

Summer 1967

The new British drama 1956-1966 : a critical study of four dramatists: John Osborne, Brendan Behan, Arnold Wesker, and John Arden

Jeanne Fenrick Bedell

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The New British Drama

1956-1966

A Critical Study of Four Dramatists:

John Osborne, Brendan Behan,
Arnold Wesker, and John Arden

A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

University of Richmond

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Approved for the Department of English

and the Graduate School by

James H. White
Director of Thesis

William B. Guthrie
Chairman of English
Department

Edward C. Pepl
Dean of the Graduate
School

by

Jeanne Fenrick Bedell

August, 1967

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Chapter I
Out of Apathy

"You swine! You swine!" a middle-aged man shouted at an actor as he rose from his seat in a London theatre and shook his fist at the stage.¹ The play which so enraged him was John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, and the character who provoked his wrath was Jimmy Porter, an angry young man whose vitriolic harangues against contemporary society embodied the dissent of his generation.

That emotional outburst in the Royal Court Theatre in the late spring of 1956 was both significant and symbolic. In the history of the English Theatre Look Back in Anger marked a decisive moment. After decades of tameness and remoteness, largely devoted to drawing-room comedies and revivals of the classics, the theatre was dragged out of apathy and into controversy. Look Back in Anger had one outstanding merit which rendered its defects almost negligible: it was "about life as

¹Leslie Paul, "The Angry Young Men Revisited," Kenyon Review, XVII (1965), 314.

we live it today."² Its view of life was young and leftist-- explicitly connected with the generation that has grown to maturity in postwar Britain. More important, it was shocking. Osborne's hero attacked with scorn, violence, vulgarity, and occasionally, real eloquence, all the traditional values and symbols of a moribund empire: the Royal Family, the BBC, the "posh" Sunday papers, the Anglican church, women, upper-class snobbishness, stiff upper lips, and middle-class respectability. He spoke in contemporary idiom, directly to and for his own dissident, unsatisfied generation, and he was speaking for millions. The new generation was rebelling against the old.

In the history of England as well as in the history of the English stage, 1956 was a momentous year. It was the year of Suez, the year that saw the effective destruction of the myth of the British empire. And it was the year of the Hungarian Revolution, which crushed liberal illusions about Soviet Russia. In 1956 the old idols were crumbling fast, and defense of tradition was fast becoming not only impossible but ludicrous. The bankruptcy of the older generation was apparent; it was time for the new to speak out.

That they spoke out in anger was largely a reaction to the apathy and smugness that characterized postwar England. The burst of excitement and enthusiasm which followed the

²George Devine, as quoted by Irving Wardle, "Revolt against the West End," Horizon, V (March, 1963), 27.

Labour victory in 1945 evaporated in the period of economic austerity and imperial decline that followed. The great hopes for a new and better society subsided into concentration on material goals. To rebuild a war-damaged economy, ensure a switch from wartime to peacetime production in industry, and to secure housing and employment for thousands of ex-servicemen were the pressing concerns of the Labour government. Nationalization of industry and national health insurance did not bring about the radical changes in social structure which their proponents had envisioned. As England entered the 1950's national apathy had become a recognized phenomenon. It was evident in almost all aspects of life: in the decline of the economic growth rate, decreasing attendance at trade union meetings and church services, lack of interest in political events, and frivolity in the arts. The England of this decade has often been called a "stagnant society," and the judgment seems valid.

The postwar period was, however, one which brought increased prosperity to the population of England. Although unable to compete efficiently in world markets, English industry thrived on Marshall Plan aid and domestic demand for material goods. As wages rose, the middle class settled down to enjoy suburban villas and mini-cars. The working class sank back in easy chairs bought on the "never-never" and watched the telly. Despite difficulties with the income tax man, the upper classes remained arbiters of taste and fashion. The Conservative victory in 1951 and the pomp of the coronation

in 1953 gave an Edwardian aura to a society on which the sun was setting fast.

Underneath this apathetic appearance were forces that were soon to culminate in far-reaching social changes. The generation which came to maturity in the 1950's was a product of the free and easy society of the war years, when class barriers had fallen before a common effort to achieve "victory at all costs." The artificial social stratification that prevailed after the war was a source of irritation to young men who found that, despite the election of a socialist government, working-class origins were still a handicap. Graduates of the "red brick" provincial universities, sporting regional accents, swarmed into London and found that an Oxbridge degree, a BBC accent, and "connections" were still the assets needed for professional advancement. They were frustrated and increasingly angered by the refusal of the powers-that-be to recognize the claims of youth.

In 1956 accumulated resentments began to burst forth. The forms were varied: juvenile delinquency, race riots, a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square to protest the Tory government's action at Suez, new books and plays written from a working-class viewpoint and definitely hostile to the status quo. As the decade passed, symptoms of revolt became more apparent. Political apathy gave way to involvement; leftist intellectuals founded the New Left Review in 1959, and young historians began to study contemporary and working-class

history. "Ban the Bomb" demonstrations were frequent. Then, in 1962, the Profumo scandal rocked Establishment prestige to its foundations and contributed to a Labour victory in 1964.

The England of 1967 faces grave moral and economic problems. But it is no longer clinging to the outworn conceptions of a vanished era. When England began withdrawing its forces "East of Suez," an era in modern history came to its symbolic end. When the Labour government began to press for entry into the European Common Market, England entered upon a course commensurate with its diminished position in world affairs.

Today the image of England has changed. The amazing success of the quartet from Liverpool and the "big beat" it popularized, youthful vigor in the arts, and the rise of Carnaby street as a fashion center have tended to produce a new type of society, one with an accent on youth. The typical Englishman is no longer a conservatively dressed gentleman who wears a bowler hat and carries a neatly furled umbrella. The new symbol of staid Britannia is a young girl in a mini-skirt.

What happened in the British theatre between 1945 and 1966 is a repetition of what happened in the country as a whole. A theatre which has been described as a "stuffed flunky"³ and called "hermetically sealed off from life"⁴ is now the best in

³Penelope Gilliatt, "A Decade that Destroyed 'A Stuffed Flunkey,'" Life, LX (May 20, 1966), 98.

⁴Arthur Miller as quoted by Kenneth Tynan, Curtains (New York, 1961), p. 162.

the world. The London theatre in the early fifties was completely divorced from reality. It subsisted on revivals of the classics, foreign imports, drawing-room comedies, barrack-room farces, and detective plays, none of which had any special relevance to life as it was lived in England in the second half of the twentieth century. It was an actors' theatre par excellence, and it was economically prosperous, a condition maintained by conscious catering to the tastes of an upper middle-class audience. The new plays were by established dramatists like Terence Rattigan and Noel Coward, competent craftsmen who provided audiences with a good evening's entertainment and sent them out of the theatre without a thought in their heads. The revivals, both in artistic and production quality, were excellent. In 1955-56 the following plays were produced on West End stages: Otway's venice Preserved, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, Pinero's His House in Order, Congreve's The Way of the World, Sheridan's The Rivals, and several plays by Shaw and Shakespeare. It is admittedly an admirable thing to revive the classics, but a theatre that does little else can be termed "live" only in the technical sense of the word. English drama critic Kenneth Tynan, writing in the London Observer in 1954, said, "The bare fact is, that, apart from revivals and imports, there is nothing in the London theatre that one dares discuss with an intelligent man for more than five minutes."⁵ The

⁵Tynan, Curtains, p. 85.

title of his article was "West End Apathy."

Tynan was not alone in lamenting the sad state of the English theatre, and by 1956 at least two groups were attempting to do something to remedy the situation. In 1953 Joan Littlewood had set up her Theatre Workshop in the East End of London in an effort to reach a working-class audience. Her success was limited, both by an inability to find new plays and by the refusal of her chosen audience to attend her theatre. Until 1956, when she produced Brendan Behan's The Quare Fellow, Miss Littlewood generally confined herself to revivals, scoring a notable critical success with Jonson's Volpone.

The real breakthrough in the creation of a vital English theatre came with the organization of the English Stage Company, a group originally formed to promote verse drama. The brainchild of Lord Harewood, J. E. Blacksell, and the poet Ronald Duncan, the English Stage Company secured financial backing from Yorkshire businessman Neville Blond, and, with a rather vague idea of what it actually wanted to do, hired George Devine as its artistic director. ⁶ Devine and Tony Richardson had been trying for three years to form a stage company and once they had financial support, they lost no time in getting to work. Devine's idea was to establish a writers' theatre and concentrate on producing new plays. After securing a thirty-four year's lease on the old Royal Court Theatre

⁶Wardle, "Revolt," p. 26.

in Sloane Square, Devine set out to find his new plays. An advertisement in the trade journal The Stage brought disappointing results, so he approached novelists Nigel Dennis and Angus Wilson and persuaded them to turn dramatist. Dennis dramatized his novel Cards of Identity, and Wilson wrote The Mulberry Bush especially for the English Stage Company.⁷ In April, 1956, the Royal Court opened with a repertoire of six plays. Only one play was by a new author, but that one play was John Osborne's Look Back in Anger.

Today drama critics speak of May 8, 1956, in roughly the same way historians speak of 1789. Phrases like "the revolution in the English theatre" are commonplace, and, like most sweeping generalizations, need modification. The first performance of Look Back in Anger did not bring about an immediate end to prevailing fashions on the London stage. It did not abolish apathy; it only dented it. But all revolutions, even in taste, begin somewhere, and in retrospect, Look Back in Anger stormed the gates of the Establishment bastille with an impact that still reverberates.

The first reviews of Osborne's play were almost all favorable; only the London Times was definitely hostile, and in the Sunday Observer Kenneth Tynan greeted it with enthusiastic praise:

⁷John Russell Taylor, Anger and After (Baltimore, 1963), p. 33.

I agree that Look Back in Anger is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of twenty and thirty I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see Look Back in Anger. It is the best young play of its decade.⁸

The usually ascerbic Mr. Tynan was a young man, not long out of Oxford in 1956, and he understood immediately the real importance of Osborne's play: it "presents post-war youth as it really is."⁹

Despite the reviewers' praise, Look Back in Anger was not an immediate popular success. Not until an extract was shown on television did attendance become heavy, but what happened after that is a legend. It has made John Osborne one of the richest playwrights in the world; it has been revived, translated, produced, and published in every important western nation, and it has been made into a motion picture. The play propelled the angry young man to stage center, shook the cobwebs from a decadent theatre, and inaugurated what that staid journal, the Times Literary Supplement, called "the best decade for British drama since the Restoration."¹⁰

Progress was slow at first. The Royal Court could end its first season with a profit only by reviving Wycherley's naughty

⁸ Tynan, Curtains, pp. 131-132.

⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁰ "Enter the Second Wave," Times Literary Supplement (July 29, 1965), p. 633.

The Country wife, an action that represented a compromise of artistic principles. The important thing, however, is the use to which the English Stage Company put the profits it made from that and subsequent revivals. In the years after 1956 it introduced to London audiences most of the new, young playwrights whose works would have gone unproduced by the dominant West End theatre hierarchy. From 1956 to 1963 the Royal Court presented plays by thirty-eight dramatists unknown to the London stage. Among the thirty-eight were: John Arden, Edward Bond, Ann Jellicoe, Doris Lessing, Alun Owen, N. F. Simpson, Shelagh¹¹ Delaney, Harold Pinter, and, of course, John Osborne.

The excitement generated by the Royal Court, Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, and the group of young dramatists they promoted spread throughout England. Events on the stage were paralleled by developments in television and films. Many of the new British dramatists, including Osborne, Wesker, Pinter, and Arden, have written for television. Young actors and directors with new ideas and techniques appeared, and directors like Peter Brook, Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson, and John Dexter were as important in giving impetus to artistic development as the playwrights.

The fifty-year decline in the physical condition of the theatre was halted; new playhouses were built in London and

¹¹Taylor, Anger and After, pp. 327-328.

the provinces. Provincial repertory groups sprang up, and some of them have achieved artistic and production standards of such excellence that they draw London critics to their opening performances.¹² They take risks with unknown dramatists and present controversial contemporary plays.

The financial picture for the English theatre is relatively bright. Both local and national authorities have stepped up financial aid to the arts. The long-hoped for national Theatre came into being in 1963, and under the direction of Peter Hall, the Royal Shakespeare Company is encouraging experimentation and presenting avant garde modern plays, along with new productions of Shakespeare.

Most of the young British dramatists who have come forward since 1956 belong to the realistic tradition in the drama. With the exceptions of Harold Pinter and N. F. Simpson, who belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, they deal primarily with the concrete world. If they use parable, allegory, fantasy, non-realistic stage devices, or poetic language, they do so in order to reveal the social fabric of twentieth century life. Representing various strands of the trend towards realistic appraisal of contemporary life are the four playwrights under discussion in this paper: John Osborne, Brendan Behan, Arnold Wesker, and John Arden.

¹²Jeremy Rundall, "Fresh Sap for the Withered Tree," Tulane Drama Review, XI (Winter, 1966), 137.

Osborne, who had made the greatest impact upon the public of any of the new English dramatists, has made that impact by revealing in his plays many of the issues that perplex Englishmen at mid-century. Behan, an Irishman, shares with his English colleagues a distrust of the prevalent mores of contemporary society, but he expresses in his plays a joyous affirmation of the value of life which is missing from their work. Wesker, reflecting both his own origins and the changing character of English society, emphasizes various facets of working-class life. Arden has turned to ballad literature in an effort to set the life of today in a literary and historical tradition. All four have received critical acclaim, and all illustrate the impact of present-day British life upon the drama.

Chapter II

John Osborne, Spokesman for a Generation

John Osborne is now a world-famous figure, but when Look Back in Anger was first accepted for production in 1956, he was an out-of-work actor living on unemployment benefits and gifts of money from his barmaid mother. Born in 1929 in Fulham in southwest London, Osborne was educated at state schools and Belmont College, a boarding school. His formal education ended at sixteen when he was expelled from Belmont for hitting a master.¹ His subsequent work history included a job as a writer for the trade journal The Gas World and a long succession of acting jobs in provincial repertory. He has been married three times, twice to actresses; his current wife is a drama critic for the London Observer.

Osborne possesses a remarkable talent for self-publicizing. Since 1956 he has waged a one-man war against what he considers the stupidity of the English press. He has rarely

¹Robert Hancock, "Anger," Spectator, CLXVIII (April 15, 1957), 438.

neglected an opportunity to lambast his country or his critics, and he has heaped scorn on such respected national institutions as the monarchy, football, and religion. An undoubtedly egotistical young man, Osborne is handsome in personal appearance, a dandy in dress, and a leftist in politics. He calls himself a socialist, but his definition of a socialist as "a man who doesn't believe in raising his hat"² implies that his socialism is an attitude toward life, not a political philosophy. In the mid-fifties he was obsessed by class consciousness and emphatic about proclaiming his own working-class origins. All his personal prejudices and his vehement dislike of contemporary England were embodied in his first produced play, Look Back in Anger.

Look Back in Anger is a battlecry as well as a play, and it is difficult to extract it from its historical context and discuss it as drama. But it must be said at once that its great impact on audiences, "the biggest shock to the system of British theatre since Shaw,"³ arose from its content, not its form. Osborne has called Look Back in Anger "a formal, rather old-fashioned play,"⁴ and structurally, that is what it is--a well-made, realistic play written for the picture frame stage.

²Kenneth Tynan, "The Men of Anger," holiday, XXIII (May, 1958), 179.

³Taylor, Anger and After, p. 37.

⁴John Osborne, "That Awful Museum," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (February, 1961), 214.

It is in three acts, with a climactic speech by the hero at the end of the first two acts and a reconciliation between the hero and heroine at the end of the third. As a study of an unhappy marriage, which is what the play basically is, it is far less revolutionary than A Doll's House. The plot is simple: the hero and his wife quarrel, separate, and in the end are reconciled.

What shocked British audiences in 1956 was the character of Look Back in Anger's working class hero, Jimmy Porter. Jimmy was opinionated, aggressive, articulate, and university-educated, a far cry from the stereotyped servants and batmen who had so long represented the working class on the English stage. He was poor, sold candy to earn his living, and lived in an attic, but Look Back in Anger is not proletarian drama. For two and one-half hours Jimmy slings mud at English society; he hates it because he cannot find a niche or a way toward meaningful existence, but there is not even a hint that he would be any different in a reconstructed society. He displays a paradoxical nostalgia for the Edwardian era, a period which he certainly would have found as irritating as his own. He was a completely realized and exciting character who echoed so faithfully what so many young men (and women) were saying that youthful audiences ignored the play's faults and embraced its hero as a new Everyman.

Jimmy's relations with society are inextricably mingled with his attitude toward his wife, Alison. Criticism of one

leads to criticism of the other. In the opening minutes of the play Jimmy uses sarcastic assessment of the contents of the Sunday papers as a springboard to attacks on the "pusillanimous" nature of his upper-class wife and her family. Jimmy cannot come to any sort of terms with society, and he cannot communicate with his wife except in a game called "squirrels and bears." Only by retreating into a primitive world can he and Alison achieve even physical communion. The retreat from life resolves nothing. A phone call from Alison's friend, Helena, near the end of Act I, dissolves their momentary intimacy and prevents Alison's telling Jimmy of her pregnancy. Jimmy is violently jealous of anything that robs him of Alison's undivided attention. The act ends with a vituperative tirade in which Jimmy characterizes his wife as a "python" who is trying to destroy him.

