

Theatre Review

EDWARD BOND'S IN THE COMPANY OF MEN (The Pit 7.12.1996)

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Within the last twelve months, two new plays by Edward Bond have been staged in this country. In the Company of Men received a professional production by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, while Coffee was produced by a mixed company of amateur and professional actors in Wales.

Bond's play about the arms industry, In The Company Of Men, was written in the early 1990s and staged in Paris in 1992, but did not get its British premiere until the RSC's production in 1996, under Bond's own direction. I saw this play, a dystopian view of the future, at The Pit, the small auditorium in the bowels of the Barbican in London. I did not, however, see the entire play, as the performance I attended had to be abandoned at the start of the final scene because of a malfunction in the stage mechanism. A wall which should have been raised in order for the central character to hang himself from it¹ refused to emerge from beneath the stage. After a delay one of the actors was sent onstage to give a synopsis of the remainder of the action to a somewhat irritated audience. The performance thus ended in anticlimax, and my account of its total impact is inevitably going to be coloured by that fact.

Bond's first play was produced in 1962, and his 'Rational Theatre' now receives regular performances world-wide, with French and German (more than British) directors showing especial interest. His plays have moved through a variety of styles from pared-down naturalism through realism and surrealism to a uniquely 'Bondian' manner suited to his often bleak view of contemporary life. He has drawn on a wide range of subjects, from historical figures (Shakespeare, Clare), periods of history (18/19th century Japan, Edwardian England) and mythology (the Trojan War), to visions of a post-nuclear-holocaust future in The War Plays (1984/5). In the 1980s his opera The Cat, with musical score by Hans Werner Henze, was performed at Covent Garden. In the Company of Men is the second of two 'Post-Modern Plays', the first of which, Jackets, deals with the problem of violence in different societies/periods of history - a theme which recurs in one form or another in all of Bond's plays. His most recently performed work has been the two television plays for young people, Ollie's Prison (BBC 1993) and Tuesday (BBC Schools TV 1993); another play, At The Inland Sea, was written for Big Brum, a Theatre in Education group, and toured Midlands schools in 1996/7.

In The Company Of Men deals with the armaments industry, although its characters' wheeling and dealing could be based on almost any kind of big business. In fact one of the points made by the play is that we are moving towards a future where the huge multinationals will control all production indiscriminately - guns and butter both being made by the same giant company, indifferent to whether life is sustained or destroyed as long as there is profit in it. The other main theme on the play's agenda is the effect on personal relationships of involvement in this kind of activity. Love and loyalty are concepts in which the main characters believe unquestioningly until the play's events reveal the extent of the corruption surrounding them

When the play opens, Leonard Oldfield and his father are arguing about Leonard's request to be taken onto the board of his father's arms manufacturing company. The company has just escaped being taken over by Hammond, a 'shark in a brown overcoat' who dominates the market, and Oldfield's future seems secure. But he does not know that his son has already been tempted to go behind his back and secure control of another company, an ailing outfit run by an incompetent gambler, Wilbraham. Chief mover in this plot is Dodds,

Oldfield's company secretary and trusted confidant, who it eventually emerges was spying for Hammond all along. Leonard bargains with Wilbraham for a seat on the board of his company in return for a deal with Wilbraham's creditors to stave off bankruptcy. What Leonard does not realise is that Hammond is now the sole creditor, having bought up all the outstanding debt - and Hammond wants immediate payment, which Leonard can only provide by going to his father for money. Rather than face this humiliation, Leonard opts out of the whole situation, 'dropping out' into a (literally) subterranean world of drink and squalor in which he is joined by Bartley, the sacked former manservant of Oldfield. Hammond, who seems to need Leonard as a substitute son, pleads with him to return, but instead the disillusioned Leonard commits suicide.

