

DAVID EDGAR AND HIS AUDIENCE

An interested observer from outside the United Kingdom trying hard to work out for himself a more or less accurate picture of what has been going on in the British theatre scene during the last twenty years or so, will inevitably find himself rather confused, if not totally lost, on coming across what some call « political drama ».

He would expect to find light comedies, musicals, thrillers, soap-opera stuff and the like in the commercial theatres of London's West End - and his 'Great expectations' are certainly not disappointed, but would he ever have visualized such left-wing political writers as Howard Brenton, David Hare, Trevor Griffiths, David Edgar or Edward Bond in such bourgeois, well-established and subsidised venues like the National Theatre, The Barbican, The Royal Shakespeare Company's stages, provincial repertory theatres, and, to some extent, even the West End ? *Pravda* by Howard Brenton and David Hare has been running in the Olivier for nearly twelve months, Bond's *The War Games* could be admired (or not) at the Barbican, Hare's *Plenty* at the National Theatre, Edgar's *Destiny* at Stratford, just to mention a few. These writers and others who are known as being left - or even very far left - of the Labour Party, what kind of audience do they write for ? Do they still believe in being able to change the Establishment ? Or has the Establishment already changed them, possibly without them having noticed yet ? Whereas John McGrath, for example, has said that he « would run about twenty-five miles » (1) away from the National Theatre if he was offered a commission we find quite a substantial number of his colleagues who try « to jump the queue », mix happily with the very people they condemn in their plays or - could it be worse - have their plays merrily adapted for television. After 1968 theatre-goers have been used, more often than not, to finding British life and institutions presented as being in a state of decay and as a spectacle of corruption. Many a playwright born after World War II found himself disillusioned by the socialist governments into which he had put so much hope, and, discovering no perspective whatsoever for a humane future, such dramatists turned their backs on the parliamentary system and began to struggle for a radical reform. This is also true, to a certain degree, of quite a number of theatre companies which were founded after 1968, such as CAST, 7:84, The General Will, Belt and Braces, or Monstrous Regiment. There were plays, for example, about urban terrorism, like Howard Brenton's *Magnificence*, or corruption in England's provincial cities, like *Brassneck*, written by Brenton and Hare, the rise of British neo-fascism in *Strawberry Fields* by Poliakoff or in *Destiny* by David Edgar. Counter-culture was flourishing, street-theatres, agit-prop, living-newspapers, and groups like Portable Theatre carried harsh and explosive shows to England's campuses. Bradford in Yorkshire had turned into a dazzling centre of performing art, arts labs, all kinds of live shows, and so on. Would it, then, mean stretching the point too far to assume that, while those plays were being written and performed, there must have been some kind of mutual consensus shared by the playwrights, the actors and the vast majority of their audience on the assumption that the British society was in a deplorable state - on the one hand - and that one of the theatre's main functions and objectives was to work towards a better society - on the other hand -?

However, even a perfunctory glance at the theatre programmes of the main venues, whether subsidized or commercial, does reveal that not only left-wing writers were being performed during that period, but the majority were authors of so-called « well-made » plays. Ayckbourn, Stoppard, Pinter, Saunders, Shaffer, Whitehead and others were by no means neglected. And, in retrospect and with a time-lapse camera, it does not seem too difficult to detect that part of the audience which had always been in favour of a theatre that basically sustained the ruling class and its values had never really changed their sympathies but had grown increasingly impatient with the outcries for « egalitarian collectivism » and « more power to the people ». With the western world economy regaining confidence, with politicians and top executives slowly « jogging to the right » (2) and with a growing privatisation of public life and affairs a great part of the theatre audience seemed to have become fed-up with socialist drama.

Conservative politics was firmly in power in the late seventies and neo-conservative ideology splashed over the great pond producing an astonishing number of « wets » - not only in Great Britain - when left - wing writers were apparently caught in mid-flight and brought down to a hard and rocky earth. Is this the explanation for, say, Trevor Griffiths not writing a stage play between 1976 and 1981, for David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff or Barry Keefe not producing anything at all, and for Arden/d'Arcy, after an unceasing struggle against virtually everybody in and around the theatre, accepting the futility of it and declaring that they would never write for the theatre again ?

While the playwrights - or at least some of them - who had propagated socialism based on mutual understanding in their plays were shrinking from the stunning consequences of the « U-turn » and sinking into deep reflection about what to do next, the stage was swamped by a growing number of much-applauded plays that concerned themselves with a particular species of the individual character, that is the handicapped, the cripple, the disabled, the mentally ill. While plays of that kind were much applauded the governments of the western world supported organisations which propagated godparenthood for individual starving children in the Third World, thus privatising pity. And we find plays responding to this « Zeitgeist » by luring the audience into the identification with the hardships of one single character. Lanford Wilson's *The Fifth of July* showing a legless Vietnam war veteran, achieving personal growth through teaching dumb children to speak, was an unexpected success on Broadway (3). Outside the theatre, however, official western economy was in fact exploiting all underdeveloped states more severely than ever. « Charity must have its romance », says Charles Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* - and it seems that he has taught a pertinent lesson, indeed.