The first scene of Act II is largely a repetition of Act I except that Helena has joined the ménage in the attic. The attacks against Alison and society continue. Jimmy shouts, "I've no public school scruples against hitting girls," and calls Alison "white, messy and disgusting."⁵ In scene two Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, who has been summoned by Helena, arrives to take Alison away. Col. Redfern is the only really sympathetic character in the play, and Osborne demonstrates the limitations of the "angry young man" label by

⁵Osborne, Look Back in Anger (New York, 1963), pp. 60, 56.

showing amazing insight into the character of a displaced Edwardian:

Perhaps Jimmy is right. Perhaps I am a--what was it? An old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness. And I can't understand why the sun isn't shining any more. . . . It was March, 1914, when I left England . . . and I didn't see much of my own country until we came back in '47. Oh, I knew things had changed But it seemed very unreal to me, out there. The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way. Besides, I had the Maharajan's army to command-- that was my world, and I loved it, all of it. . . . When I think of it now, it seems like a dream. . . . I think the last day the sun shone was when that dirty little train steamed out of that crowded, suffocating Indian station, and the battalion band playing for all it was worth. I knew in my heart it was all over then. Everything.⁶

In Act III, which takes place several months later, Helena has become Jimmy's mistress. But when Alison, who has lost her baby, returns, Helena exits gracefully, and a final, painful reconciliation occurs. Alison makes a melodramatic speech during which she says, "Don't you see! I'm in the mud at last! I'm grovelling! I'm crawling!"⁷ It is complete capitulation, and Jimmy is momentarily awed. Nothing, however, is resolved. The "poor squirrels" and "poor bears" embrace, still unable to cope with life.

The most outstanding flaw in Look Back in Anger, and in Osborne's subsequent plays, is his inability to write anything except monologues. His characters make speeches; the dialogue

⁶ Ibid., pp. 83-84.

⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

is often witty and laden with sarcasm, but there is no real give-and-take, no organic response, between the characters. Jimmy talks at everybody; he is on a perpetual soapbox. Alison is a conventional character, a long-suffering wife who loves her husband despite his sadistic treatment of her. Helena is passive; she simply does what is expected of her in every situation, too enervated to make any effort to assert herself. Cliff, Jimmy's friend, who was onstage most of the time, seems superfluous. He explains Jimmy to Alison, Helena, and the audience. Jimmy needs no explanation. The plot is occasionally creaky. It is difficult to believe that so modern a young man as Jimmy Porter would not have been aware that his wife was pregnant. The scenes in which Cliff and Helena urge Alison to tell Jimmy about her condition would have been appropriate in a Victorian melodrama; they are out of pace with the strong contemporary flavor of Look Back in Anger. The "whimsey" of the final reconciliation scene has been noted by every critic who saw the play. Yet the "squirrels" and "bears" game represented the only logical ending. The feeling that life is too difficult, too destructive to be met "in the light of common day" is central to the characterization of both Jimmy and Alison. The game may have looked ridiculous on the stage, but it has the ring of truth.

Look Back in Anger is a one-man show all the way. What makes it the most important play of its decade is the character of that one man, the most exciting to appear on an English

stage in at least forty years. He said things too long left unsaid and expressed attitudes too long unexpressed. He spoke at full volume for a generation demanding to be heard, and he captured public attention for his dissentient contemporaries.

In Osborne's second play, The Entertainer (1957), he made an attempt to escape realistic stage convention by using English music hall techniques as a Brechtian "endistancing" framework. The thirteen "numbers" of the play alternately show the domestic and professional life of Archie Rice, the entertainer of the title. At home Archie is a shallow, unfeeling failure whose constant infidelity has made his wife an alcoholic. He is unable to communicate effectively with his children or feel more than momentary grief when his son Mick is killed in the Suez invasion. His most callous action is to persuade his father Billy, a great performer during the halcyon days of the music hall, to return to the stage to rescue him from financial disaster. Billy dies, and after his funeral Archie's brother offers to settle his debt with Inland Revenue if Archie and his family will go to Canada and try to make a new start. Refusal means jail for income tax evasion. Archie chooses jail; failure is so ingrained in him that he will not make any effort to succeed.

On stage Archie is a fourth-rate comedian who mixes lewd and not very funny jokes with a song and dance routine. He performs in a nude review, against a backdrop of naked women attached to a gauze curtain.

The expressionistic music hall scenes serve a double purpose: they are both a commentary on the domestic action and an attempt at allegory. The dying music hall is Osborne's symbol for England in 1956. Archie's songs, "Why Should I Care" and "Number One's the Only One for Me" comment on his personal decay and that of his country. In one number the Union Jack and the song "Land of Hope and Glory," which Archie sings as the spotlight shines on a gauze nude wearing Britannia's helmet, are used to further the allegory. On the printed page the symbolism seems labored, and only once does Osborne achieve a real synthesis between the falling performer and his faltering country. For one moment, when Archie says, "Don't clap too hard--it's a very old building," the identification is complete.⁸

But such moments are rare. Like Look Back in Anger, The Entertainer is a one-man show. Osborne's inability to construct shared scenes is again obvious. There is no real interaction between the characters, and the domestic scenes are tedious when Archie is absent. Jean, Archie's daughter, is a colorless leftist dragged in to represent young England. Billy Rice is the only sympathetic character in the play, but, unfortunately, he is a hymn-singing bore who talks too much about the good old days. Phoebe, Archie's wife, is a bewildered

⁸Osborne, The Entertainer (New York, 1958), p. 59.

drunk who cannot understand why life has not lived up to her expectations.

In performance the abrupt transitions between realistic and expressionistic scenes achieved, to some extent, the distancing effect Osborne desired. The sharp contrasts prevented any real structural unity, but on stage this flaw was glossed over by a virtuoso performance by Sir Laurence Olivier in the title role. It is, however, difficult to believe that even a great actor could have disguised the shallowness of the allegory. Osborne's fumbling use of Brechtian technique is relatively unimportant. What matters is his inability to present social conflict or achieve any analytical approach to his subject. No effective contrast to the described decadence is ever presented. Osborne simply lashes out emotionally; there is no thought behind his condemnation of society. The Entertainer is an interesting social commentary on a specific situation, but it is too limited in outlook to have any long-term significance.

Epitaph for George Dillon, although not performed until 1958, was written by Osborne and Anthony Croighton before 1956. Its hero is a neurotic actor-playwright, who sponges off a suburban family until he compromises his artistic integrity by selling out to commercialism and achieving financial success. Osborne's heroes are all failures; George is no exception.

The Elliot family with whom George lives represent suburban vulgarity at its worst. Their furniture, their conversation,

and even their food are caricatures of middle-class life. Mrs. Elliot characterizes herself in a sentence when she tells her husband, "I don't mind you swearing at the back door, but the front door--well--." ⁹ Her daughter Josie is a prying, sex-crazy adolescent, and Norah, the other Elliot daughter, is a colorless spinster. Mr. Elliot is a nonentity. Into this stimulating atmosphere comes George Dillon, whom Mrs. Elliot has met at work. Impressed with George's status as an artist, she offers him a place to live and the use of the savings of her dead son. George remains, seduces Josie, contracts TB, goes off to be cured, returns, rewrites his play, and re-names it Telephone Tart. When the play ends, George is a "success."

On the surface George is like Osborne's other heroes, angry, dissatisfied, and filled with self-pity. However, in Epitaph he is given, in Mrs. Elliot's sister Ruth, an adversary capable of standing up to him. In the Act II scene between Ruth and George real dramatic conflict occurs. George's statements are challenged; he gains insight into himself and begins to question the authenticity of his talent:

What is worse is having the same symptoms as talent, the pain, the ugly swellings, the lot--but never knowing whether or not the diagnosis is correct.¹⁰

⁹Osborne and Anthony Creighton, Epitaph for George Dillon in Penguin Plays (Baltimore, 1964), p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 59.

Because neither Osborne nor Creighton has commented on their method of collaboration, it is impossible to know how much Creighton contributed to this scene. However, in view of Osborne's predilection for monologues, it would appear that much of the effectiveness of the Ruth-George duologue is due to his working with Creighton.

The dramatic interaction in Spitash makes it one of the best constructed of Osborne's plays. George's ultimate decision to pursue "success" arises directly out of his self-revealing conversation with Ruth, thus giving the play a properly motivated conclusion.

The World of Paul Slickey (1959), an expressionistic musical, was Osborne's one real flop. Intended as a satire against conventional drawing-room comedy, it is a ragbag of attacks on practically everything--the press, the Tories, the aristocracy, rock n' roll music, and sex, which Osborne thinks has degenerated into mere lust. The play has many witty lines and a couple of good satirical scenes. In scene three Lady Mortlake of Mortlake Hall wanders about her drawing room arranging flowers, like innumerable heroines of innumerable drawing-room comedies. Her husband is dying, and her daughter comments on her bravery: "I remember how she was when they gave away India. But she's been even more wonderful this time."¹¹

¹¹ Osborne, The World of Paul Slickey (New York, 1959), p. 21.

A few good scenes are not enough to save Paul Slickey. Osborne goes off on so many tangents that the play winds up a hodgepodge of bits and pieces. The conclusion, in which the major characters change sex, is confusing and ridiculous. And the songs are not very singable:

It's a consideration we'd do well to bear in mind
 We can safely say in a not un pompous way
 blind
 Them with words! ¹²

Richard Findlater, an admirer of Osborne, said that the actors in Paul Slickey had real difficulty in singing the songs, partly because of a poor score, but also because Osborne cannot write "singable and scannable lyrics."¹³

Osborne reacted to the plays disastrous reviews by writing an introduction to its published version:

No one has ever dedicated a string quartet to a donkey although books have been dedicated to critics. I dedicate this play to the liars and self-deceivers; to those who daily deal out treachery; to those who handle their professions as instruments of debasement; to those who, for a salary cheque and less, successfully betray my country; and those who will do it for no inducement at all. In this bleak time when such men have never had it so good, this entertainment is dedicated to their boredom, their incomprehension, their distaste¹⁴

This stunning piece of invective is worth more than the whole of Paul Slickey.

¹² Ibid., p. 29.

¹³ Richard Findlater, "The Case of P. Slickey," Twentieth Century, CLXVII (January, 1960), 38.

¹⁴ Osborne, Paul Slickey, p. 5.

The jacket blurb to the Signet edition of Luther (1961) says that London critics greeted it as Osborne's finest achievement. Jacket blurbs are notoriously inaccurate; this one, sadly, is correct. Luther was both a critical and popular success in London.¹⁵ But despite the praise it received, it is a meaningless charade. And its hero is a constipated neurotic straight out of a psychiatrist's casebook.

According to rumor, Osborne wrote Luther in a few weeks after seeing Brecht's Galileo and reading Erik Erikson's Young Man Luther and Norman Brown's Life against Death.¹⁶ Meaningful historical drama requires a sound knowledge of the political, economic, and cultural background of the period. Osborne tackled the subject of the Reformation with a shallow understanding of Freudian psychology; his Luther is a peevish monk whose revolt against the Roman Catholic Church was brought about by an ill-functioning digestive system.

Brecht's Galileo is a tragic figure, a scientist who bartered his integrity for personal comfort and a chance to continue his work in secret. The conflict between Galileo's inner desires and the power of the Inquisition is clearly presented,

¹⁵Several London critics have strong reservations about Luther. Both Taylor, Anger and After, pp. 53-55, and Martin Esslin, "Brecht and the English Theatre," Tulane Drama Review, XI (winter, 1966), 69, find essentially the same faults in the play as I have done.

¹⁶Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater," Partisan Review, XXXI (1964), 96.

and the self-knowledge which gives Galileo his tragic stature arises directly out of the conflict between individual and social forces.

It is perhaps unfair to compare a competent dramatist with a master, a bad play with a great play, but a man must be judged by his intentions as well as his achievements. As an attempt at historical drama in Brecht's manner Luther is a complete failure. Despite the scenes depicting Luther with Cajetan, the papal emissary, at the Diet of Worms, there is no real social conflict in the play. An Luther's inner conflict, the great question of his relationship with God, is, in the play, merely a Freudian conflict with his earthly father. The real Luther was intent, first and above all, on saving his immortal soul; Osborne's Luther is intent on evacuation.¹⁷ The anal imagery, which pervades Luther's conversation in the play, has a certain basis in medieval folklore where the devil and excrement were closely associated. That Luther himself used popular terminology in his references to the devil is certain, but Osborne's over-use of it tends to reduce spiritual crisis to the level of a barnyard squabble.

¹⁷ Osborne's view of Luther is essentially that of Erik H. Erikson, Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History (New York, 1962). I had read Erikson before reading Osborne's play and was immediately struck by the similarity of their views. Osborne is indebted to Erikson for the "fit in the choir" scene, the idea that Luther felt the Gospels to be his mother, and the father-son conflict as the basis for Luther's rebellion against the church. Both Erikson and Norman Brown, Life against Death (New York, 1959) emphasize the anal elements in Luther's writings.

Historical accuracy is not required of a dramatist; believable characterization is. The overwhelming fault of Luther is that its protagonist could not have done what Osborne says he did. He lacks the emotional and intellectual depth necessary to create anything. He could not possibly have attacked, battled, and conquered the powerful edifice of the medieval Catholic Church.

Structurally, Luther is a series of scenes, each introduced by a knight who acts as narrator. The dialogue is a series of rhetorical monologues, and the only really theatrically exciting scene in the play is Tetzels sales oration--Madison Avenue selling indulgences. The peasant revolt, an event important in the development of both Luther and the Reformation is described at second hand by the knight, and the motivation for Luther's action is never made clear. Osborne was unable to provide Luther with an opponent of stature or to dramatize effectively his conflict with the Catholic hierarchy.

In 1962 The Royal Court produced Osborne's two slight one-acters collectively titled Plays for England. The first of these, The Blood of the Bamburghs, is a heavy-handed attempt to use the Princess Margaret-Antony Armstrong-Jones marriage as a vehicle for satire. An essentially implausible situation (the substitution of a look-alike photographer for a royal prince in a royal marriage) is burdened with adolescent dialogue and unbelievable characters.

The second of the plays, Under Plain Cover, is more

Interesting, but almost as bad as The Blood of the Bamburgs. Under Plain Cover depicts a "modern" marriage between a brother and sister who act out sado-masochistic fantasies in their suburban villa. Osborne uses one of their parlor games to attack obliquely the critics of Look Back in Anger. The couple discuss a pair of knickers in the same language which the Times used to dismiss Osborne's first play:

the final gesture is totally inadequate, irrelevant, and with a basic failure to be coherent
It seems to me these knickers are speaking out of a private obsessional world--18

The fantasy scenes are a fairly humorous comment on modern marriage fetishes, but Osborne's obsession with the press caused him to drag in a reporter who disrupts the idyll and exploits the situation in order to sell newspapers. The two situations never fuse, and the final scene, in which the reporter bangs at the door of the incestuous household and yells, "You can't escape the world," is meaningless. The characters have done it.

The ineptitude of Osborne's technique in Luther and Plays for England led some of his critics to believe that nothing of significance could be expected of him. ¹⁹ Then, in 1964,

¹⁸ Osborne, Under Plain Cover in Plays for England (New York, 1963), p. 117. For the source of this passage I am indebted to Hallam Edwards, who wrote a letter to the Times Literary Supplement (May 31, 1962), 389, criticizing their failure to notice it.

¹⁹ George Wellwarth, The Theater of Protest and Paradox (New York, 1964), p. 233.

he came forward with Inadmissible Evidence, and once again he managed to do what he had done in Look Back in Anger--to speak out so forcefully for his generation that his disabilities seemed unimportant. Bill Maitland, the middle-aged protagonist of Inadmissible Evidence, is another Jimmy Porter. Older, less sure of himself, and a man who disintegrates before the eyes of the audience, he is nevertheless a representative figure. In a moving article, Ronald Bryden, a man of Osborne's age, wrote of the play's impact on him:

He is still the voice of my generation. . . . There we were again on the stage, our inmost selves: older, unhappier, self-accusing, but recognized, spoken for. . . . Maitland's is a national dread: he is the generation in power in Britain, he is his own boss, and his sense of failure is mixed up with Britain's inability to cope with the world. . . . In this time, in this place, Osborne has gathered our English terrors in Maitland's image and purged them pitifully and terribly. He has not written everybody's tragedy. He has written ours.²⁰

Osborne caught the essence of his real talent when he described himself as "one who speaks out of the real despairs, frustrations, and sufferings of the age we are living in now, at this moment."²¹ Bill Maitland is every man who approaches forty with the realization that his life is empty and meaningless and that his youthful dreams have come to nothing. He is frightened by the mad technology of the hydrogen bomb era. He

²⁰ Ronald Bryden, "Everyosborne," New Statesman, LXVIII (September 18, 1964), 410.

²¹ John Osborne as quoted by Frederick Lunley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama (New York, 1967), p. 222.

is appalled by the mediocrity of his contemporaries, "flatulent, purblind mating weasels."²² And, most of all, he is appalled and frightened by himself. Overwhelmed with guilt and wracked by despair and self-pity, he lives on alcohol and pep pills in an effort to hold himself together. He cannot do it; the play is a drama of disintegration.

