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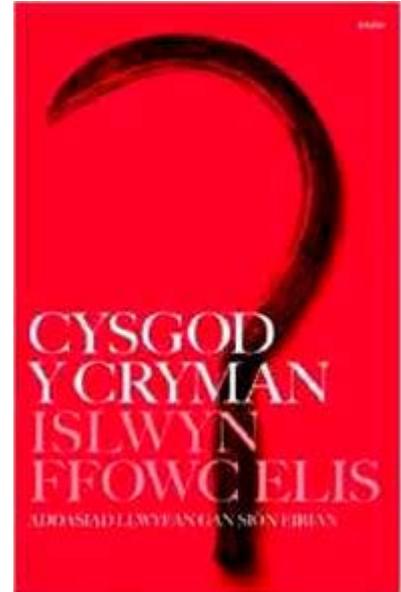
SHADOW OF THE SICKLE

ISLWYN FFOWC ELIS



INTRODUCTION

The novel *Cysgod y Cryman* by Islwyn Ffowc Elis (later translated into English by Meic Stephens and published under the title *Shadow of the Sickle*) was first published in 1953. It became a bestseller and was considered an important milestone in the history of the Welsh novel. It was first adapted for television and this stage adaptation by Siôn Eirian (who had already written an English adaptation for radio in 2002) and was first performed in February and March 2007 by Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru (The Welsh National Theatre).



THEME OF THE PLAY

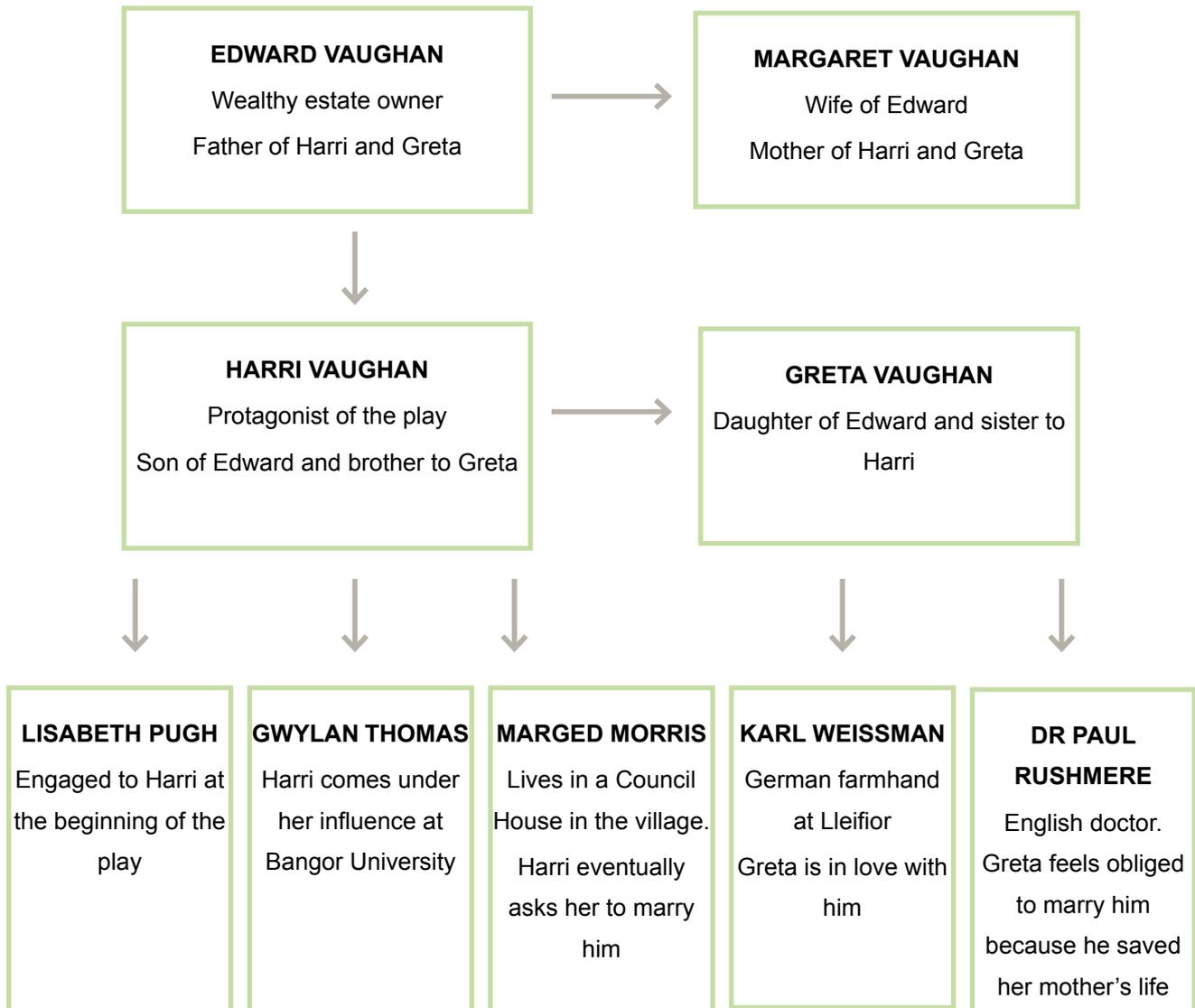
The theme of the play is the impact of one person's new ideas and beliefs on other people. In this instance it is the ideas and beliefs of the play's protagonist, Harri Vaughan. He is the son of Edward Vaughan, a wealthy estate owner (Lleifior farm) and a leader in the community. Harri is a student at Bangor University and there, under the influence of Gwylan Thomas, he becomes a communist and an atheist and it is this that leads to a long conflict between him and his father. It also has an impact on the rest of his family, his friends and his community, and one person in particular his fiancée, Lisabeth Pugh. Thus the significance of the title, *Shadow of the Sickle* – the sickle being the symbol of communism. His new ideas and beliefs throw a shadow over the people around him.