However, theatre is not only *what* is said on stage but - equally important - how it is said. It is the structure, the form and the style of a play that arouses our interest - not only its content. And it can be demonstrated that politically committed playwrights worked on altering the formal element in political drama while still trying to bring home, basically, the same message. Beginning in the late seventies they made efforts to combine style and content in order to give a new interpretation of a new reality. A telling example of this process are the works of David Edgar, who has always been acutely aware of the political and social changes in post-war Britain and has tried to offer sound and credible explanations in his plays.

Born in 1948, David Edgar is one of the most prolific contemporary British playwrights. He has written more than 40 plays which - and this *is* worth emphasizing - have all been put on stage or performed on radio or television. After studying English literature in Manchester he went to Bradford where he met Chris Parr, lecturer in drama at the university, who encouraged him to write plays and had them put on stage. These earlier plays were very often issue-related and are firmly rooted in the agit-prop tradition. Working together with a theatre-group called « The General Will » he wrote in quick succession one play after another, all of which were, above all, harsh comments on government politics after the conservative victory in 1970. Thus, productions like *State of Emergency*, *The Dunkirk Spirit*, *The Rupert Show* or *The National Interest* were conceived.

However, if one characteristic of agit-prop is to cut down the complexities of social life to a black-and-white picture, with straightforward didactics and with virtually no development of the protagonists, David Edgar felt very early on in his career that this form contained some pitfalls he had to avoid if he wished to write drama that mirrored the complexities of political life. On the other hand, being a dedicated socialist, he also had to avoid psychologically motivated characters who could all too easily be explained by, say, a reference to Freud and his school. So, in a comment to his play *Destiny*, he made the following statement about one of the characters, called Turner, « I'm not going to give you the opportunity to say Turner is a fascist because his wife is a gorgon, or his child is a mongol, or his son was run over, or whatever. I'm not going to do it. You are not going to know. He could be single. He could be gay. I'm going to treat everything else about him in a very complicated way, but you're not going to know anything personal or intimate, because, if you do, you'll run up that blind alley for psychological explanations » (4).

The third blind alley Edgar did *not* want to go up was naturalism. All that this style means for him is « recognizable, surface behaviour », showing the world as, for example, an « endlessly repeated series of equivalent domestic conflicts and reconciliations, as predictable and unchanging as the cogs and wheels of a clock » (5). Although his plays rely heavily on detailed research into the actual background of the themes he deals with, this does not mean that they give some kind of photographic replica of reality. Even where he worked very intensively from one source only, as for instance, from the tapes of the Watergate Affair which he used to write his television play on Richard Nixon, which might have been « the purest drama documentary ever written ... in which every word spoken on screen had actually been spoken in reality » this was not recognizable, surface behaviour, or a chronicle of the events. Edgar explains : « ... the whole process of making it (the play) had consisted of value judgements about what to look at, and the actors' judgement about pace and inflection and gesture and mood. And those judgements - about how the words were said, and why and with what relative significance - added up to an argument ... (which) had the effect of deepening our audience's understanding of those extraordinary events » (6). David Edgar's play *Destiny* serves perfectly as an example of the author's successful attempt to combine a credible plot and credible characters with a new structure and a new form, as may also be demonstrated by *Maydays*, *Mary Barnes*, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* or even his adaptation of Dickens' voluminous novel « *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* ».

Destiny covers the period from 1947 when India became independent until the present time, but it centres mainly on the political development of those persons

who served in India as military men and of some of the members of a new fascist party in the United Kingdom called in the play, the « Nation Forward ». As a matter of fact, the core of the play is Enoch Powell's infamous « Rivers - of - Blood - Speech » which is introduced by the author when « Nation Forward » celebrates Hitler's birthday. This is a very effective stage device clarifying for the audience in a flash the potential relationship between Powell's speech and Hitler's type of fascism on the one hand and possible links between conservative and fascist parties, on the other.

The other essential political milestone that gave thrust to the play was the Immigration Act of 1971 put forward by the Conservatives. This act had never really been fought against by the Labour Party either, which not only disillusioned many progressive thinkers, but put the Party itself into a deep conflict. Edgar's aim was to explore how a very problematic relationship between the native English population and the immigrants, which was rooted deeply in the days of the Empire, was ruthlessly exploited by a fascist party by persuading even the common man in the street that he had a moral right to drive the immigrants home. One of the highlights of the play, the assembly of the so-called Taddley Patriotic League, brings this point of argument home in a brilliantly dramatic way. Although the people attending this meeting belong to different classes and have no interest whatsoever in their mutual problems - they do in fact show outspoken hostility towards each other - the « Nation Forward » speaker can easily unite their dissatisfactions at the end of the debate by propagating a common enemy they all have who is responsible for all their miseries : this common enemy is nothing else but a world-wide conspiracy against the white race.