Inadmissible Evidence opens with a dream sequence, a trial in which Maitland faces the accusation that his life is an obscenity. He cannot defend himself; he realizes that he has "depended almost entirely on others' efforts,"²³ that he has failed to achieve even the simple desires for love and friendship. He is confused, and, finally, lost: "I am not equal to any of it, I can't forget it. And I can't begin again."²⁴

Logically, the statements in the prologue should come at the end of the play, but Osborne gains in theatrical excitement by presenting them first. Maitland's real adversary is himself: by showing first the hell he thinks his life to be, the steps to hell, the rest of play, gain in dramatic intensity.

After the opening scene, Inadmissible Evidence is a series of confrontations with other characters which reveal Maitland to himself. In his relations with his managing clerk, who actually keeps the business going, lawyer Maitland is seen as

²² Osborne, Inadmissible Evidence (New York, 1965), p. 24.

²³ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

an incompetent shyster. With his secretaries he becomes an aging lecher, with his wife and children, a rejected husband and father. A series of interviews with clients shows Maitland losing contact completely; he withdraws so totally into his personal world that he and the clients, ostensibly discussing legal cases, really talk about entirely different things. At the end of the play, deserted and alone, he sits at his desk, confused and overcome by the unsolvable difficulties of human existence.

Maitland is a monologist, but in this instance his creator has made a virtue out of his greatest fault. Maitland has lost the ability to communicate; he is isolated from human contact. This is his tragedy, his total incapacity to come to grips with life in the form of another human being. The monologue is his natural form of expression.

In this play Osborne has modified his vitriolic condemnation of society: instead of being specific, it is general--an attack on the mechanistic civilization of the twentieth century that has deified technological change and denied humanity. He has integrated his criticism with the character of his protagonist. Maitland is guilty; he takes the blame for his failure, but he is also the product of a dehumanized society. Osborne has always wanted to characterize his age. Bill Maitland does it when he says, "I seem to have lost my

drift."²⁵ He is Everyman, lost in an incomprehensible world, drifting towards disaster.

Inadmissible Evidence is Osborne's major accomplishment. Rejecting imitation of Brecht, he has found a workable form of expressionism. Osborne has said that he prefers to write for a conventional stage and make his "breakthrough" by use of language.²⁶ Here he does it; the quality of Maitland's rhetoric conveys his gradual dissolution. His language becomes progressively out of step with what is happening around him, progressively unreal. And by generalizing his social criticism, Osborne has managed to write a play with real meaning for his contemporaries without being parochial.

In A Patriot for Me (1965) Osborne once again attempted historical drama in the Brechtian manner. Although a better play than Luther, A Patriot for Me reveals Osborne's inability to draw meaningful parallels between past and present. Set in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the years preceding World War I, the play is based upon the factual case of Alfred Redl, a homosexual Austrian army officer, who was blackmailed into spying for Tsarist Russia. Osborne's picture of a declining empire was obviously meant to recall the British Empire's drift to ruin. Neither his protagonist (a "patriot" who

²⁵Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶Osborne, "That Awful Museum," p. 214.

betrays his country to save his own skin) nor his command of history is strong enough to support the allegorical framework. The historical background is so sketchy that Martin Esslin was uncharitably moved to describe A Patriot for Me as "a Viennese operetta minus the music."²⁷

As a play about the problem of homosexuality in contemporary England, A Patriot for Me has real merit. Redl is a sympathetic character for about half its length, and Osborne has handled a difficult subject with perceptiveness and delicacy. Redl first appears as a young lieutenant in the Galician infantry; by merit he eventually rises to hold a high position in the counter-espionage department of the Austrian General Staff.

Written in twenty-nine scenes, A Patriot for Me falls roughly into three parts: in the first Redl is brought gradually to a realization of his homosexual nature; in the second his frailty is discovered by the Russians, and he is forced to betray his country; in the third his careless pursuit of pleasure draws his weakness to the attention of Austrian authorities, and he commits suicide. The portrait that emerges is that of a sensitive, ambitious young man, who is struggling with a dark and unperceived side of his nature. The final scene of Act I, in which Redl's homosexuality becomes overt, is profoundly

²⁷ Esslin, "Brecht and the English Theatre," p. 69.

shocking--not because the audience has not been properly prepared for it, but because it represents the tragic fall of a good man. The opening scene of Act II is one of the most brilliant Osborne has written. Set in a Vienna ballroom in 1902, it glitters with elegant costumes and Mozart's music. Only gradually does the audience realize that all the guests are male, that it is witnessing a "drag ball."²⁸ The image of decadence presented by the ball sets the tone for what follows.

Unfortunately, what follows does not live up to the promise of the first portion of the play. Redl's moral disintegration is superbly motivated, but the parallel between his decay and that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is not believable. Although homosexuality, which Osborne presents as prevalent among the Austrian army hierarchy, is only a symbol for decadence, it is not a powerful enough symbol to explain the disintegration of Austria-Hungary. The Hapsburg Empire, like the British, fell victim to the powerful forces of nationalism. Individual and/or group treason were quite immaterial; no matter how moral or conscientious the Austrian bureaucracy had been it was incapable of withstanding the surge of nationalism that beset it on all sides. To write meaningful historical drama without

²⁸ Osborne's stage directions are extremely detailed; he emphasizes that the fact that the ball is a homosexual gathering must be gradually revealed to the audience. According to Ronald Bryden, "Osborne at the Ball," New Statesman, LXV (July 9, 1965), 58, Osborne's intention was realized in the Royal Court performance.

an understanding of so fundamental a force is impossible.

And Redl himself becomes less credible as the play winds to its melodramatic conclusion. His pursuit of pleasure completely dominates his life. One young man succeeds another in his affections until one is left with no feeling except boredom.

It seems probable that Osborne's handling of the theme of homosexuality in A Patriot for Me owes something to the Profumo scandal, a contemporary event in which sexual degradation did neatly symbolize the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the English ruling class. His ball scene, which masterfully captures the taste of a decadent, pleasure-seeking aristocracy, has the sense of provocative immediacy that distinguishes all his best work. It is, however, unfortunate that Osborne felt compelled to enclose his psychological study of homosexuality in an epic framework. To see a man in his society it is necessary to have a knowledge of the historical and cultural character of that society. The only society which Osborne seems capable of understanding is that of the mid-twentieth century. When he talks about the present he speaks with authority and perceptiveness. When he talks about the past, he is shallow and misleading.

The structure of A Patriot for Me apparently owes a great deal to Osborne's work in films. The multiplicity of cross-cutting scenes, although their arrangement sometimes seems random, yields a panoramic effect. The device is generally effective, and its use enables Osborne to reveal Redl's

disintegration gradually over a period of years. The play is padded, however, and short on incident. Several of the scenes between Redl and his homosexual companions could easily have been omitted. Not only are they markedly distasteful, in contrast to the sensitive manner in which Redl's early self-discovery was made, but they add nothing to an understanding of his character.

Osborne has subdued his normal eloquence in A Patriot for Me, but his dialogue reveals more interaction, more real communication between characters than in any of his previous plays. Redl's interviews with the Countess Sophia Delyanoff and the Russian Spymaster Colonel Oblensky bare his innermost nature. To the Countess he reveals the perverted passion that torments him:

I love Stefan. . . . So: tonight's your wedding night. I tell you this: you'll never know that body like I know it. The lines beneath his eyes. . . . And the scar behind his ear, and the hair in his nostrils, which has the most, what colour they are in what light? The mole on where? I know the place here, between the eyes, the dark patches like slate--like blue when he's tired, really tired, the place for a blow or a kiss or a bullet. You'll never know like I know, you can't you've never looked at him, you never will.²⁹

To Oblensky he displays both the remnants of sensitivity and the vulgarity and selfishness of his corroded nature. In the conversation with Oblensky the interaction of the dialogue

²⁹Osborne, A Patriot for Me (London, 1966), p. 101.

is particularly tight.³⁰

In 1963 Kenneth Tynan, Literary Manager of the National Theatre, asked Osborne to adapt Lope de Vega's La Plinza Satisfecha. The result, A Bond Honoured, was presented at the National Theatre in June, 1966. The immediate reaction of London drama critics was to find the play "inexplicable" and "unpalatable." The reviewers in the Sunday papers, who had a few days to ponder its significance, were more favorable. Alan Brien of the Sunday Telegraph found A Bond Honoured a "serious, ambitious and valuable play," but he admitted that he had seen it twice and that it first appeared "a jumpy sequence of ill-digested themes."³¹

Osborne says that he undertook the adaptation because of his interest in the Christian framework of the play and "the potentially fascinating dialectic with the principal character."³² What emerged is a study in the nature of violence that owes no small debt to the Brook-Narowitz "Theatre of Cruelty" experiments. Antonin Artaud, whose dramatic writings provided the basis for the "Theatre of Cruelty," aimed at a totality of theatrical experience which would re-invoke pre-logical mentality and reveal the "blind appetite for life" underlying human experience. Influenced by the metaphysical tendencies of

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 112-116.

³¹ Magnus Turnstile, "Puny Critics?" New Statesman, LXXXI (June 17, 1966), 874-876.

³² Osborne, "Author's Note," A Bond Honoured (London, 1966), p. 9.

the Eastern theatre, Artaud wanted the theatre to "confront the existential horror behind all social and psychological facades."³³ A Bond Honoured, with its emphasis on physical cruelty, blood, and violence, conforms in outward essentials to the ritualized horror that has come to characterize "Theatre of Cruelty" productions.

Osborne's hero, Leonido, who rapes his mother and sister and blinds his father, is portrayed as a man driven to defy God. His internal conflict is between his reasonable delight in the law of God and that other law, "in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity."³⁴ The bond he makes with God is his final promise to accept eternal punishment in return for his earthly defiance. Why Leonido is so driven to defiance and so filled with hatred is never really apparent. The only clue lies in his line "I can't forgive what I can't remake."³⁵

A Bond Honoured is composed of eight scenes, and the action in all of them is entirely arbitrary. After Leonido's sister-mistress marries, he duels with her husband and their father. He is then captured by a party of Moors, goes to Tunis as the master of the king who captured him, and is eventually dragged off to honor his bond. Leonido is simply cruel in the normal

³³Charles Marowitz, "Notes on the Theatre of Cruelty," Tulane Drama Review, XI (Winter, 1966), 172.

³⁴Osborne, A Bond Honoured, p. 52.

³⁵ibid., p. 16.

sense of the word, "a camp thug from an age of faith," as D. A. N. Jones described him with exact accuracy.³⁶ His self-conflict may be pre-logical in origin; it is certainly illogical.

Osborne's fling with the "Theatre of Cruelty" is an interesting experiment, which demonstrates his unwillingness to be bound by any one dramatic convention. But it has no real importance.

The most amazing things about John Osborne are his fecundity and his ever-broadening scope. He has produced ten plays in ten years, and even unsuccessful ventures like Luther and A Bond Honoured demonstrate the diversity of his talent. Although he has constantly experimented with new subjects and forms, his work remains intensely personal. The monologue is still his natural form of expression, but one of the most interesting aspects of A Patriot for Me was his newly-won ability to write meaningful dialogue. With the possible exception of Inadmissible Evidence, he has not been able to contain his eloquence within a coherent, logically developed framework.

Yet he is the most exciting playwright in the English-speaking theatre. His greatest strength is his contemporaneity. He has imprisoned in his plays, even the bad ones, the tension of modern life. He has moved away from social realism and disregarded the acutely class-conscious attitude embodied

³⁶ D. A. N. Jones, "Hot Thing," New Statesman, LXXI (June 17, 1966), 962.

in Jimmy Porter in Look Back in Anger. He has faced the great issues that have perplexed his contemporaries. He has expressed their anger, their nostalgia for the secure world of Edward VII, their frustrations and sense of loss over England's diminished position in the world. As English society changed, he was quick to respond to the change: the concern for violence, homosexuality, and moral deterioration, which supplanted the early attacks on apathy in his plays, reflects the changed problems of England in the sixties.

In 1956 Osborne rose to prominence because he grasped the fabric of life in an England where there were "no good, brave causes left." Eleven years later he is still the spokesman for his generation.

Chapter III

Brendan Behan and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop

Although the main impetus in the creation of the new British drama arose at the Royal Court, several interesting playwrights came out of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. Because of Miss Littlewood's insistence upon the collaborative nature of dramatic productions, playwrights like Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney cannot be considered without an understanding of her method. Believing that a "fixed" production is "dead," Miss Littlewood not only encouraged but demanded improvisation from actors, and she herself exerted great influence upon the texts of the plays she produced. It is difficult, therefore, to determine precisely the actual contributions of the Theatre Workshop dramatists--Brendan Behan, Shelagh Delaney, and the "Cockney improvisers," Frank Norman, Stephen Lewis, and Henry Chapman.

Miss Littlewood's aim has been to encourage the growth of popular theatre. Her political basis is profoundly left-wing, her attacks on the English theatrical hierarchy have emphasized

its "bourgeois" character. After spending the war years touring English rural and industrial districts with the Theatre Union in order to "bring the Theatre back to the people," she formed the Theatre Workshop in 1945. The group spent eight years touring Europe before settling down at the old Theatre Royal in Stratford-att-Bowe in London's East End. In 1955 Miss Littlewood's production of Volpone drew critical acclaim at the Paris International Theatre Festival. Her success in Paris was rewarded by a financial grant from the Arts Council, and from 1956-1961 the Theatre Workshop performed yeoman service in introducing new dramatists to the English public and staging revivals of plays Joan Littlewood considered meaningful to modern audiences (e. g., Richard II, An Enemy of the People, Mother Courage). Many of her productions were successfully transferred to the West End; their casts accompanied them, and the cohesion of the company was disrupted. Miss Littlewood, disgusted by what she felt to be artistic corruption, left England in 1961. She returned in 1963 to direct Oh, What a Lovely War, a satirical musical about World War I, which was a success in both London and New York. She left the Workshop again in 1964, worked with multi-racial theatrical groups in Tunisia, and returned to Stratford in the spring of 1967.

Miss Littlewood's dramatic mentor is Bertolt Brecht, and, like him, she feels that the ultimate purpose of art is the reform of society. Because of her interest in creating popular theatre and her desire to appeal to working-class audiences

she is opposed to intellectualized and esoteric dramatic themes. Frankly contemptuous of art for art's sake, she says, "If the theatre is to fulfill its social purpose it is contemporary and vital material which must make up the dramaturgy, and its themes must be important to the audience."¹ Her production methods were designed to implement the contemporary flavor of the plays presented at Stratford and to achieve the enddistancing effect Brecht deemed necessary if drama was to move its audiences to action. She has relied heavily on English music hall devices, probably because the music hall stage was the only one with which working-class audiences were familiar and because it enabled her to use a native art form to achieve the desired alienation effects. Her productions utilized song, dance, and direct address to the audience. Audience interruptions were never ignored, and the morning's headlines were² worked into the evening's performance whenever possible.

Miss Littlewood's technique has frequently been compared to that of the commedia dell' arte, and in some instances the finished productions were largely the result of communal effort. Frank Norman, who had never been in a theatre when he wrote the rough draft of Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be (1959), had intended it to be a straight play. When it opened at the

¹Joan Littlewood, "Plays for the People," The New British Drama, Henry Popkin, ed. (New York, 1964), p. 558.

²Howard Goorney, "Littlewood in Rehearsal," Tulane Drama Review, XI (Winter, 1966), 102-103.

Theatre Royal, Fings was a musical comedy with lyrics by Lionel Bart. In the preface to the published edition of Fings Norman described the method by which "his" play achieved final form:

We then went to work with the Theatre workshop company of actors, who improvised on the character that each was playing, and also, I must admit on the plot as well until we arrived at the script which is contained in these pages.³

Such a method was probably necessary with a playwright like Norman, who was entirely ignorant of dramatic technique. However, professional writers like Wolf Mankowitz, whose novel Make Me An Offer was staged as a musical at Stratford in 1959, exercised greater control over the final script.

The extent of the author's contribution is not of great importance in considering the "Cockney improvisers," none of whom achieved individual success, either critical or popular, apart from their Workshop efforts. Fings, generally considered the best of them, presented an entertaining picture of Soho low life. Henry Chapman's You won't Always Be on Top (1957), concerned with workers in the building trades, and Stephen Lewis' Sparrers Can't Sing (1960), a plotless account of family life in the working-class district of Stepney, were apparently successful in drawing proletarian audiences into the Theatre Royal. All the Cockney improvisers concentrated on describing

³Frank Norman, "Author's Preface," Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be (New York, 1960), p. 6.

working class or low life, and all used flavorful, slangy speech. None possessed any outstanding ability, and their slight importance lies in the novelty of their subject matter and the freshness of the approach utilized in the presentation of their dramatic efforts.

Shelagh Delaney, whose first play, A Taste of Honey (1958), was written when she was eighteen, possessed considerably more native ability than the improvisers, but she, too, has written nothing since her connection with the Theatre Workshop ended. John Russell Taylor, who was allowed to inspect the author's original draft of A Taste of Honey, said it was not "radically" different from the published text. He found that the dialogue had been "pruned and tightened," but that most of play's best lines were the author's. The main character, the young girl, Jo, underwent no transformation in Miss Littlewood's hands, and the only drastic change involved the character of Peter, lover of Jo's mother, who, according to Taylor, was originally a "seventeen-year-old's dream figure of cosmopolitan sophistication."⁴ That Miss Littlewood improved A Taste of Honey seems definite, but her improvements apparently concerned form, not substance.