The period of the play is 1940s and its location is Powys. Although the theme of communism seems outdated by now following the end of the Cold War and the downfall of the Berlin Wall it remains relevant today. There are still examples of a person's ideas and beliefs having an impact on those he loves and cherishes, be they ideas about religion, sex or politics. There are also still examples today of new generations turning their backs on their roots.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

Adapting the novel for the stage was never an easy task because there are so many different characters and so many different locations. The same problem will arise when we discuss the staging of the play. The play as a result is episodic in its structure. There are two acts divided into 4 scenes each but within those scenes there are various locations. It can be argued that *Shadow of the Sickle* is Brechtian in style and it is worth discussing with the students what elements in the play make it so.

THE CHARACTERS



Some of the minor characters are Wil James, Terence, Robert Pugh, Eleanor Pugh and Gwdig John. In addition to these there are nine other minor roles. This suggests multi-roling when it comes to staging the play. However, care must be taken when choosing which actors to play more than one role. In the original production one criticism was that the actress playing Marged Morris (considered to be one of the more prominent characters) also played another character in another location.

HARRI VAUGHAN

The central character in the play is a charismatic character and any actor playing this part must realise this. He is a character who has many deep feelings and an inner conflict. He is a complicated character with many aspects. He not only becomes a communist and an atheist but he also rejects his fiancée, Lisabeth Pugh, starts an affair with Gwylan Thomas and eventually asks Marged Morris, who lives in a council house in the village, to marry him. Effective uses of voice and body movements



are therefore essential to portray the character successfully. The actor must show, using these skills, Harri's determination to stick to his principles and not bow to the beliefs of his father. He is so determined to turn his back on his father's way of living that he decides to quit university and applies for a job as a labourer with the local council.

EDWARD VAUGHAN

is another strong character. He is a wealthy estate owner and an old style Liberal. The actor portraying this role should consider carefully his posture on stage, his body should convey a confident and authoritative figure. He cannot accept anyone going against his wishes and definitely not anyone disputing his ideas and beliefs. This is what his son Harri does in the play and the scenes between father and son are full of dramatic tension. The tension between the two can be seen in the first few pages of the play e.g.

EDWARD *I want to see you maintaining the good name of the Vaughans. Respecting your ancestry.*

HARRI *Do you think that a name is important, Dad?*

EDWARD *It has been until now.*

HARRI *Remember that things change so quickly in the busy world out there...*

EDWARD *Places like Lleiflor are indestructible. They give security to the people living around them.....*

We come to feel sorry for Edward Vaughan towards the end of the play, that is when he loses out to Aerwennydd Francis as district councillor. After he loses the vote the stage direction describes his response thus:

Edward bows his head, as if his spirit sags under the disappointment of losing.