Interwoven with this plot is the theme of relationships between fathers and sons and the responsibilities of parents to children. Leonard is, in Bond's words, 'trapped in an Oedipal hall of mirrors'. As the only, adopted child of Oldfield he is the Hamlet-like heir to the fortune, frustrated in his ambition by a parent whose clinging to power is reminiscent less of Hamlet than of King Lear. Leonard's name links him with an earlier series of Bond protagonists notable for their questioning attitude to life and their search for a reliable father-figure (The Pope's Wedding, Early Morning and Saved all include a character called Len). Leonard could thus be seen as a re-creation of the working-class heroes of Bond's 1960s plays - his uncertain origins (found on Oldfield's doorstep as a baby, parentage unknown) displace him from the centres of power and privilege where he has been raised. In Oldfield he has found a father of sorts, but he betrays Oldfield as perhaps he has been taught to do by Oldfield's betrayal of him, and cannot trust his would-be substitute, Hammond. Leonard/Oedipus finally only solves his dilemma by killing/rejecting both 'fathers' and taking his own life. Bartley assists him, thereby becoming his murderer as well as being his 'brother' through the parallels in their situations - Bartley also was taken in by Oldfield after his dismissal from the Navy, just as many years earlier Leonard had been adopted. Oldfield has reneged on his obligations to both servant and son, enacting the part (again a familiar one in Bond's drama) of the irresponsible or non-nurturing parent.

Bond's abiding themes of hope for the human race combined with horror at its ability to negate that hope - a result of the dehumanising pressures of capitalism - find expression in his later plays through a series of powerful images of modern life. In the *Company Of Men* draws on Hamlet in order to show up the relative paucity of imagination forced on a world which sees fulfilling the demands of the market as its highest good. Searching for analogies, Bond sees the plays of Shakespeare as reflecting the state's quest (albeit confusedly) for justice - a quest now abandoned in favour of pursuit of profit. The death of Leonard at the end of *In the Company of Men* reflects this historical change - whereas Hamlet dies gloriously in a palace, purifying the state through his death, the world of the modern Hamlet has shrunk to the confines of a cellar, and is not purified - though of course Bond wants the audience to draw conclusions from Leonard's death. In his programme notes for the play, Bond points out that the proliferation of wars and weapons in this century is a direct result of our misunderstanding of justice - a 'common human need' which we reject 'only at the cost of fear and danger'. Self-congratulation on the long term peace-keeping function of nuclear and other weapons may turn out to be a delusion; as Bond puts it: 'We would not have much regard for a man mounting the scaffold who boasted that he had survived the walk there.'

This quotation was among several from Bond's earlier "Notes on Post-Modernism", published in the first edition of *In The Company Of Men* in 1990 (Two Post-Modern Plays, Methuen Drama), which were included in the programme notes for the RSC production. (Other extracts used in the programme were from "The War Plays Commentary", 1991, and "Notes on Imagination" published with Coffee in 1995). They appear to have been selected mainly with

a view to illuminating Bond's thinking on the connections between capitalism, authority and institutionalised violence, which has been a perennial concern of his drama ("War memorials are the trademarks of ownership"). What they leave unanswered is the question of the sense in which Bond is using the term "post-modern" when he applies it to these later plays. At first sight it would seem that post-modern is the last term that one would apply to the work of a writer who patently neither believes that the very idea of history should be questioned, nor takes a relativist perspective directly focused against historical thinking.² Post-modernism's shift from the social to the individual, together with its distrust of language's ability to represent the real world, and its conclusion that meaning is indeterminate, do not square with Bond's continued insistence on the value of a "rational theatre", which will make its audiences "accept responsibility for being human". Yet Bond has applied the description "post-modern" to two of his most radical recent plays.

The "Notes on Post-Modernism" suggest that Bond is using the term primarily to connote 'our contemporary situation'. While he employs some of the vocabulary of post-modernism, cites Saussure and Chomsky directly, and seems to have been influenced in some respects by Foucault, his opening reference to 'the history and present state (known as post-modernism) of the relationship between people, technology and authority...' indicates a view of post-modernism as a historical moment rather than a philosophical position. But it is, according to Bond, a moment of crisis, in which the choice of philosophy adopted is of vital significance to the survival of humanity, because "We are creations of our understanding of our situation" ("Notes on Post-Modernism" #70). In Bond's view we misunderstand our (post-modern!) situation, primarily because we misunderstand the nature and importance of justice - a "common human need". The "Notes on Post-Modernism" do not specifically refer to the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, but the date of their composition, November 1989, points to a close connection between those events which prompted the 'End of history' debate, and Bond's contention that "Socialism has not failed but many of the things which socialism was intended to struggle for.. have been produced as if they were out of the hat by technology, as if science had played a trick on history" ("Notes on Post-Modernism" #72). In a letter written in 1993, Bond commented on the need to change the way power can be passed from the top to the bottom of society, and the requirement that this imposed for a "new form of human psyche" - a psyche which theatre could have an important role in creating. With evidence of such urgency and conviction in Bond's outlook, it is unsurprising to find him telling a correspondent that he is "using post-modern to mean almost the contrary to what it is usually taken to mean" (Letters Vol.II p220). Describing *In The Company Of Men* as a post-modern play, then, signifies for Bond that it is part of the new kind of theatre demanded by a world in which interpretation is still a necessary human activity - even if "meaning cannot be derived from the world but must be given to it" ("Notes on Post-Modernism", #4).