A Taste of Honey, set in Salford in Lancashire, is primarily concerned with a young girl's gradual entry into the

⁴Taylor, Anger and After, pp. 115-116.

adult world. The girl, Jo, has an affair with a colored sailor, and during her subsequent pregnancy, she shares her flat with Geof, a homosexual. The references to homosexuality are delicately handled, and the friendship between Jo and Geof is both touching and convincing. Jo's mother, described as a "semi-whore," is affronted by the unconventionality of their relationship. She sends Geof away and abandons her new lover in order to remain with Jo. The story is slight and of no special significance, but Miss Delaney's portrayals of Jo and her mother are well done, and she successfully captures the drab essence of life in a Midlands industrial town.

Miss Delaney's second play, The Lion in Love (1960), was rejected by Joan Littlewood, although she is known to have had a hand in re-writing the original script. It was produced by Wolf Mankowitz at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in September, 1960, and at the Royal Court in December of the same year. Although generally considered inferior to A Taste of Honey, The Lion in Love is a more ambitious and more mature work, which contains many non-realistic elements. The title is drawn from a fable by Aesop, and upon the realistic story of an unhappy marriage Miss Delaney has superimposed snatches of song, dance, and poetry--none of them reminiscent of the music hall stage. Both the fairy tale which ends Act II and the ballad-like verse which concludes the play illustrate a decisive step away from a realistic approach to drama. The play has long, dull stretches and several unrealized characters, but it is still a promising

effort by a twenty-year-old playwright.

One of the questions most frequently asked by British drama critics is "what happened to Shelagh Delaney?" Since 1960 she has written nothing but a slight, impressionistic autobiography, Sweetly Sings the Donkey (1963). After making two interesting contributions to regional drama, she has faded from sight.

Only one of the Theatre Workshop artists has achieved literary success outside its confines. Brendan Behan (1923-1964) wrote only two plays, The Quare Fellow (1956) and The Hostage (1958). But The Quare Fellow is widely held to be a near-masterpiece, and Behan's autobiography, Borstal Boy (1958), is a contemporary classic.

Behan began his literary career by writing for the Irish Press; he served a short stint as drama critic for Radio Eireann and published poetry in Gaelic before turning to drama. Both his plays were originally written in Gaelic. The Quare Fellow was first produced by Alan Simpson at the Pike Theatre in Dublin, and The Hostage was first staged in Gaelic as An Ullinn in Dublin in 1957.

When The Quare Fellow opened in London in May, 1956, its author was immediately, and inevitably, compared to Sean O'Casey. Their Irish nationality, working-class backgrounds, and skeptical attitudes towards sentimental patriotism provided obvious points of comparison. Behan was thoroughly familiar with O'Casey's plays, and although he belonged to the post-revolutionary

generation, his attitude towards life was shaped by experiences similar to those which molded O'Casey.

Behan's father was in Kilmainham prison in Dublin when his son was born in 1923, and the year 1916 became as vivid to the boy as if he had stood at the G. P. O. with Pearse and Connelly. Behan grew up in a North Dublin slum and joined the I. R. A. when he was thirteen. In 1939 he was sent to Liverpool with a bag of explosives and instructions to "fight for Ireland" by sabotaging ships in the harbor. Arrested before he could detonate a single bomb, he was tried and sentenced to three years in the Killesley Bay Borstal, a boys' reformatory. When he returned to Dublin, he continued his I. R. A. activities and was sentenced to fourteen years in Mountjoy jail by a British military tribunal. He served almost six years of this sentence, from which he emerged entirely unchastened.

Behan's years of imprisonment left him with an irreverent attitude toward authority in all forms, and his I. R. A. experiences led him to view fanatical nationalism with skeptical irony. However, a strong social conscience underlay his sardonic view of conventional society. An admirer of Jim Larkin, the Irish labor leader who led the 1913 Dublin Transport Strike, Behan was as compassionate toward the Dublin poor as he was contemptuous toward the Irish government. Although a practicing Roman Catholic, he was strongly anti-clerical and held the church responsible for the reactionary attitudes toward

ensorship, amusements, and sex prevalent in modern Ireland.

Outwardly Behan was a clown. His sprawling personal life was legendary before his death, and one of his friends once said, "Brendan would drop his trousers in church for a laugh." His two plays and Borstal Boy contain wildly funny moments, and he lavished humorous mockery upon everything he touched. But a slight scratch upon the veneer of humor reveals the tragic tone beneath it. Like his mentor and master, Sean O'Casey, Behan wrote tragicomedy. His method differs from O'Casey's: in The Quare Fellow tragicomic elements are not so much juxtaposed as layered. The underside of an hilarious incident frequently turns out to reveal serious comment on human frailties and anachronistic social structure. Behan evokes "thoughtful laughter."

The atmosphere that pervades The Quare Fellow, set in a prison in the twenty-four-hour period preceding an execution, is strikingly similar to that of Borstal Boy. Characters and incidents were drawn from Behan's personal experience; the speech patterns are based upon prison slang and, in the Irish characters, Dublin idiom. Behan sang away much of his time in prison, and The Quare Fellow opens with a song:

A hungry feeling came o'er me stealing
And the mice were squealing in my prison cell,
And that old triangle

⁵Brendan Behan, Brendan Behan's Island (New York, 1962), p. 189.

the body. Yet Behan's skill manages to make this disgusting criminal a life symbol; even the convicts are appalled by his crime, but when he dies, he dies not as a murderer, but simply as a man. And what occurs is not execution, but ritual murder.

Punctuated by bits of wild humor, songs, and puns, the action of The Quare Fellow rises to its climax. While the hangman scientifically calculates the proper "drop" for the condemned man, his assistant sings hymns. The tension among the prisoners mounts; throughout the night they "converse" by tapping on water pipes. And as the time remaining before the execution narrows to minutes, one of the convicts begins an imaginary account of the Quare Fellow's "dash" from condemned cell to scaffold:

We're ready for the start, and in good time, and who do I see lined up for the off but the High Sheriff of this ancient city of ours, famous in song and story as the place where the pig ate the whitewash brushes and--we're off, in this order: the Governor, the Chief, twoscrews Regan and Crimmin, the quare fellow between them, two more screws and three runners from across the Channel, getting well in front, now the Canon. He's making a big effort for the last two furlongs. He's got the white pudding bag on his head, just a short distance to go. He's in. His feet to the chalk line. He'll be pinioned, his feet together. The bag will be pulled down over his face. The screws come off the trap and steady him. Him-self goes to the lever and . . .⁷

When the clock strikes the hour, a "ferocious howling" arises from the prisoners; they rattle and bang the cell doors. Then the noise stops; it is quiet. But the moment of respect

⁷ibid., pp. 82-83.

is brief. The scene shifts to the prison yard where four convicts squabble over the dead man's letters as they prepare to bury him. Defending a "businesslike" attitude, they pocket the letters and plan to sell them to the popular press. The play ends as it began, with the singing of an unseen prisoner in a basement punishment cell.

Structurally, the refrain "That old triangle/Went jingle jangle/Along the banks of the Royal Canal" ties the play together. It introduces the first two acts and ends the third. It is sung at various times throughout all three acts, and in conversations among the convicts the audience learns that the unseen prisoner is singing for the Quare Fellow, at his request. Thus the song functions as a reminder of the play's central event--the execution. There is no conventional plot development, but nevertheless the action rises in a crescendo to the final jangling climax. Gradually references to all other events are crowded out by the impending death of the Quare Fellow. Even the raucous humor is tinged by the gallows; as the prisoners lay bets on whether a last-minute reprieve will come through, their levity masks a real concern for the fate of the unseen sufferer.

The Quare Fellow is one of the best plays of its generation. Despite its realistic setting, its contemporary flavor, and its slangy speech, the play achieves an effect of timelessness. Its theme is the age-old conflict between life and death

forces, and over it hangs the shadow of Cuchulain, the legendary Irish hero, who roared with laughter when he saw a crow slip in the blood that poured from his death wound. Like Cuchulain, Behan's convicts grasp at comedy in the face of death. The "jingle jangle of that old triangle" represents the victory of the life force.

Whatever may be said of Joan Littlewood's effect on play-scripts, it seems certain that The Quare Fellow was largely resistant to her methods. The parallels between the play and Borstal Boy are too close to leave much doubt that Behan was the dominant force in its construction. ⁸ The play is almost untouched by music hall devices, and the use of song to reinforce and implement the theatrical situation was natural for Behan, a noted pub-singer whose non-dramatic works are filled with snatches of song. If Behan's tragicomic technique in The Quare Fellow was profoundly influenced by anyone, he paid the debt himself when he sang O'Casey's ballad "Red Roses for Me" as his curtain speech at the Dublin production of his play.

No such straightforward statement can be made about Behan's other play, The Hostage. Behan's brother, Dominic, an admittedly prejudiced observer, called The Hostage "Joan Littlewood's

⁸ Any final authoritative statement on Behan's plays must, of course, be based upon comparison of the original Gaelic versions, his translations, and the final texts. My judgment of The Quare Fellow is necessarily impressionistic, but after a close reading of Borstal Boy, I am convinced of its validity.

version of Brendan's English translation" and maintained that what she staged was "only the shadow of a magnificent play."⁹ However, Brendan himself, who said he wrote the play "in about twelve days," preferred the Littlewood version to either the original production or the later one at the Abbey Theatre:

I saw the rehearsals of this version and while I admire the producer, Frank Dermody . . . his idea of a play is not my idea of a play. . . . He's of the school of Abbey Theatre naturalism of which I'm not a pupil. Joan Littlewood, I found, suited my requirements exactly. She has the same views on the theatre that I have, which is that the music hall is the thing to aim at to amuse people and any time they get bored, divert them with a song.¹⁰

The Hostage has been published in two versions; the 1962 version, although not radically different from the 1958 version, is superior. Like most Theatre Workshop authors, Behan was usually present at rehearsals. Therefore, some of the suggested changes may have been his, but many of them are probably the result of improvisation.

The Hostage is set in a disreputable Dublin boarding house, and its action centers around a young English soldier, taken as a hostage by the I. R. A. in a vain attempt to prevent the execution of an eighteen-year-old I. R. A. terrorist by the British authorities in Belfast. Models for the play's central incident and its setting were taken from life, although,

⁹Dominic Behan, My Brother Brendan (New York, 1965), pp. 142, 157.

¹⁰Brendan Behan, Brendan Behan's Island, p. 17.

as Behan said, he "fiddled around a lot with them."¹¹ The boarding house-cum-brothel was suggested by similar establishment run by a Mrs. Roberts in Parnell Street in Dublin. An ardent republican, Mrs. Roberts took in anyone pretending to be an I. R. A. man on the run, and her house eventually became a hostelry for thieves and prostitutes. The young I. R. A. terrorist was suggested by Tom Williams, who was hanged in Belfast jail in 1942, and the counterpointed incident of the British Tommy, seized and held in a brothel, actually occurred in Belfast, although he was neither taken as a hostage nor shot.

In The Hostage these suggested incidents provide the basis for a play whose theme is the anachronistic character of fanatical nationalism. The play opens with the Dead March played on bagpipes by "Monsewer,"¹² an Anglo-Irishman, who so detests the English that he refuses to allow himself to be addressed as "Mr." A veteran of the 1916 Rebellion, "Monsewer" lives in a world of illusion and believes that the motley group of homosexuals, thieves, pimps, and whores, who live in the boarding house, are all revolutionary heroes. An effective contrast to him is Pat, an authentic hero of the Easter Rebellion, who says

The I. R. A. is out of date-- . . . and so is the
R. A. F., the Swiss Guards, the Foreign Legion, the

¹¹Ibid., p. 13.

¹²My references throughout are to the 1962 version of the play. The 1958 version opens with an Irish jig and dialogue by the two homosexuals. The later version, which focuses attention on the main incident immediately, is superior.

Red Army-- The United States Marines, the
 Free State Army, the Coldstream Guards, the Scots
 Guards¹³

In the H-bomb era the I. R. A. is both obsolete and absurd. Throughout the play Pat's commonsense attitude renders farcical the vain posturings of "Monsewer" and the strait-laced I. R. A. officer, who talks of "heroism" and runs away as soon as the shooting starts. Further contrast is provided by the tender love affair between the doomed Tommy and Teresa, a convent-bred girl, who works as a maid in the brothel.

Although basically an anti-war play, the main action of The Hostage is frequently obscured by extraneous characters and incidents. Characters like the two homosexuals, Rio Rita and Princess Grace, and the social worker, Miss Gilchrist, who attempts to comfort the Tommy by reading aloud about Queen Elizabeth, merely represent an attempt to pull topical interests into the play. But among the music hall jokes and set pieces of visual humor is much authentic Behan. "Monsewer," Pat, his mistress Meg, the two young people, and I. R. A. officer are rounded characters. The view of nationalism which Behan sets forth and the particular manner in which he contrasts the illusions of the nationalists with realistic, humane attitudes are an echo of O'Casey's similar method in The Plough and the Stars. Like The Quare Fellow, The Hostage is built

¹³Behan, The Hostage in The New British Drama, pp. 114-115.

out of contrasting attitudes toward life and death. But the play wanders from its theme, and all too frequently the tragic-comic tone degenerates into vaudeville.

In a discussion of Theatre Workshop technique Howard Goorney described rehearsals of The Hostage:

Behan gave us a great hunk of material from which we had to knock out an evening's entertainment. Behan came to rehearsals, regaling us with anecdotes and background. With these in mind, we improvised units of the script, cutting, adding, changing. At the end of the day, an agreed segment of the text was hammered out. We allowed for improvisation in actual performance; interruptions were never ignored¹⁴

The play was the Workshop's most successful effort, and many of those who saw it in performance have commented on the commedia dell' arte nature of the production. But since The Hostage had been performed in Dublin, Behan must have given Miss Littlewood more than "a great hunk of material." The sub-plots and some of the minor characters apparently were added at her suggestion.¹⁵ Undoubtedly they added topical interest to the play, whose subject might not have had great appeal for an English working-class audience. But they disastrously distract attention from Behan's serious purpose. Even in the final minutes of the play, when a raid on the brothel results in the inadvertent killing of the Tommy, a situation

¹⁴Howard Goorney, "Littlewood in Rehearsal," p. 103.

¹⁵Taylor, Anger and After, p. 109.

which should have underscored the tragic irony of Anglo-Irish nationalism remains inchoate and incoherent. The song which ends the play, "Oh death, where is thy sting-a-ling-ling/Or grave thy victory" is obviously intended as irony. But since the "dead" soldier rises to sing it, what began as an indictment of fanatical nationalism ends a muddle. Perhaps Behan intended to say that youth and love will ultimately triumph. Aside from being sheer sentimentality, such a view is rendered meaningless by the action of the play. Behan, who frequently castigated the hold of the past upon modern Ireland, sporadically demonstrated in The Hostage how the past strangled any chance for a realistic attitude toward the present. Until the final moments of the play the origin of the "sting" of death is clear. Then suddenly the theatrical reversal shatters the mood, and the play ends in confusion.

Perhaps the absurdity of the conclusion was intentionally designed to emphasize the ridiculous nature of a ridiculous world. The author refused to comment on his intent. When someone asked, "What was the message of your play, Mr. Behan?" he replied, "Message? Message? What the hell do you think I am, a bloody postman?"¹⁶

Behan died in 1964, and by the early sixties he was practically finished as a writer. His last book Brendan Behan's

¹⁶Dominic Behan, My Brother Brendan, p. 159.

New York is inferior to his previous work. Almost entirely without self-discipline, he spent his last years in an alcoholic haze, spinning out brilliant conversation in pubs on both sides of the Atlantic. According to his brother and at least a score of other witnesses, Behan talked nearly as well as Oscar Wilde. Few who listened to him neglected to wish that the wit and feeling tossed out in conversation had been applied to literature. But they were not, and the only authentic genius among the new British dramatists made only minor contributions to the drama.

Behan's unique gift was his ability to create humor out of the texture of despair. Like O'Casey, he came up from hell laughing. The atmosphere of defeat which pervades contemporary drama is balanced in his plays by an unconquerable delight in the stuff of life. He wrote two plays about death and an autobiography about his life in English prisons; the final effect is one of victory.

Yet Behan died at forty-one. Beneath the Irish blarney and indomitable humor of the pub-crawler lay concealed a sensitive man who could not face life without alcohol. The ironist in him would have appreciated the final irony: Behan, who could recite by heart the preface to John Bull's Other Island succumbed to what Shaw considered the typical Irish weakness--the inability to face reality without the help of whiskey.

Chapter IV

Arnold Wesker: Commitment in the Theatre

Born in 1932 in the East End of London of immigrant Jewish parents, Arnold Wesker has been politically committed since adolescence. His mother is a member of the Communist Party, and for a short while Wesker belonged to the Young Communist League. Like many other left-wing intellectuals, he renounced his allegiance to communism after the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956, but he has remained active in leftist political movements. He served a short jail sentence in connection with his work for the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament, and his involvement with Centre 42, an organization formed to promote mass culture, brought him into relationship with the trade union movement.¹ A social rebel, dissatisfied with the mediocre cultural standards of present-day England, he has declared his desire to change the world: "What one wants is bloody

¹Simon Trussler, "His Very Own and Golden City: An Interview with Arnold Wesker," Tulane Drama Review, XI (winter, 1966), 192-195.

revolution; absurd, but one wants it."

