictions. In the case of *Skylight*, even though the author's socio-political beliefs appear on stage, it is manifest that his main concerns are rooted in the awareness that there exist whole groups of people that are vulnerable and should be rescued from a situation that would otherwise be insurmountable. This is the reason why *Skylight* can be considered universal, because "every time you check your wallet, every time you look across the street and see someone who is disenfranchised or lonely or ill, and every time you pick up a newspaper and read that children have been abandoned, by the government or by individuals...it's everything." (Boon 2003:183) David Hare shows, in this light-hearted

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

drama, that his final aim is to stir the conscience of as many people as possible, and make them realise the importance of their role as citizens. Personally, I believe that his personality as a committed writer fits to the idea conceived by Bertolt Brecht that: "There are men who fight one day and are good. There are men who fight one year and are better. There are some who fight many years and they are better still. But there are some that fight their whole lives; these are the ones that are indispensable." (Brecht 184)

Works Cited

Balée, Susan. "English Knights, American Stages: David Hare and Tom Stoppard on Broadway." *University of Michigan Library*. Michigan Publishiung, Fall 2007.

Billington, Michael. «Margaret Thatcher casts a long shadow over the theatre and the arts.» *The Guardian* 8 April 2013: 16.

Boon, Richard. *About Hare: the playwright & the work*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003. Print.

—. *The Cambridge Companion to David Hare.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.

Brecht, Bertolt. *The Threepenny Opera, Baal, and the Mother.* New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993. Print.

Christians, Lindsay. "An affair flames and falters in APT's superb 'Skylight'." *Tribune Business News* 3 July 2012: n/pag.

Donesky, Finlay. *David Hare Moral and Historical Perspectives.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996. Print.

Editorial. "Margaret Thatcher: the lady and the land she leaves behind." *The Guardian* 8 April 2013: n/pag.

"Freedom fighter." *The Economist* (2013): 20-23, 33, 74-75. Print.

Feingold, Michael. "Small Wonders." *The Village Voice* 1 October 1996: 40-41. Print.

Games, Stephen. *Los Angeles Times*. 24 November 1993. 29 May 2013 <http://articles.latimes.com/1993-10-24-opinion/op-49126 1 margaret thatcher>.

Hare, David. *David Hare: Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008. Print.

—. *Obedience, Struggle & Revolt.* London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.

—. *Writing Left-Handed.* London: Faber and Faber, 1991. Print.

Harris, John. "How Thatcherism politicised the arts in Britain." *The Guardian* 9 April 2013: 23. Print.

Homden, Carol. *The plays of David Hare.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

Innes, Christopher. *Modern British Drama The Twentieth Century.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.

Morley, Sheridan. "Hare's breadth." *The Spectator* (1995): 51. Print.

Peter, John. "How to Make a Play for Failure." *The Sunday Times* 15 May 1988: n/pag.

Peyser, Marc. "Love in a cold climate." *Newsweek* (1996): 14. Print.

Román, Susana Nicolás. *Imagen de la mujer en el teatro inglés de los noventa: seis personajes en busca de identidad.* Almería, 1 de Junio de 2009. Print.

Trussler, Simon. *New theatre voices of the seventies: sixteen interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980.* London: Eyre Methuen, 1981. Print.

Wood, Gaby. *Can David Hare takes Manhattan?* 12 November 2006. 3 April 2013 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/nov/12/theatre.broadway>.

Wu, Duncan. *Six contemporary dramatists: Bennett, Potter, Gray, Brenton, Hare, Ayckbourn.* Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1996. Print.

Zozaya, Mireia & Aragay, Pilar. *The State of British Theatre Now: An Interview with Michael Billington.* London, 2004. Print.

Peña Anllo, Romina. "David Hare's *Skylight:* When the Political Becomes Personal." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.2 (2013): 50-61
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Bioprofile of the author: Romina Peña Anllo holds a Degree in English Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid. Throughout her studies, she received grants from the Ministry of Education for four consecutive years. The impact of the crisis on Education has resulted in many students losing their right to state sponsored financial support; which was why she decided to highlight this issue with her end-of-degree project fashioned on the contemporary day British drama; *David Hare's Skylight: When The Political Becomes Personal*.

Contact: <rominapena@ymail.com>