The critical response to this production was almost overwhelmingly negative. Before I attended it, I had heard only the BBC Radio 4 'Kaleidoscope' piece, which was fairly balanced, so I approached it with as open a mind as possible (I deliberately didn't re-read it before seeing it). By the interval it was clear that the play was taking far too long to say whatever it was saying, a message which seemed to consist of such a plethora of ideas that no single one had made its mark with enough force. However, though some people left at the interval, the remaining audience was attentive. But the contrasting moods of the text were missed in performance: the black farce of Oldfield's demise, for instance, did not seem to be appreciated as such; probably the preceding lengthy 'public soliloquy' of Leonard's, conducted in stage blackout as specified by the stage directions, had left the audience unprepared for a change of mood - or uncertain whether the mood actually had changed. The remainder of the play had little discernible sense of direction, and virtually none of the desperation and urgency which Leonard's rapid decline would seem (from the text) to imply. 'Direction' might

be taken in two senses: Bond apparently abandoned his direction of the play once it opened, preferring to turn his attention to the production of *Coffee* which was then in rehearsal in South Wales.

There were, however, some memorable moments in this production: Oldfield and Leonard standing stiffly side by side, their arms awkwardly round each other as if conducting an experiment in paternal/filial affection; a Lear-like Oldfield wearing Leonard's ragged raincoat like a parody of a royal robe, draped around his shoulders with the crimson lining facing outward; Wilbraham, huge and dishevelled, grovelling on the floor like a disintegrating Fool. The set had a Brechtian sparseness, its black/grey/white repeated in the costumes. This was a drama about men in suits (no women) where any departure from city 'uniform' was significant. Oldfield's age and vulnerability were suggested by his white dressing-gown and slippers; but on the country-house shooting weekend his garb was a reminder of the connections between upper-class privilege and violence. (The arms manufacturers' idea of a day's relaxation is to go out and kill something.) The scene of the shoot neatly, if slightly implausibly, brought together the images of institutionalised class power (Wilbraham, the alcoholic and failure, is the only one reluctant to go after the 'poor bloody birds') and destruction on a global scale - the latest Oldfield rifle is on show, visual evidence of the origins of the participants' wealth. When Leonard delivers the salesman's patter on the rifle's specifications it is in order to cover his attempt to kill his father 'accidentally' - an ironic situation which could be developed as a Theatre Event in Bond's theoretical terminology

It was in this scene, and a later one where Leonard recalls his actions in it, that a sense of extremity, of characters pushed to the limit of their experience, was most obviously lacking. Despite having directed it himself, Bond was not satisfied with the production, and this lack of a sense of desperation, of characters on an urgent quest for some understanding of their world, may account for his feeling that it was not 'there'. Its length (3 ½ hours, even without the final scene) was not necessarily solely to blame for this, although judicious cuts could probably help. It was as densely packed with images, ideas and suggestions as any of Bond's plays. With the exception of Bartley, the Glaswegian servant, whose articulation became increasingly impenetrable, the dialogue was delivered with a clarity and grace that did justice to Bond's fine sense of style and rhythm. The characters were well differentiated, and the complexities of the various relationships explored. It was the language of the long speeches, both in its detail and in its sheer quantity, that proved to be the stumbling block for most critics. Bond has said that the language of his 'post-modern' plays is not about the characters' experience but is a part of that experience, like cries of pain or the keening sounds of mourning; the audience should receive it as they would the sight of a waterfall, not distinguishing each drop but seeing the whole torrent [letter from Bond, 31.1.97]. However persuasive this may be in theory, it is not certain that it can be effectively put into practice. This production, anyway, did not manage it.

1. Bond's stage direction for Unit 9 (the final scene) reads: 'The cellar of the ruined house. Empty. A bracket on the proscenium arch.'

2. See F. Furedi *Mythical Past, Elusive Future* (Pluto 1992), pp.230-232