Wesker left school at sixteen, and after holding a succession of jobs as furniture maker's apprentice, bookseller's assistant, and road and farm laborer, he qualified as a pastry cook and spent four years in kitchens in England and France. A youthful interest in the theatre was reinforced during his years in the R. A. F., where he was associated with a drama group. He studied for nine months at the London School of Film Technique and would probably have gone on to work in the film industry had it not been for the announcement of the Observer's play competition and the production of LOOK BACK IN ANGER, which convinced wesker that "things could be done in the theatre."³ The Observer would not consider his first play, The Kitchen, because it was not full length, but his second, Chicken Soup with Barley, was produced at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in July, 1958.

After achieving a critical and popular success with Chips with Everything in 1961, wesker temporarily left the theatre to devote his time to Centre 42. In 1965 he returned to the stage with The Four Seasons, which received disastrous reviews. In 1966 he followed it with Their Very Own and Golden City, a play that drew on his experiences with the trade union

²Arnold wesker, "Art Is Not Enough," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (February, 1961), 194.

³Trussler, "An Interview with Arnold wesker," p. 194.

movement.

Wesker's connection with Centre 42 has played an important role in his life, and an understanding of the motivation that impelled him into the venture is necessary to comprehend the "message" of his plays. By 1960 he was upset because his plays were not reaching the working-class audience for which he intended them. Feeling that the mass of Englishmen were living in a "culturally third-rate society,"⁴ he set out to remedy the situation. In a speech at Oxford entitled "Oh, Mother Is It Worth It?" he attacked the labor movement for neglecting the role of the artist in society. He had the speech printed, sent it to trade union leaders, and then wrote a pamphlet in which he urged the Trades Union Council to attempt to improve the cultural status of its members. In 1961 a resolution vaguely affirming the value of the arts was passed at the TUC Congress, but no money was allocated to implement it. Wesker, however, was unstoppable by then; he gained moral support from leading figures in both trade union and artistic circles, a financial grant from Gulbenkian, the oil millionaire, and set up shop. By 1964 Centre 42 had staged six art festivals in the provinces, bringing folk music, Hamlet, modern jazz, Bernard Kops's Waiting for Solly Gold, Stravinsky's Soldiers' Tale, and exhibits of paintings to people who had rarely seen

⁴Wesker, "Vision! Vision! Mr. Woodcock!" New Statesman, LX (July 30, 1960), 153.

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live drama.

All of Wesker's plays (except The Four Seasons) reflect his strong political feelings and his concern for the ignorance and apathy of the working classes. In 1961 he wrote, "art is beginning to have no meaning for me--it is not enough."⁶ His message to the masses and his personal philosophy are simple: "You've got to care, you've got to care or you'll die."⁷

Wesker's first play, The Kitchen (1959), drew on his experiences as a pastry cook to present a restaurant kitchen as a microcosm of industrial society. A two-act play, it has eighteen characters. Although the dialogue is naturalistic, it is not really possible to call The Kitchen a naturalistic play. Pantomime is important; all the cooks mime their actions, for which Wesker has given detailed directions. During the rush hour the work tempo is speeded up; the cooks mime faster, the waitresses rush from kitchen to dining room, all in a precisely planned pattern, which gives a ballet-like effect to the staging. The Kitchen is incipient expressionism,

⁵Dennis Thompson, "British Experiment in Art for the Masses," New Republic, CII (November 21, 1964), 7. The resolution containing Wesker's proposal was forty-second on the TUC agenda--thus the name.

⁶Wesker, "Art Is Not Enough," p. 193.

⁷Wesker, Chicken Soup with Barley in The Wesker Trilogy (Baltimore, 1964), p. 75.

superimposed on naturalism.

Almost plotless, The Kitchen is concerned with the dehumanizing effect of work performed only for pay. As the work pace increases, the cooks, who were friendly when the day began, begin to quarrel. Kevin, the new fried fish cook, is upset by the changes in the other men: "Well, speak a little human like, will yer, please?"⁹ In the quiet interlude between lunch and dinner, Dimitri, the kitchen porter, tells Kevin, "This stinking kitchen is like the world-- It's too fast to know what happens."¹⁰ All the conversations between the cooks are well done; Wesker has a good ear for speech patterns, and he gets across his moral (that the tensions in a rushing industrial society prevent human sympathy) without preaching. He is less successful with Peter, the boiled fish cook, who is the play's most important character. After three

⁸It is difficult to place The Kitchen precisely in the scheme of Wesker's development. He wrote an early version of the play, which was published in the Penguin series, Now English Dramatists. This series cannot be sold in the United States, so I have used the 1962 version. According to the Times Literary Supplement (January 5, 1962), p. 14, this version differs, although not substantially, from the NED version.

Taylor, Anger and After, p. 144 attacks the realistic level of The Kitchen. Bernard Kops, The World is a Wedding (New York, 1963), an autobiography, discusses his life as a waiter in West End restaurants and gives a picture similar to Wesker's.

⁹Wesker, The Kitchen in Penguin Plays, p. 122.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 123.

years in the restaurant, Peter cracks under pressure and goes berserk. He runs into the dining room, threatens the customers by brandishing a knife, and then hacks open a gas lead, causing the humming noise of the ovens, constant until now, to stop.

Wesker's message is clear at this point, but instead of leaving the audience to draw its own conclusions about Peter's breakdown, he drags forth several characters to explain it and the restaurant owner to say that he gives the men work, food, and wages. His line "What is there more?" is repeated by an accusing staff as the curtain falls. The Kitchen is an effective theatrical comment on the tensions of modern life. It would have been better had Wesker not felt the sermon necessary.

Wesker's next three plays, Chicken Soup with Barley (1958), Roots (1959), and I'm Talking about Jerusalem (1960), form a trilogy, an ambitious undertaking for a playwright under thirty. The complete trilogy was presented in repertory at the Royal Court Theatre in 1960 and was widely praised by London drama critics. Wesker has said that the three plays are "three aspects of Socialism, played out through the lives of a Jewish family. The first play handles the communist aspect, the second the personal, and the third a William Morris brand of socialism."¹¹ His comment is only partially correct; the second play, Roots, is not an integral part of the trilogy

¹¹Richard Findlater, "Plays and Politics," Twentieth Century, CLXVII (1960), 273. The quotation is from the programme handed out at the Royal Court's performance of the trilogy.

and is only incidentally, if at all, concerned with socialism as a political philosophy. None of the members of his Jewish family actually appears in it. As an entity, Wesker's trilogy does not quite hang together. There is no real progression from one play to the next. The first play carries its characters to 1956; the second is a sort of "side dish," and the third extends from 1946 to 1959, picking up two characters who left in the second act of the first play. The third part of the trilogy ties up loose ends and comments on events in the first two parts, but it resolves none of the personal or political conflicts Wesker has chosen to explore. Despite the trilogy's indefinite conclusion, its central message--that the success of socialism is dependent upon the human resources of those who practice it--is clear.

Chicken Soup with Barley, the first play in the trilogy, is usually considered the best. Obviously reflecting Wesker's own East End Jewish background, it has a sense of authenticity and a feeling of human warmth lacking in the other plays. Chicken Soup is concerned with the Kann family and their involvement with socialism and each other in the years from 1936 to 1956. It opens with Mosley's fascist march in October, 1936, and vividly captures the political fervor characteristic of the left wing in the thirties. Wesker's ear for language effectively distinguishes his characters and enables them to set forth what are actually hackneyed political slogans with personal conviction. He manages, too, to avoid excessive

propagandizing by judicious exploitation of the humorous aspects of the situation.

Wesker's major characters are introduced and typed at once. Most important is Sarah, the Kahn family matriarch, who faces Mosley's fascists with a rolling pin in her hand, but who really believes that socialism is love. Her husband, Harry, is a weak-willed, indolent man who sneaks off to his mother's while the others fight Blackshirts. Ada, their idealistic daughter, and her beau, Dave, the "sad pacifist," who goes off to fight for republican Spain, complete the main cast.

Wesker's theme is the changes which occur in these ardent socialists as the years, the war, the modern welfare state changed them and their viewpoints. Act II is set in 1946-1947. Ronnie, the Kahn's son, who was a child in 1936, is an adolescent now and an enthusiastic socialist. His youthful idealism is contrasted with the disillusionment of Dave and Ada, who have lost faith in the "splendid and heroic working class," and the weariness of his Aunt Cissie, who has devoted a lifetime to protecting trade union members from their own cowardice.

In the closing, climactic scene of Chicken Soup Ronnie, too has lost his illusions. But nothing, not even Hungary, could divert Sarah; she tells her son:

All right! So I'm still a communist! Shoot me then! . . . I've always been one--since the time when all the world was a communist. . . Now people have forgotten. I sometimes think they're not worth fighting for . . . You give them a few shillings in the bank and they can buy a television so they think it's all over . . . they don't have to think

any more? You want me to move to Hendon and forget who I am? If the electrician who comes to mend my fuse blows it instead, so I should stop having electricity? I should cut off my light?¹² Socialism is my light, can you understand that?¹²

The play is episodic in structure after the first act; too many characters and events are crammed into it. Ronnie is at times too adolescent to be bearable. The general theme, however, is clear at all times, and most of the characters are carefully drawn. The human relationships between Sarah, her husband, and her friends are convincing. Sarah is the bond that holds together her family and the play, but this is not a structural defect. It is a form deliberately adopted to illustrate both the nature of Jewish family life and Wesker's philosophy. It is Sarah who voices Wesker's belief that "You've got to care or you'll die," and the moving nature of the play derives from his identification with her.

Apathy, together with ignorance, is the theme of Wesker's second play, Roots. Set in the Norfolk countryside, Roots centers about Beatie Bryant, a young farm girl who has come home to visit her family after living for three years with Ronnie Kahn. Basically, the play is a contrast between the attitudes toward life of Ronnie (through Beatie's quotations of his opinions) and the Bryants, who are half dead, satisfied to languish in their small, dull world, and oblivious of their

¹²Wesker, Chicken Soup, pp. 73-75.

stupidity. Wesker illustrates this contrast by showing Beatie's growing impatience with her family's limitations and her constant quoting of Ronnie to them in an effort to widen their narrow outlook. She is unsuccessful; her speeches to her mother are met with incomprehension, her father is concerned only with money and pigs (his job), and her attempts to arouse class loyalty fall flat. In the climax of the play, Ronnie, who was supposed to come to visit Beatie, fails to appear and sends a letter terminating their relationship. Beatie gets no comfort from her family, and in the one intense moment in the play, she begins to think for herself. Before this she has simply parroted Ronnie; now she is talking. She sees the idiocy in Ronnie's idea that country people live in "mystic communion with nature." She says that the "masses" are too stupid to think for themselves: "we want the third-rate--
¹³
 we got it! We got it!"

The main trouble with Roots, as John Taylor has pointed out, is that it "has every indication of being a one-act play . . . blown up to three acts by the exigencies of the modern theatre."¹⁴ Few things are more difficult for a dramatist than to construct an interesting play about a bunch of bores, which is certainly what the Bryants are. There is no action in Roots

¹³Wesker, Roots in The Wesker Trilogy, pp. 147, 148.

¹⁴Taylor, Anger and After, p. 137.

until the third act; the first two demonstrate, with incident piled upon incident, the limitations of the Bryants and what John Mander has called their "linguistic impoverishment."¹⁵

Wesker's use of Norfolk dialect is effective and well done, but it grows stale early in the play. He needed only half an hour, or less, to characterize the Bryants; he took two hours. The play, however, was remarkably successful on the stage. Joan Plowright, who played Beatie, was apparently able to exploit the humorous aspects of ignorance and sustain the audience's interest for what seems in reading an interminable length of time.

Roots has another major problem--Ronnie. Quoted ad nauseam, he comes through as a confused, somewhat sadistic pseudo-intellectual who spouts cliches at every opportunity. As an intellectual mentor, he is not convincing. Even so, Roots, cut to one-third its present length, would be a good play. Wesker has done a good job of showing how ignorance and apathy limit human experience; he has just taken too long to do it.

The third play in the trilogy, I'm Talking about Jerusalem, is considered by all critics the weakest. The first act merely repeats information given in Chicken Soup, and the next two are largely unbelievable. Ada and Dave, the ardent communists

¹⁵John Mander as quoted by Jacqueline Matham, "Roots: A Reassessment," Modern Drama, VIII (1965), 193.

of Chicken Soup, have lost faith in political action and have gone to Norfolk to set up a personal experiment in socialism. Dave is going to build furniture and find happiness as William Morris in creative labor. He fails, and as the play ends, he is packing to return to London. He has realized that his claim to being a prophet, a seeker after "Jerusalem," is without foundation. "Face it--as an essential member of society I don't really count I'm defeated,"¹⁶ he tells Ronnie, who has been berating him for giving up the great experiment. The play, and the trilogy, end on a note of failure. The interesting aspect of that failure is its personal nature: it is Dave, not socialism, who has failed. Wesker does not blame society for refusing to accept Dave and his dreams. He shows, especially in a scene in which Dave steals linoleum from his employer, that Dave is not capable of sustaining his ideals in the face of hostile reality.

Jerusalem is most significant in the clues it gives about Wesker's future development. Two scenes in the play are completely non-realistic. The first is a symbolic reconciliation scene between Ada and Dave in which he crowns her with an olive branch and wraps a red towel around her shoulders--the enactment of a private myth. In the second scene Dave, Ada, and their child re-enact, in a highly personal manner, the myth of

¹⁶Wesker, I'm Talking about Jerusalem in The Wesker Trilogy, p. 215.

the creation. Neither of these scenes is particularly effective, and neither has any integral connection with the play, but the distinct turn from naturalism showed that Wesker was growing impatient with conventional form and attempting to utilize the visual aspects of theatrical art.

This shift away from naturalism is strikingly evident in Chips with Everything (1961). Chips is an allegory about the class struggle in which an R. A. F. training base is the world, the recruits are the working class, and the officers represent the upper class. Its hero, Pip, a rebellious aristocrat, attempts to lead the recruits in revolt against the officers and the class system. With the exception of Corporal Hill, a typical top-sergeant type, none of the characters is realistically drawn. The officers are automata whose speech parodies conventional military terminology. In their relationships with the men they seem to be enacting a ritual. Kingsley Amis caught the real quality of the dialogue when he described it as having "the air of being hastily translated from a foreign tongue."¹⁷ It is deliberately simple; the characters all speak in short sentences or phrases. Even Pip's lectures to his fellow recruits sound like a textbook for the young:

One day, the French kings and princes found themselves bankrupt--the royalty and the clergy never

¹⁷Kingsley Amis, "Not Talking about Jerusalem," Spectator, CCLIX (August 10, 1962), 190. Amis did not intend the remark as a compliment.

used to pay taxes So what did they do?
 They called a meeting of all the representatives
 of all the classes to see what could be done--
 there hadn't been such a meeting for over a
 century¹⁸

Pantomime figures prominently in Chips. One entire scene is wordless. Song is integrated into the plot structure when Pip leads the men in singing a peasant revolt song at the officers' Christmas party, a scene in which one class joins ranks to menace another. Even the climax of the play is symbolic: Pip, beaten by the "system," slowly changes from airman's to officer's uniform, assumes the identity of an officer, and begins to speak in the curious, automaton-like language of the officer class.

Wesker has grasped in Chips many facets of dramatic presentation that previously eluded him. The play is extremely "theatrical"; there is no sense of real life being lived as there was in Chicken Soup or Roots. The singing, miming, and the unrealistic, formalized linguistics place it definitely in the expressionistic category.

Wesker's technique in Chips testifies for his developing talent as a dramatist. Chicken Soup, as every American critic has pointed out, is quite similar to Clifford Odets' Awake and Sing. Chips, in both tone and style, recalls Brecht.

Theatrically, this is wesker's best play, and an exiting

¹⁸Wesker, Chips with Everything (New York, 1962), pp. 29-30.

experiment in socialist non-realism.

It is unfortunate that Wesker chose to apply his new-found talents to an improbable situation. The characters in an allegory must be believable on a realistic level. Wesker's officers, since they are obviously abstractions, function believably on both levels, and most of the time his men also carry off their dual roles as human beings and class representatives. What is wrong with Chips is its hero--plus its central situation. Pip's lectures on history and his illustrious family, his insults to his mates, and above all, his snobbishness, would not have earned him leadership in any army that ever existed. They would have earned him a (much deserved) beating. The same improbability extends to his conflict with the officers, who end the rebellion simply by telling him that he joined the ranks because he found the competition for power too strong in his own class:

Among your own people there were too many who were powerful, the competition was too great, but here, among lesser men--hero among the yobs, you could be king. KING.¹⁹

Pip collapses, dons his officer's uniform, the class system is preserved, and "God Save the Queen" ends the play--undoubtedly the first time in an English theatre that the playing of the national anthem was intended as irony.

In his review of The Four Seasons (1965) Ronald Bryden

¹⁹ Ibid... p. 66.

asked:

What on earth made Wesker, a naturalistic playwright whose assets are an ear for dialects and a detailed concern for the workings of society, embark on this work of anonymous, lushly high-falutin', essentially non-verbal kitsch?²⁰

From minute dissection of the class system Wesker turned to abstract description of a love affair. There are only two characters, Adam and Beatrice, in The Four Seasons. The play opens in mid-winter when they move into a deserted house. Beatrice does not speak a word until the coming of spring thaws her tongue. In summer she takes Adam, her "golden eagle," for her lover, and he, to demonstrate his love, makes a batch of apple strudel for her. In autumn they quarrel; their love affair is over. It is a disaster, totally unrelieved by any merit whatsoever. And the dialogue is unbelievably bad:

Adam: My skin breathes. There is blood flowing through my veins again. My skin breathes.