GWYLAN THOMAS

is a post-graduate student at Bangor University. She is a very forceful and determined character and under her influence Harri is first introduced to the ideas and beliefs of communism. When we first meet her in the play she presents Harri with a leaflet-*"The Fight for Socialism in Wales"*, and she refers to the manifesto of the Communist Party, anxious for him to read the Welsh translation. She also invites him to join her at the SocSoc meeting later that day. She is fond of mocking Harri for his wealthy background. We see this for example when she says, *"Your personal valet is still with you"*, when Harri's friend, Gwdig, joins them. She is very passionate about her cause. She is flirtatious and it is little wonder that Harri falls under her charms. She can be very persuasive and it is she that persuades Harri not to go ahead and marry Lisabeth Pugh, the daughter of another wealthy estate owner, since this would mean turning his back on his socialist ideals. The part of Gwylan is very challenging for any actress because she would have to use effective vocal and movement skills to convey these different aspects of her character.

Of the minor roles, **Wil James** is the most colourful character. He is a farmhand at Lleiflor and it is obvious from the beginning that he is a rogue and a blaggard. He detests the fact that Karl Weissman, a German, is working alongside him and exploits every situation to mock and ridicule him for being German. Wil James is a 1940s example of a racist and today he would surely be at the forefront condemning immigration. He constantly refers to Karl as 'Jerry'

and later in the play, he along with his cronies physically attack Karl as he is walking home to Lleifior. Karl is thrown to the ground and Wil kicks him more than once whilst he is down. It is not only Karl who suffers from Wil James' acid tongue. He mocks Harri as well for his University education. One day when Harri, home from college, joins them in the field, and his future in father in law, Robert Pugh, arrives, Wil's comment is:

"Your father in law, Harri, Coming to keep an eye on you. To see how you can handle a pitchfork after three years in college.

The role of Wil James would be a joy for any actor to portray.

THE STAGING OF THE PLAY

Because of the many different locations, *Shadow of the Sickle* is a very challenging play to stage. The locations vary, including kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms, in two farms, Lleifior and Trawscoed, outdoor scenes, a tavern bar and the Union at Bangor University. The designer for the original production was Martin Morley and in his design he settled for a revolving stage and on it was built a stepped spiral ramp. It was quick to install and was completely silent. Upstage was suspended a large projection screen onto which were shown location scenes.

A model of the stage in the original production is shown here.

It must be discussed with the students if this is the best option for staging "Cysgod y Cryman". Is this set too cumbersome and does it hinder the actions of the players?



With so many different locations would a more minimalistic set be more appropriate? Would the play work just as well on a bare stage using selective lighting to focus on the different locations, using a minimum of props and furniture?

Here is a costume sketch used in the original production



The director of the original production of *Cysgod y Cryman* was Cefin Roberts. This is what he had to say about the production.

"It's possible that 'Cysgod y Cryman' (Shadow of the Sickle) is one of the most well known of all Welsh novels. I remember reading it when I was very young and it made quite an impression on me at the time. The major themes are all here: a love story, the gap between two generations, politics, to name only three.

Staging an adaptation of a novel is a challenge to any director since the backdrop of most novels is much wider than the usual play, and this is certainly true of Islwyn Ffowc Elis' great novel. To add to the challenge, a large percentage of the audience will already have a definite picture of the characters and locations, especially 'Lleifior' itself. Indeed, it could be argued that 'Lleifior' is the central character of the novel. Therefore it's an impossible task for a director to please the whole audience.

Since Sion Eirian's adaptation adheres closely to the original plan of the novel the scenes change quickly from one location to another. I knew, as I approached the play as a director, that this would be an enormous challenge to Martin Morley, the set designer. He had to offer me possibilities to move and place my characters in those locations without any hindrance; from the college to the home and from the farmyard to the corn fields, and even to Bangor pier. That is why he designed a set on a revolve. This enabled us to change furniture and props easily between each scene and another. For example: whilst actors were performing a scene in the living room of Lleifior it was possible for technicians to prepare the next scene on the other side of the set and then turn it to face the audience when the time came. But as anyone

who has worked in the theatre knows it has its own difficulties. It can confine the acting space and it can create a headache for the lighting designer and slow down the technical running of the play since the technicians have one other element to add to their cues list. In addition, the cast had to get accustomed to working on a stage that moves!

It is possible, of course, to stage this kind of production on a simpler stage: projecting appropriate images on a backdrop to suggest a location; subtle lighting and appropriate props. I did not choose this option for my production for Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru since the company, at the time, had already staged a few productions in this style. Possibly, if I was to direct the script again in the future I would be inclined to go for a simpler set and make more use of lighting and sound. However, I do believe that the original design offered a spectacle that I wanted to give to the audience at the time.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cysgod y Cryman cover. Gwasg Gomer Cyf / Gomer Press Ltd

Harri Vaughan, *Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru*

Stage design - Martin Morley <http://martinpmorley.webplus.net/>

Costume design - Martin Morley <http://martinpmorley.webplus.net/>

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