Beatrice: Nothing should be held back, ever. I believe that, O Adam I believe that. We're mean, we're all so mean, nothing should be held back.

Adam: You're blushing.

Beatrice: Don't look at me.²¹

Some things should be held back; The Four Seasons is one of them.

After his venture into what may only be called soap opera, Wesker returned to his natural habitat in Their Very Own and

²⁰ Ronald Bryden, "Kitschen Sink," New Statesman, LXX (September 17, 1965), 409.

²¹ Wesker, The Four Seasons (London, 1966), pp. 22-23.

Golden City (1966). Written in thirty scenes and utilizing a "flash-forward" technique, Golden City covers a time period from 1926 to 1990. Wesker drew on his experiences with trace unionism to write the play, which centers around Andrew Cobham, a young architect who rises to prominence in the labor movement.

There are actually two diverse streams of action in the play: one, which Wesker calls the "reality stream,"²² details Cobham's relations with the labor movement; and the other, a dream sequence, reveals his vision of the future. Golden City opens in Durham Cathedral in 1926. Three young people, Jessie Sutherland, Cobham's future wife, and his friends, Stoney and Paul, listen to young Andy describe his dream of houses that "soar." Three cathedral scenes are interspersed among the early realistic scenes, which depict Cobham's gradual rise in his profession and the labor movement. Intended to provide contrast between Cobham's dream of transforming the world and his actual failure to do so, the cathedral scenes are bogged down by adolescent dialogue which fails to evoke the fantasy effect necessary to make the device workable. Also, Cobham's actions in the realistic scenes stamp him as a dreamer, and therefore the cathedral shifts only emphasize the obvious.

In the "reality-stream" of the play, Cobham attempts to

²²Trussler, "An Interview with Arnold Wesker," p. 200.

persuade the TUC and the Labour Party to underwrite his dream of building worker-owned and controlled cities. The best scenes in the play, based upon sound historical and practical observation, show how Cobham's efforts to build his golden cities are frustrated by trade union leaders with different priorities. Numerous controversies in the labor movement are touched upon: Owenite communities, the place of trade unions in the Labour Party, immediate vs. long-term aims, and "socialism in one country." None of these is presented didactically, and the most important relationship in the play, that between Cobham and Jake Latham, an aging trade union leader, brings together both two different strains of the labor movement and two strong individuals. The most moving scene in Golden City, based upon the Bevin-Lansbury duel at the Labour Party Conference in 1935, pits Latham's vision of international socialist pacifism against Cobham's realistic appraisal of Nazism.²³

After the war, Cobham, a respected architect and war hero, continues the struggle to build his cities. He realizes that his efforts will be only patchwork and that complete revolution is impossible:

Then let's begin. In the way you build a city
you build the habits of a way of life in that
city--that's a fact. Six Golden Cities could lay
the foundations of a new way of life for all

²³ Although the Bevin-Lansbury duel was basically a power struggle for control of the Labour Party, its major intellectual issue did center around foreign policy. Lansbury was a pacifist; Bevin believed in "collective security." Lansbury, an old man espousing an unpopular cause, lost.

society--that's lie, but that's the lie we're going to perpetuate, with our fingers crossed.²⁴

The final long "flash-forward" in the play runs from 1948 to 1990, and its action is continuous. One scene dissolves rapidly into another, as in a film. Cobham, who has become Sir Andrew, manages to build one golden city: "patchwork: Bits and pieces of patchwork. Six cities, twelve cities, what difference. Oases in the desert, that the sun dries up."²⁵ The play ends as it began, in the cathedral where the three young boys link arms to make a "chariot" for Jessie, who is carried off laughing "Giddy up, stallions. Forward, you ragged-arsed brothers--forward."²⁶ Old Andrew delivers young Andy's lines in order to reinforce what Wesker hopes is "sad irony." Sentimental would have been a better adjective.

After Wesker's masterly use of irony in Chips with Everything, it seemed that he had learned the value of understatement. The conclusion to Golden City makes it clear that he has not done so. Nor has he learned to hold to one line of development throughout a play. Golden City is packed full of extraneous incidents and characters. The women, Jessie and Kate, a left-wing intellectual who is Cobham's most devoted follower, are distractions, and the Tory officials are caricatures. Golden City is a confused play, but pruned of

²⁴Wesker, Their Very Own and Golden City (London, 1966), p. 59.

²⁵Ibid., p. 89.

²⁶Ibid., p. 91.

superfluties, it could have been excellent. Reflecting its author's passionate concern for the search for a better world, the play deals with a subject almost untouched by other dramatists. Plays about trade unionism are rare, and playwrights with the ability to dramatize and humanize political and economic history still more rare.

It is improbable that Arnold Wesker will ever be a dramatist of the first rank.²⁷ He has never written a structurally coherent play: he has not learned to combine naturalism and expressionism in a workable manner, and he cannot create a situation that is believable on two levels. He is a realistic playwright who wants to be a poet. But if he realizes this limitation and learns to control his prolixity, he may become a good, even an important, playwright.

Wesker has shown definite talent. He has escaped the limitations of both naturalism and his Jewish background. The characters in his later plays may not be as credible as those in Chicken Soup, but they have a wider significance. With the exception of that disastrous experiment, The Four Seasons, he has shown an increasing ability in the use of language--its manipulation to show varying shades of realism and an ear for dialects that is excellent and brings to both

²⁷This is probably the view of the majority of British drama critics. See Lumley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama, pp. 278-279; Taylor, Anger and After, p. 151, for similar judgments.

his dialogue and his characters a novel freshness. He has placed the working class, urban and rural, on the stage as interesting individuals, not types. His idealism, his affirmation of human dignity, and the moral force behind his plays are constructive contributions in an age that is predominantly materialistic, negative, and immoral.

Moral passion is a quality difficult to control, and preaching is a difficult thing for Wesker to avoid. Yet his moral passion, along with his acute consciousness of his working-class origins, is Wesker's greatest strength as a dramatist. These qualities have enabled him to create characters who speak with burning conviction about important issues and to portray on the stage little-known facets of modern life. He is a man with a mission, who sees the drama as an educational force. To attempt to raise the cultural standards of a nation by forcing people into a realization that apathy is synonymous with death is an estimable aim. Surely one must admire a man who is devoting his life to such an effort.

Chapter V

John Arden, British Balladeer

John Arden, unlike most the current crop of young British dramatists, is from middle-class stock and university-educated. He was born in Barnsley, Yorkshire, in 1930 and educated at Sedbergh School, King's College, Cambridge, and Edinburgh College School of Art. Arden is a professionally trained architect, but to be a writer was always his long-term goal. He wrote plays while in school, finished his architectural training with a year in a London office, and then wrote The Waters of Babylon and Live Like Pigs, both of which were performed at the Royal Court. For a year (1959-1960) Arden was Fellow in playwriting at Bristol University. He now lives with his actress wife and sons in Kirbymoorside, Yorkshire. With his wife he has written two short plays intended for amateur performance--The Business of Good Government (1960), a nativity play, and Ars Longa/Vita Brevis (1964).

Arden's architectural training has made him especially conscious of staging techniques. He wrote The Happy Haven

for the arena stage at Bristol and feels that all his plays are best suited for an open stage:

The proscenium arch is not a very happy medium for staging the sort of plays I want to write I suspect that one of the reasons why The Happy Haven did not do so well in London as in Bristol is simply that the audience was frozen off by the proscenium arch, and the parts of the play that were meant to come out at the audience completely failed to do so.¹

Arden's plays are all extremely "theatrical," and it is easy to see why performance on a open stage would best suit them. Portions are written directly at the audience; he uses a mixture of prose and verse, integrates ballad songs and dance into the dramatic structure, and in one play, The Happy Haven, he used masks. The picture frame stage necessarily limits the "breakthrough" Arden can achieve with these devices, and its use in the London productions of his plays partially explained his lack of success there. None of Arden's plays has been a commercial success in London. The Royal Court's 1959 production of Serjeant Musgrave's Dance resulted in a £5,820 loss for the management. The 1965 revival at the Court did better, but Arden's popular acclaim is still limited. He has, however, a strong underground following throughout the country, and his plays are studied in schools and dramatic societies. The most original and objective of the new English dramatists, he has constantly baffled both critics and public.

¹John Arden, "Building the Play," The New British Drama, p. 596.

The production of Arden's first play, The waters of Babylon (1957), marked him at once as an original. Although Babylon is more realistic than Arden's other plays, it was strikingly different from the offerings of his contemporaries. Both characters and situation are objectively created. The playwright has been "refined out of existence" in a play that deals with slum housing, race relations, municipal corruption, and Khrushchev's visit to England. Arden's people are individuals, not social symbols; they speak for themselves in vernacular prose, song, and free verse. Their creator never takes sides or moralizes. There is social satire in Babylon, but no specific social criticism. Arden stands squarely in the great tradition of English satire: out of the interplay between character and incident arises a clear view of human foibles seen against the social background that produced them.

Babylon began as a satire on Macmillan's Premium Bond scheme,² and the actual plot concerns the attempt of Sigismandrad Kranklowicz (Krank), an immigrant Polish brothel keeper, to rig a municipal lottery in order to pay off a blackmailing compatriot. Aided by Charley Butterthwaite, a one-time "Napoleon" of local government, Krank persuades Joseph Caligula, "the chocolate dynamo of North London," to sponsor a savings bank scheme. Their plan to milk the deposits is upset when

² ibid., p. 585.

the honest councillor decides to hold a drawing for the prize in the lottery offered as an inducement to gain the bank clients. Krank's need for money grows increasingly acute when Paul, a fellow Pole to whom he owes money, moves into his house, threatens to stay until he gets his £500, and starts making bombs to blow up Khrushchev. In order to get rid of Paul and an investigating M. P., who suspects him of complicity in the bomb plot, Krank makes elaborate plans to hold the winning lottery ticket. The dénouement occurs at the prize-drawing, a scene which begins farcically as the elaborate plan fizzles and ends in near tragedy when Paul mistakenly shoots Krank.

Interwoven, although not very successfully, with the main plot is a subplot which shows Krank in his other life. He is an architect by day and a brothel keeper by night. His relationship with the lady architect for whom he works reveals little about Krank's character. The M. P. who brings about his downfall is first met in the office, but he is seen again in a Hyde Park scene that is central to the main plot. As Harold Clurman has pointed out, Arden is not always able to master his material.³ The subplot is extraneous, and by following it Arden lessened the impact of Krank's death. The Krank who dies is the Krank of the main plot, and the double life he leads adds nothing to either his villainy or his dignity.

³Harold Clurman, "Notes from Afar: Part II," Nation, CCC1 (August 30, 1965), 106.

The measure of Arden's achievement as a creator of character lies in this double nature of Krank. He poses as a survivor of Buchenwald. And he was at Buchenwald--but as a member of the German Army. He runs a lodging house which doubles as brothel and tenement for West Indian immigrants; he attempts to cheat the poor out of their savings. Yet throughout the play he remains a sympathetic figure, a man of such complex nature that no black and white moral criterion will classify him. When he explains his status in the German Army and then turns on his accusers to categorize their madness, he comes close to declaring the tragic identity hidden under his enigmatic personality:

But I don't know what you are
 with your pistols and your orations
 And your bombs in my private house
 And your fury, and your national pride and honour.
 This is the lunacy,
 This was the cause, the carrying through
 Of all the insensate war
 This is the rage and purposed madness of your lives,
 That I, Krank, do not know. I will not know it,
 Because, if I know it, from that tight day forward,
 I am a man of time, place, society, and accident:
 which is what I must not be
 The world is running mad in every direction.
 It is quicksilver, shattered here, nere, here, here,
 All over the floor.

But I choose to follow
 Only such fragments as I can easily catch⁴

Most of the other characters share, to a lesser degree, Krank's complex nature. The colored councilman, who easily

⁴Arden, The Waters of Babylon in Three Plays (New York,

could have been a sentimentalized figure, speaks eloquently in Hyde Park for the rights of his fellow Jamaicans, yet he succumbs to the advances of one of Krank's prostitutes. The two politicians, Ginger and Loap, parody political speech-making in Hyde Park, but both have personal identities. Even Charley Butterthwaite, who thought up the savings bank scheme, is shown as both a thief and a man who is trying desperately to regain the dignity he possessed during his days of councilmanic glory.

Babylon is a flawed play, but Arden's objectivity and use of language compensate for its flaws. There are snatches of real poetry in Babylon, and although Arden has not succeeded in integrating his prose and poetry--his verse bits sometimes seem incongruous--he has shown real ability in both forms.

In his next play, Live Like Rigs (1958), Arden made a greater distinction between prose and verse. With only a few exceptions, his verses are all ballads and all sung. Written in seventeen scenes, each preceded by a ballad sung "with the peculiar monotony of the old fashioned street-singers,"⁵ Live Like Rigs is one of the most Brechtian of Arden's plays.

Arden has admitted that Brecht has influenced him, and the methods of the two playwrights are similar.⁶ Like Brecht, Arden is a balladeer. Like him, he deliberately discourages

⁵Arden, Live Like Rigs in Three Plays, p. 104. Stage directions.

⁶Walter Wager, "Who's for a Revolution? An Interview with John Arden," Tulane Drama Review, 41 (Winter, 1966), 46.

audience empathy by making his plays outright theatrical experiences. Again, like Brecht, Arden concentrates on the diversity in his social situations and attempts to give a multifaceted view of life. But Arden is certainly no slavish imitator. Both Arden himself and Martin Esslin have pointed out that the two playwrights have followed similar models in dramatic tradition: Elizabethan drama, Japanese and Chinese theatre, folk song, and the conventionalized play of the Middle Ages.⁷ Arden is not a communist, and he is not much interested in class conflict except in its effect upon individual characters. He is conversant with German literature, and he has translated Goethe's Goetz von Berlichingen. But his plays testify to his wide knowledge of English literature, and particularly, English folk ballads. They are filled with ballad imagery, and some critics have described their structure as suggesting an expanded ballad in form.⁸ There are also certain elements of the picaresque in his plays. This is especially true in Live Like Rigs, where the contrast between "low" and seemingly respectable characters, the elements of violence and farce, and the animal imagery recall Smollett.

Arden has stated that he did not intend Live Like Rigs to be a "social document," but "a study of differing ways of life brought sharply into conflict and both losing their own

⁷Ibid.; Esslin, "Brecht and the English Theatre," p. 70.

⁸Times Literary Supplement (January 7, 1965), p. 10.

particular virtues under the stress of intolerance and misunderstanding.⁹ This is precisely what he has written. The Sawneys, nomadic descendants of the sixteenth century sturdy beggars, bring their chaotic, amoral way of life into a suburban housing development. Forced by welfare officials to desert the broken-down tramcar where they had lived, they react by "living like pigs" in the council house to which they were removed. The contrast between them and their respectable neighbors, the Jacksons, is set forth at once when Mrs. Jackson comes to call, and her polite greeting is interrupted by Rachel Sawney's saying, "Oh, go to hell you, you and your fizzing husband."¹⁰ In successive scenes the Sawneys and the Jacksons meet, interact, and collide. Mr. Jackson sleeps with Rachel Sawney and is bitterly disappointed by the experience. It is this personal disillusionment that convinces Jackson that the Sawneys must go, just as it is Mrs. Jackson's discovery of his infidelity and the destruction of her laundry that impel her to lead a mob against the Sawneys. The Jacksons are not strong enough to preserve their own way of life without resorting to violence. In the final scene of the play the council mob assaults the Sawney household with rocks, and only the arrival of the police prevents massacre.

The Sawneys ought to be despicable--thieving, amoral, one

⁹Arden, "Introductory Note," Live Like Pigs, p. 101.

¹⁰Arden, Live Like Pigs, p. 113.

a confessed murderer, one a prostitute--but they are not. Their great vitality, their elemental enjoyment of life, and the courage with which they face the mob make them curiously admirable. Out of social conflict on its lowest level Arden created a climax which Henry Hewes called "magnificent theatrical poetry."¹¹ The song which introduces the final scene illustrates the mood Arden has created:

Afared and waiting all the night
 And never go to bed
 They've trampled on your shadow, Jack,
 They'll trample on your head.
 The morning comes, they all of them come,
 Now fight them for your life:
 They'll have you out and down and dead,
 So fight fight fight for your life.¹²

Live Like Pigs is at times pure farce, but it is the kind of farce Ionesco was speaking of when he said that by revealing the comic, the absurd nature of man "one can achieve a sort of tragedy."¹³ Although Arden is not an absurdist, in this play he has used the absurdity and ridiculousness of human nature to create a "sort of tragedy." And he has done it with a vivid use of poetical language and a clarity of expression which the absurdist rarely attain. It is not, however, a perfect play. It is too long, and once again, a subplot, this time the relations of the Sawneys with two characters who

¹¹Henry Hewes, "Here's Mud in Your Sty," Saturday Review, XLVIII (June 26, 1965), 45.

¹²Arden, Live Like Pigs, p. 183.

¹³Eugene Ionesco, "The Bald Soprano," Playwrights on Playwriting, Toby Cole, ed. (New York, 1963), pp. 283-284.

invade their home, detracts from the main action. It is, perhaps, too "earthy." The Sawneys are sometimes too animal-like to seem human, and although Arden remedies this defect in characterization by the end of the play, it yields a cartoon-like effect to some of the scenes.

No such criticism can be levied against Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1959), which has been called "the finest British play since the war."¹⁴ Set in an English coal-mining town eighty years ago, Musgrave is a play about the nature of violence. Into a strike-bound town come Serjeant "Black Jack" Musgrave and three men, Sparky, Hurst, and Attercliffe, posing as recruiters. In reality, they have deserted Victoria's army in a colonial outpost and returned to England with a Gatling gun and the skeleton of a comrade in a gun crate, bent on convincing

¹⁴Ronald Bryden, "Armstrong's Last Goodnight," New Statesman, LXVII (May 15, 1964), 782.

Arden, "Building the Play," p. 586, said that he got the idea for Musgrave from an American film, The Raid. Although the film suggested the situation (the terrorization of a town by army deserters), Arden's interest in the subject was set off by an incident in Cyprus in which soldiers wreaked vengeance on the natives for the killing of a civilian. Five people died in the Cyprus incident; five natives were shot in the colonial outpost in retaliation for the death of Billy Hicks.

Arden, Ibid., p. 597, has admitted that John Whiting's play, Saint's Day, has had a strong influence on him. Saint's Day is also a study in the nature of violence, and it suffers from the same structural defect in revealing motivation as Musgrave.

the townspeople of the folly of war. With plentiful supplies of free beer they win the confidence of the miners. Musgrave's air of authority and his religious convictions persuade the town authorities that he is a "safe" figure, and they offer their aid in his recruiting venture. Only Annie, the barmaid at the inn where the soldiers stay, senses the hidden nature of Musgrave:

The north wind in a pair of millstones
 was your father and your mother.
 They got you in a cold grinding.
 God help us all if they get you a brother.¹⁵

The play is mainly slow, but vivid exposition until the final scene of Act II. Arden makes clear the suppressed violence lurking in all the miners; whatever Musgrave is planning, this town, a "hot coal," is ready for it. Then, suddenly, Musgrave's carefully prepared plans (the audience does not know what they are) go amiss. In a quarrel precipitated by Sparky's decision to run away with Annie, Sparky is killed by Attercliffe and Hurst. The pacifists have employed the violence they are in revolt against. And the mayor, frightened by rock-throwing strikers, has asked for a company of dragoons to help keep order in the town.

In the climax of the play, Serjeant Musgrave, his men, and all the townspeople are gathered in the market place. Flags flying, drums beating, beer flowing, it is a colorful

¹⁵ Arden, Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (New York, 1962), p. 26.

scene which slowly turns to horror as Musgrave mounts the rostrum to begin his "recruiting" speech. As the Gatling gun is turned on the populace, he reveals the skeleton of the hometown boy, Billy Hicks, who was killed abroad, and the situation which had brought him to the town. Five natives had been killed in retaliation for the death of Billy; by his own peculiar logic Musgrave arrived at his decision:

One man, and for him five. Therefore for five of them we multiply out, and we find it five-and-twenty. . . . So, as I understand Logic and Logic to me is the mechanism of God--that means that today there's twenty-five persons will have to be--¹⁶

He speaks "as though to himself," and then turns to invite Walsh, leader of the miners, to "Join along with my madness, friend. I brought it back to England but I've brought the cure too--to turn it on to them that sent it out of this country--" ¹⁷

The timely arrival of the dragoons prevents massacre. The miners, sympathetic to Musgrave's purpose, succumb to the military show of force and join hands to dance around the serjeant. As the play ends, Musgrave and Attercliffe are in prison, and the lines Sparky sang in the opening scene have become a prophecy:

Court martial, court martial, they held upon me
And the sentence they passed was the high gallows tree.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 91.
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 92.
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

The insane logic of fanaticism bred violence out of violence.

This, more than Arden's other plays, is definitely an expanded ballad in form. As in a ballad, the central image, the red-coated soldiers in the black coal town, blood and death, sets the tone for the play. The chill, the foreshadow of doom is created in the opening lines when Sparky says

Brrr, oh, a cold winter, snow, dark. We wait too long, that's the trouble. Once you've started, keep on travelling. No good sitting to wait in the middle of it. Only makes the cold night colder.¹⁹

Arden's language, his impersonality, and the feeling that this is not part of life, but an essentially climactic moment in a man's life all recall the old ballads. Key phrases and words are repeated throughout the play: dance, blood-red roses, scarlet, coal-black, drum, and war. There is a simplicity and an inevitability about the action that is primarily ballad-like.

For all its simplicity of structure, Musgrave is a highly complex play. It is not, as some critics have implied, a pacifist tract. Arden's objectivity prevents his writing message drama. Musgrave is initially a sympathetic figure, but his proposal to use violence to combat violence vitiates his pacifism and turns the audience against him in horror. Actually, this, like all Arden's plays, is about the tragic difficulty of upholding personal ideals in the face of hostile

¹⁹Ibid., p. 9.

reality. Musgrave is a pacifist and a fanatic; he is also a mysterious, enigmatic human being whose ideals collapse when he attempts to impose them on others.

It would be gratifying to say that so rich and profound a play as Musgrave is great drama. It is not. It is very slow-moving, and although this is perhaps intentional, the thoroughness with which Arden investigates his social situation impedes the progression of dramatic action. And the structure is decidedly faulty. Arden himself recognized this in 1966 when he said

Somehow I have not managed to balance the business of giving the audience information so that they can understand the play with the business of withholding information in order to keep the tension going.²⁰

Two scenes in particular wreck its structure. The third scene in Act I, in which the soldiers discuss their purpose in visiting the town, is vague. Arden obviously meant to save the revelation of the skeleton for his climax, but the fact that the skeleton belongs to a native of the town is important in establishing the soldiers' motivation. By concealing the origins of their motive in choosing this particular town until so late in the play he has made their decision seem haphazard.

The other unrealized scene in Musgrave occurs in Act II. When Sparky dies, murdered by his mates, and the pacifists themselves have turned to violence, it becomes obvious that

²⁰Wager, "An Interview with John Arden," p. 42.

the nature of their errand is going to change. But here, in this vital scene, Arden has chosen to interrupt the dialogue with a real rush of characters who dash (literally) onstage to inquire, speculate, and comment on what is happening. Continuity is lost. Attercliffe says to Musgrave, "But he was killed, you see, killed . . . don't you see, that wipes the whole thing out."²¹ Before Musgrave can answer, he is interrupted by a constable asking about a break-in. What happens after this loses the sense of reality and inevitability that pervaded the play before Sparky's death. The climax is a great scene, but one is never certain why **Musgrave** behaved as he did. However, if Serjeant Musgrave's Dance must finally be judged a failure, it is failure on a scale approached by few of Arden's contemporaries.

In The Happy Haven (1960) Arden returned to the tragicomic form of farce he used in Live Like Pigs. The "happy haven" is an old people's home, and the plot of the play concerns the attempt of the director of the home to use its inhabitants as guinea pigs in a rejuvenation experiment. Arden takes pains to characterize the doctor and to delineate his scientific aims. The old people are seen from his point of view, that of a young, vigorous man, and he is seen from theirs--as an officious bore who limits the few pleasures remaining to them. The old are

²¹Arden, "Building the Play," p. 296.

subject to their own personal ills and to foibles which beset all of us--greed, gluttony, pride, and fear of the inevitable end. Each of them is individualized, though in more formalized terms than in Arden's other plays. They are "flat" characters. However, The Happy Haven was played in masks, and the simplicity of language and characterization was deliberately adopted to fit the form. The break between prose and verse is highly formal; there are no passages of heightened prose. The dialogue is either in the vernacular or **in** metrical verse. Arden admits that he has been accused of being a cold writer, and the science fiction element in The Happy Haven makes it a cold play.²² Here it is not possible to feel emotional involvement with the characters.

The Happy Haven is notable for the tightness of its structure. There are no subplots, and the action rises fairly steadily to the climax in which the old people inject the doctor with his own rejuvenation serum, dress him in short pants, and wheel him offstage. The scenes which show the haven's inhabitants struggling with the idea of becoming young again and rejecting it are convincing and often eloquent. The highpoint of the play is Mrs. Phineus' speech in Act II. Mrs. Phineus, who is ninety, wants neither to die nor be reborn, and her great speech contains both personal pathos and universal truth about old age:

²² Arden, "Building the Play," p. 598.

I'm an old old lady
 And I don't have long to live.
 I am only strong enough to take
 Not to give. No time left to give.
 I want to drink, I want to eat,
 I want my shoes taken off my feet.
 I want to talk but not to walk
 Because if I walk, I have to know
 where it is I want to go.
 I want to sleep but not to dream
 I want to play and win every game
 To live with love but not to love
 The world to move but me not move
 I want I want for ever and ever
 The world to work, the world to be clever.
 Leave me be, but don't leave me alone.
 That's what I want. I'm a big round stone²³
 Sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm.

In the play Arden has blended realism and expressionism so effectively that even though the plot is actually impossible, one never questions the validity of the action. Yet it is a cold play, too cold. Arden is clearly saying something about old age and scientific bureaucracy, but what? Arden's objectivity, his belief that an audience must make up its own mind about dramatic issues, has prevented him from establishing a theme that would give meaning to the action.

Arden wrote The Workhouse Donkey (1963) to celebrate what he calls "the old essential attributes of Dionysus: noise, disorder, drunkenness, lasciviousness, nudity, generosity, corruption, fertility, and ease."²⁴ Set in a provincial Yorkshire town modelled on his birthplace, Barnsley, The

²³Arden, The Happy Haven in Three Plays, pp. 250-251.

²⁴Arden, "Author's Preface," The Workhouse Donkey (London, 1964), p. 9.

Workhouse Donkey is concerned with a scandal in municipal politics. The plot, as Arden admits, is "labyrinthine," but the central situation in the play revolves around alderman and ex-mayor Charley Butterthwaite's fall from power. Butterthwaite (the Workhouse Donkey), pillar of the local Labour Party, runs the municipality like a personal fief. Both laborites and conservatives are scoundrels who use their official positions for personal advantage and put petty political expediency above the common good. The arrival of the new Chief Constable, the incorruptible Colonel Feng, sets off a chain of events which leads to exposure of certain corrupt practices (including Butterthwaite's theft of £500 from the town hall). Butterthwaite is ruined, but Col. Feng falls with him. His determination to enforce the law with strict impartiality leads to his rejection by both political parties. He is forced to resign, and the municipal government continues to pursue a policy of mild corruption agreeable to both sides.

The Workhouse Donkey is Brechtian in structure. Dr. Blomax, a lascivious physician of shady reputation, acts as narrator. The action is frequently suspended entirely for song and dance interludes, and the large cast of characters are all portrayed in essentially public functions. Unlike Brecht, however, Arden is entirely neutral in attitude. His laborites are more colorful than his conservatives, but no less corrupt.

Arden says that he would have liked The workhouse Donkey to have lasted for "say, six, seven or thirteen hours . . . and for the audience to come and go throughout the performance."²⁵ Lacking a theatre designed to present such a form of drama, he compressed the material into a multiplicity of scenes within a two-act form. The result is a play diffuse, rambling, and finally incoherent. While Arden can occasionally enliven his work with comic touches (most successfully in Live Like Pigs), he is not primarily a comic writer, and The workhouse Donkey is not a very funny play. And Arden's command of language, his greatest asset, is inferior here. The only character who seems to have caught fire in his imagination is Col. Feng, the incorruptible independent, who is defeated by the perversity of human nature, which prefers comfortable ease to honor. Charley Butterthwaite is a vivid figure, but he is essentially a pathetic, not a comic character. Roger Gellert pronounced the play "an infuriating and baffling whole."²⁶ To say that power corrupts is hardly novel, and Arden lacks the comic touch that could have made his drama of corruption entertaining. Dionysus would not have been pleased with this colobration of his attributes.

Armstrong's Last Goodnight (1964), like Serjeant Musgrave's

²⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁶ Roger Gellert, "Rudsey Is Mine," New Statesman, LXVI (July 19, 1963), 86.

Dance, is an historical parable. Its theme, that of primitive individualism in conflict with constituted authority, was suggested to Arden by Conor Cruise O'Brien's book, To Katanga and Back. Long familiar with Sir David Lindsay's The Three Estates and the Scottish ballad, "Johnnie Armstrong," he decided to transpose the Congo situation to sixteenth century Scotland. The plot of the play is based upon the ballad: John Armstrong of Gilnockie, a powerful border lord, is upsetting Scottish efforts to make peace with England by his forays across the border. Tricked into a meeting with King James V, Armstrong is captured and executed. There is no historical evidence which would link Lindsay with this incident, but Arden's view of Lindsay's character, the fact that Lindsay frequently went on diplomatic missions for the Scottish crown, and that he expressed in The Three Estates a sardonic view of Armstrong's hanging led Arden to envision him as the perfect foil for Armstrong.

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Armstrong's Last Goodnight, first performed at the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre and subsequently in repertory by the National Theatre, has been Arden's most successful play. It is also his best. Entirely free of the structural ambiguities that plagued Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, it succeeds in both recreating an historical period and capturing the exciting essence of the

²⁷ Arden, "General Notes," Armstrong's Last Goodnight (London, 1965), pp. 7-8.

conflict between John Armstrong, border freebooter, and Sir David Lindsay, the suave diplomat, who represents national authority.

Armstrong is a savage, charming, entertaining, and immensely alive. But he is an obstacle in the path of progress. His feuding with his neighbors creates internal dissension, and his raids across the border are a central issue in the English-Scottish peace negotiations. To deal with him King James V sends the cunning Lindsay, who obtains Armstrong's signature to a treaty in which he promises to keep the peace. But Armstrong reacts to both the ill-accustomed idleness and what he considers ill-advised pressure from above:

The man that strives to pit down Armstrong is the man that means to bring in England They do presume to bribe my honour with their pardons and their titles: and then they do delay--d'ye note--in the fulfillment of their fearful bribes. And they do justify this delay by scandalous talk of unproven murder. They wad gain ane better service out of Armstrong gif they were to cease to demand it as ane service: and instead to request it . . . to request it in humility as ane collaborate act of good friendship and fraternal warmth.²⁸

With his personal prestige at stake he leads the borderers against England, and Lindsay returns to trick Armstrong into meeting the king. Dressed in his finest clothes, Armstrong goes to his doom.

Arden has said that the problem of the playwright is to

²⁸ Arden, Armstrong's Last Goodnight, p. 80.

"find a fable that will of itself express his image of the world and express it in a way that will make sense to the audience."²⁹ In Armstrong's Last Goodnight Arden has found a fable powerful enough to swamp his colorless objectivity with passion. In this conflict between primitive individualism and the necessity for order in civilized society Arden has fashioned a coherent view of the world. His sympathies are with Armstrong, but the conflict is not one-sided. Armstrong is proud and arrogant; he once enticed a rival laird into ambush and watched his murder. Johnny Armstrong of Gilnockie, struggling to maintain his anarchic existence, is Arden's most completely realized character. Lindsay understands the realities of the world, which remain forever strange to Armstrong, but after Armstrong's hanging he understands that there is a moral issue unresolved by the royal victory:

The man is deid, there will be nae war with England:
 this year. There will be but small turbulence
 upon the Border: this year. And what we have done
 is no likely to be forgotten: this year, the neist
 year, and mony year after that. Sire, you are
 King of Scotland.³⁰

Arden's fusion of poetry and prose in Armstrong's Last Goodnight is masterful. His variation of sixteenth-century Scottish dialect sounds so authentic that Frederick Lumley was moved to comment that "it is difficult to remember that

²⁹ Arden, "Poetry and the Theatre," Times Literary Supplement (August 6, 1965), p. 705.

³⁰ Arden, Armstrong's Last Goodnight, p. 121.

the play has been written by a young contemporary dramatist."³¹

Arden has attempted to "recreate a dead idiom of heroic poetry."³² That, of course, is the crux of the central question concerning the play. Arden is writing a dead language. There is no doubt that he has managed a literary tour de force of astonishing brilliance. But his language is not particularly easy to understand, and the loveliness of his lyrics is smothered by unfamiliar words and phrases. In a work meant to be read, the difficulty of Arden's language would not be of great importance. Armstrong's Last Goodnight is a play and dependent for effect upon immediate comprehension of its dialogue, and it is not possible, in some instances, to grasp Arden's meaning without consulting the glossary appended to the published version of the play. Arden has stated that his model in adapting sixteenth-century speech was Arthur Miller's The Crucible.³³ He wanted to preserve the flavor of the age by using an approximate simulacrum of contemporary speech. His choice of Miller's play as a model was unfortunate. Seventeenth-century Puritan speech is readily understandable to the modern ear; Scottish dialect is not. Arden once listed the names of Synge and O'Casey among playwrights whose work he finds especially interesting. Although neither of these men

³¹Frederick Lumley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama, p. 266.

³²Ronald Bryden, "Great White Beast," New Statesman, LXX (July 16, 1965), 94.

³³Arden, "General Notes," Armstrong's Last Goodnight, p. 8.

wrote historical drama, both of them used colloquial dialect in a comprehensible manner that still retained the idiomatic pattern of the original. And if Arden had been able to express the flavor of Scottish speech in a more easily understandable version, this play would have had wider significance.

In Left-Handed Liberty (1965), a play commissioned by the Corporation of the City of London to celebrate the 750th anniversary of Magna Carta, Arden has composed an historical drama in the Brechtian manner. As necessitated by the circumstances under which it was written, Liberty is an historically accurate (except in minor matters) account of the events preceding and following King John's signing of the Charter. Arden has chosen to emphasize the apparent failure of the Charter rather than the reasons that brought it into being, a decision that enabled him to give the play greater scope.

Liberty was played on an almost bare stage; scene changes were indicated by projections on a screen. The narrator, Pandolph, the papal legate, is onstage all the time; he introduces each scene and both comments on and participates in the action. Arden made no attempt to reproduce medieval speech; he used his standard mixture of verse and prose (formal or colloquial, depending on the class of the speaker). His objectivity and desire to see all sides of a question have produced a complex, even charming, King John. Still the villain of history, he has a satirical wit and a wry appreciation of his position that make him a more interesting man than the original. Arden has

followed standard historical opinion in his characterizations of Pandulph, William Marshall, and Stephen Langton. His Langton is remarkable. Individualized and lively, he is also the high-minded patriot who defied the Pope to preserve the Charter.

The last two acts of Liberty are concerned with John's attempts to circumvent the Charter, the barons' doubts about its efficacy, and, with a bow to the play's commissioners, the efforts of London merchants to preserve the City's liberties. V. S. Pritchett has said that Liberty is "not about the Charter, but about a break in men's minds,"³⁴ and while this is not precisely correct, Arden is intent on showing how the Charter affects and changes the thinking of his characters. By centering his play around the fluctuating conceptions of the nature of Magna Carta, he managed to convey its long-term significance without excursions into subsequent history.

It is difficult to think of another contemporary English dramatist who could have produced so fine a play on a set subject. Instead of a documentary or a propaganda piece, Arden wrote an exciting drama about the nature of liberty that recreated with understanding the medieval mind and an historical period. Yet it must be admitted that the play has serious flaws. It is diffuse, and extraneous incidents and characters interrupt the flow of action. Whatever his purpose in devoting

³⁴V. S. Pritchett, "Bad King," New Statesman, LXIX (June 25, 1965), 1022.

one entire and several partial scenes to the de Vesci marriage situation, it is extremely distracting. The continued presence of Lady de Vesci obscures plot development, and what is worse, Arden has dragged her into his conclusion. When King John comes forward to justify his existence, to talk about his "frantic history suspended under circumstances of absolute inconclusion,"³⁵ he centers his remarks around Lady de Vesci. What could have been an effective theatrical device becomes merely peripheral comment.

Arden is easily the most versatile of the new English dramatists. In his varied choice of subject matter and his ability to write flavorful contemporary prose and formal verse he displays greater scope than his colleagues. His plays are richly poetic in texture and intellectually distinguished. In contrast to a poetic dramatist like Christopher Fry, who deals with situations almost irrelevant to the twentieth century, Arden has chosen to use his poetic talent to explore the nature of political reality. He considers himself a "political playwright":

I don't think that it's possible not to be a political or sociological playwright. Living together in society is a technical problem about which everybody should be concerned. Therefore any play which deals with people in society is a political play.³⁶

³⁵ Arden, Left-Handed Liberty (New York, 1965), p. 83.

³⁶ Wagon, "An Interview with John Arden," p. 45.

His plays are all concerned with what Richard Gilman termed "incompatible entities."³⁷ He is not a didactic dramatist; he is objective, and his characters are never mere projections of their creator. To him the human condition is a complex riddle, and drama is an art which explores that riddle. He provides no answers, but he raises provocative questions about man's relationship with his world.

Arden is discursive, and he is cold. Except for Johnny Armstrong his characters lack true emotional depth. Arden's objectivity and his belief that the views of the playwright must not be imposed on an audience lead him to become disengaged to a point where he sometimes seems to be concerned with only surface values.

As an individual John Arden holds strong views on many subjects. If he can learn to express his own passionate feelings while still retaining his objectivity, and if he can learn to practice economy in exposition, he will be a great playwright.

³⁷Richard Gilman, "Arden's Unsteady Ground," Tulane Drama Review, 41 (Winter, 1966), 59.

Chapter VI

To Be an Englishman

He is an Englishman.
For he himself has said it,
And it's greatly to his credit,
That he is an Englishman.

W. S. Gilbert
H. M. S. Pinero

In 1900 the dominant color on a world map was pink, and when Edward VII ascended the throne in 1901, the sun never set on the British Empire. By 1956 Shakespeare's sceptered isle was a second-rate power. The Indian subcontinent became an independent nation in 1947; Burma and Ceylon soon followed. The African possessions were restless, and the strain of upholding world-wide commitments was too great for a nation whose economic resources had been exhausted by two major wars within thirty years. During the height of the Suez crisis a popular London newspaper expressed the depth of national resentment over England's diminished position in the world when it exulted, "At last we are Great Britain again." The hollowness of that judgment was apparent only a few days later, and thousands massed in Trafalgar Square to protest the futility

(and the failure) of Anthony Eden's effort to reassert England's pre-eminence.

When Archie Rice in John Osborne's play The Entertainer sings "Land of Hope and Glory," the effect is ironical. At mid-century, in a world dominated by Soviet Russia and the United States of America, to be an Englishman no longer conferred natural superiority. And the confident patriotism of the nineteenth century was as extinct as the pterodactyl.

England's declining position in world affairs is inextricably linked with the paradoxical nostalgia for the Edwardian era displayed by many young Englishmen today. But perhaps the nostalgia is not really paradoxical. Dismayed by their country's failure to cope with the problems of the modern world, they have looked backwards to a time when the taste of defeat was not in every mouth. Kenneth Alsop, who was thirty-seven in 1956, expressed this nostalgia in his book about the 1950's, The Angry Decade:

It is difficult to prove this sort of statement, but I personally have, and I believe a great many men and women in my age group have, an intense longing for the security and the innocence that seems to have been present in Britain before the 1914 war. It has become almost a tribal ancestral memory. While being aware that I am glossing it all over into a sunny simplicity, for me that period is a montage of striped blazers and parasols in henley punts, tea on the lawn . . . and Ernest A. Shepard London squares with autumn fires glinting on the brass fenders in the drawing rooms. . . . I am sure that the Victorians and Edwardians had an inner confidence that we shall never know.¹

¹Kenneth Alsop, The Angry Decade (London, 1958), p. 26.

The generation that came to maturity in the fifties possesses an economic security hardly dreamed of by its Edwardian counterparts. Protected by national insurance schemes from fears of financial destitution brought on by ill-health or prolonged unemployment, they are the beneficiaries of the moderate socialism for which their embattled grandfathers fought. Yet they are neither contented nor grateful. The mass of dissentients in present-day England are largely of working or lower middle-class origins. Recipients of the benefits of the 1944 Education Act, which provided free secondary education to age fifteen (later raised to sixteen), they have found it equally difficult to identify with either the working-class culture from which they sprang or dominant bourgeois mores. Essentially rootless and insecure, they gaze with something that resembles envy at the perpetual garden party they believe to have been Edwardian England.

And although the illusion of sunlit serenity is false, the Edwardians did possess a social stability unknown today. The family was the dominant social unit, and the Christian religion provided a generally accepted moral framework. The class structure was still cohesive enough to give a man a sense of having a definite place in the community. And England had not known major war for a century.

Looking back at the pre-1914 world, what strikes one is the confidence with which the English faced the multiplicity of problems that beset them. Aware that their world was

changing, most of them believed that it was changing for the better. The aristocracy was in retreat, but the middle and working classes were registering gains in economic and political power every year. Industrial violence and the armaments race were eroding the confidence of that society. But secure in their possession of a far-flung empire and proud of their position as the commercial center of the world, the English entered the Great War on August 4, 1914, with a lightness of heart they were never to know again.

The shift in outlook brought on World War I can be seen in microcosm in the combatant poets of the period. Rupert Brooke, who died in 1915, expressed exuberant patriotism in his widely known poem "The Soldier." After Ypres, Passchendaele, and the Somme, Brooke's romanticism was obsolete. Trench warfare produced poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves, for whom the horror of war vitiated what Owen called "The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori."

After the western Front, after Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Lidice, and Hiroshima the world of Edward VII does seem innocent and confident. Those who look back to view what F. Scott Fitzgerald once called "all my beautiful lovely safe world" do so with a knowledge of horror outside the Edwardian experience. Violence and cruelty are far from new in recorded history, but the scale on which violence and cruelty were practiced in Nazi concentration camps was new to the western

European. War is ancient, but the destructive potential of the hydrogen bomb is now.

The spread of communism, the decline in acceptance of religious values, and the widespread acceptance of Freudian psychology, which emphasizes the irrational nature of man, have combined to shatter the framework of values which sustained the pre-war world.

Those who tax contemporary dramatists with undue predilection for violence ignore the extent to which violence is a part of modern life. And to accuse them, as Sir Ifor Evans² does, of portraying the defeated, insecure elements in society is to ignore the nature of the world in which they live. Separated from their Edwardian counterparts by fifty years of English history and the changes that occurred during those years, the new English dramatists reflect both the spiritual malaise of the modern world and the insecure position of their country. Perhaps balance of payments deficits, austerity measures, and the failure to deal effectively with the Rhodesian crisis seem foreign to a consideration of contemporary English drama. Yet if a dramatist is to mirror society, he must reflect in some way the tone of that society. The tone of England today is not one of triumph. The long-heralded benefits of the welfare state have been offset by an increasing crime rate and by

²Sir Ifor Evans, A Short History of the English Drama (Boston, 1965), p. 207.

violence in the streets. Racial problems, once the province of the Colonial Office, are now the concern of the local police.

Distrust of authority was a distinct reaction of the young men who witnessed governmental and military incompetence during World War I. It is also pronounced among the new English dramatists, who feel that their elders are failing to meet the pressing problems of the present with constructive action. They are concerned with the status of the individual in a society dominated by values instilled by advertising and mass media. Political reality rendered their demonstrations against nuclear weapons ineffective, and they have turned to investigating the nature of the violence that is so widespread in the twentieth century. They call themselves "socialists," but unlike their fathers, they have little faith in the working class, and they attack its apathy and mediocrity as bitterly as they castigate bourgeois society. "Revolutionary" in the sense that they would like to change the nature of society, they have been unable to formulate a precise vision of an ideal world, and their social criticism is vague and sometimes seems purposeless. To attack apathy or cultural shoddiness is necessarily different from castigating the evils of poverty or lack of education, for which specific remedies can be proposed. The playwrights of the present have no difficulty in finding objects to attack, but they lack the confident assurance that earlier dramatists like Shaw and Galsworthy brought to their

social criticism. They raise questions, but unlike their predecessors, they provide no answers to the questions they raise. Attracted to conflicting elements of heroism and security in the past, they still demonstrate an overriding concern with the problems of present-day Britain.

Osborne has used the contrast between past and present as a unifying theme in his plays. He has plainly expressed nostalgia for the vanished Edwardian world and openly attacked the mediocrity and apathy of the present. In Luther he turned to the Reformation to find an obvious parallel with the angry young men of the present and their attacks on the prevalent power structure. In A Patriot for Me he used Austro-Hungarian decadence to symbolize British. Arnold Wesker has concentrated on specifically working-class problems. In his trilogy he contrasted the heroic efforts of the left-wing socialists of the thirties with the timidity and lack of vision that characterizes the working class today. In Golden City he returned to the struggling years of the labor movement and tried to show that even piecemeal attempts to reform society are better than apathetic acceptance.

Even the objective John Arden has displayed a romantic attachment to the past. In Live Like Pigs he calls the Sawneys (who are surely members of the lumpenproletariat) "descendants of the Elizabethan sturdy beggars." In Armstrong's Last Good-night he returned to the conflict between primitive individualism and conventional authority that he had treated in the

earlier play. Although the theme of Armstrong's Last Good-night was suggested by the Congo crisis and Arden is exploring issues of importance to the modern world, the play owes much of its effectiveness to judicious exploitation of the romanticism that surrounds Scott's Border Country.

Although Behan, an Irishman, stands somewhat outside this group, he shares with his English colleagues a strong distrust of authority and an irreverent attitude toward prevalent mores. And he, too, looks backwards to contrast the heroic stance of the rebels of 1916 with the timid conformity of present-day Irish politicians.

Like John Osborne, these playwrights write "out of the real despairs, frustrations, and suffering of the age we are living in now at this moment," and their appraisals of modern life reveal a compelling concern for the problems that face English and Irish society at mid-century. But their concern is frequently couched in terms that reflect a nostalgic regret for a vanished world in which the problems seemed less complex and their solutions more easily identifiable.

Conclusion

To make a definite judgment on a dramatic movement still in progress or on playwrights under forty, whose best work is presumably before them, is impossible. But it is certainly possible to paraphrase Adlai Stevenson and say that in the last ten years the English theatre has been "dragged kicking and screaming into the twentieth century." The representatives of the new order in the drama have succeeded in bringing fresh subjects, perspectives, and techniques into a decadent theatre. Perhaps the movement has lost some of its drive, but the embattled spirit of the fifties could not last forever. And experimentation continues. Artaud and Brecht have contributed to the attempt aimed at restoring "totality" of theatrical experience, and the influence of Brecht has also been of importance in the shift away from realism, one of the few trends identifiable in the current English drama. In 1961 the Times Literary Supplement discussed the reaction against realism:

But with one or two exceptions the history of the whole generation who have come forward in this country since . . . 1956 has reflected a similar move away from a realistic approach to modern

subjects, usually drawn from working-class life, towards a more liberal view both of the material a modern dramatist can properly deal with and of the techniques he can use in shaping it for the stage.¹

Osborne, Wesker, and Arden have all used Brechtian distancing techniques, and Wesker has explored private myth in the manner of Beckett. Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons (1960) made superficial use of Brechtian devices, and both John Whiting's The Devils (1961) and Peter Shaffer's The Royal Hunt of the Sun (1964) use the narrative method and present major problems within an historical framework.

A concern with visual aspects of theatre is especially notable in The Royal Hunt of the Sun where Shaffer uses mime and music plus a spectacular setting that he considers an integral part of the play. The same effect of totality of theatre was aimed at and achieved in Peter Brook's production of Peter Weiss' Marat/Sade (1964). Weiss, of course, is German, but the production gathered together many of the trends in the contemporary English theatre--Brechtian, didactic, absurdist, and Theatre of Cruelty.²

Colloquial speech, dialect, and regional accents still hold their places in the drama, however. The dialogue in Edward Bond's Saved (banned by the Lord Chamberlain because of

¹"The Reaction against Realism," Times Literary Supplement (June 30, 1961), p. 400.

²Peter Brook, "Introduction," in Peter Weiss, Marat/Sade (New York, 1966), p. 7.

a harrowing scene in which a baby is stoned to death) is based upon the speech of subliterate (and probably subhuman) Londoners:

Pam: Ol' man.

Len: Whass e' want?

Pam: That cushion's stickin' in me back.

Len: I thought yer reckon yer was on yer tod?

Pam: 'E's late for work.

Len: O. Why?

Pam: why?

Len: Yeh. ³

None of the characters is able to manage a sentence of more than ten or twelve words, and none can express an abstraction. But the extreme poverty of such language is offset by the controlled Cockney of Pinter, the brilliant invective of Osborne, and the poetic ability of John Arden.

Several months ago Charles Marowitz, an American who has been working with the English theatre since 1956, summed up what he felt to be the assets of that theatre. His list included: the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company; three major playwrights (Osborne, Pinter, and Arden), plus a "host of lesser lights"; Kenneth Tynan's ability as a drama critic; Jennie Lee, the newly-appointed minister of culture, and her responsibility for an increase in the Arts Council budget; and provincial drama.⁴

No new playwrights of the stature of Arden, Pinter, or Osborne has appeared, but new dramatists like Henry Livings,

³ Edward Bond, Saved (New York, 1960), p. 13.

⁴ Charles Marowitz, "State of Play," Tulane Drama Review, XI (winter, 1966), 203.

Alun Owen, Frank Marcus, and David Rudkin have come forth to add to the surge of creativity. Marcus's The Killing of Sister George (1965) added a new, and serious, dimension to comedy, and Peter Shaffer, whose talents range from farce (Black Comedy) to drawing-room comedy (Five Finger Exercise) has emerged as a contender for the first rank with the superb historical drama, The Royal Hunt of the Sun, which contrasts the Spanish and Incan empires at the time of Pizarro's conquest of Peru. The second rank of the first wave, Wesker, Ann Jellicoe, Robert Bolt, and N. F. Simpson have all been fairly steady producers of new plays. A group of young playwrights of such proven competence is an asset to any theatre, and the new English drama has produced directors and actors of comparable stature.

The last ten years have been among the most exciting in English theatrical history. The next ten may not be as exciting, but as the young men of the fifties reach the height of their powers, there is every reason to suppose that the present level of achievement will be maintained.

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Vita

Jeanne Fenrick Bedell was born in Janesville, Wisconsin, and attended public schools in Footville, and Janesville, Wisconsin. She graduated from Janesville High School in 1953 and from Sweet Briar college, Sweet Briar, Virginia, in 1966 with a major in Modern European History and a minor in English literature. She is married to Frank Cartmel Bedell and has three children: Rebecca Bailey, Matthew Sullivan, and John Clarence.