For dramatic reasons David Edgar has chosen just a few characters as participants of the meeting. He has deliberately chosen not to show a densely crowded committee room where discussions and debates would be impossible. These characters sit in silence for a long time, well out of touch with each other, thus visibly stressing the barriers between them. It is clear by the mere setting that these barriers could never be overcome by a rational discussion. It is the appeal to their deeply rooted emotions which works the miracle of agreement that, say, an aggressive labourer and a silly lady of the upper middle class find together. For the audience this seems only too credible : the form of the meeting is recognisable, and they understand that fascist ideology works by eliminating people's capacity of thought.

There is one character in *Destiny* who deserves special attention from the audience : Turner, introduced as a sergeant in India and a shopkeeper later in London. He is Mr. Everyman, as it were, a person millions of people can identify with. And yet, he is the one who reveals by his actions how fascism works. Whereas those who pull the strings stay more or less in the background, Turner (nomen est omen), shocked by a cynically demonstrated eviction from his shop, joins the « Nation Forward » party without having the slightest knowledge that these were the very forces who had done him an injustice in the first place. Edgar does not exploit Turner's political blindness to give him the touch of a tragic character ; neither does he use an agit-prop style to caricature him, which would have been all too easy to do. He does, however, make the audience aware of a complicated mesh of political forces and factors in which a man like Turner will inevitably be entangled and, eventually, suffocated. To illustrate this truth he cites Hitler : « Only one thing could have stopped our movement. If our adversaries had understood its principles, and had smashed, with the utmost brutality, the nucleus of our Movement ... » (7)

Turner did not understand. In *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* David Edgar writes about South-African Apartheid. The difficulty a writer encounters when putting a theme like that on stage is probably twofold : how can he deal with this massive, shameless injustice within a couple of hours on stage without becoming heavily overdidactic, and, what kind of new revelations could an audience expect when the message must be clear from the start and when there can be no doubt whatsoever which side one should be on ? Edgar has tried to solve these problems by treating the material very subjectively, i.e. by not endeavouring to give a full treatment of the political conflict, further by choosing a white man, not a black man, to be in jail, and by constantly making it clear for the audience that the white man's imprisonment is a relatively humane one compared to the suffering of black prisoners, and finally by involving the audience in the experience Albie Sachs suffers. Albie sits in his cell that covers the whole stage asking himself how he would explain what it was like being in solitary confinement after he had left the prison. And, in a play within a play, he says, « ... the real problem is to show just what it is like, in isolation, the dintegration, and the horror of it all, to people who are not alone, because they are together, watching, as an audience, my play.

And then, I think.

Perhaps the best thing is, not in the play, but in the audience for them to see, for me to come out, to the audience, and say, my day is sitting staring at a wall, now I am going to make you sit and stare, you mustn't talk, or read your programmes, look at other people. For these minutes you must sit and stare. And then, perhaps, they'd know.

Just what it's like.

(Pause for about 15 seconds. Then Albie goes to his bunk.

He lies down.

Another three-quarters of a minute.

Albie put his forearms across his face. He does not move, for another minute and a half.

Then he puts his arms by his side.

Another half minute.

Then he swings his legs out, stands.

He speaks, not to the Audience, briskly, as he walks out, through the fourth wall of the cell). Albie : When all is over, I will leave South Africa. I owe that thing to me » (8).

While trying to make the audience experience Albie's tortures for three long minutes in this scene, Edgar hastens to immediately distance their involvement by letting them regard the whole play in retrospect : Imprisonment has come to an end, Albie is free and emigrates to England. The spectator is back in the present time. From this point of view he can think and judge. Therefore, Albie's last words are : « They must remember ».

The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs is an adaptation of an autobiography written by the real-life lawyer Albie Sachs. Edgar's other great adaptations are *Mary Barnes* and Charles Dickens' « *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. *Mary Barnes* is, as the author wishes to point out, the most important of his works. It is an adaptation of a « true story », i.e. of an autobiography of a real schizophrenic woman. In order to increase credibility Edgar has done intensive research within this particular field of mental illness.

The time of the play is the 1960s and the setting is in East London where a group

around R.D. Laing, the anti-psychiatrist thinker, was convinced that schizophrenia was caused by disturbances in the social and personal sphere and should not be treated with the conventional mechanics of electric shocks and drugs, but with a method that encompassed soul, mind and body as an entity. Although Edgar shows very impressively the terrible hardships Mary Barnes suffers from and the almost insurmountable problems her psychiatrists encounter, this play neither deals with mental illness alone nor indulges in confused sympathy with its protagonist. The audience never loses sight of the social context in which these painful events occur, and it becomes evident that this play is really a play about a utopian community in the 1960's discussing the question : what do we have to do to establish a humane society that is not schizophrenic in itself ?

Destiny has been Edgar's great play about dangers from the far right of the political scene, *Maydays* discusses the development of the left from after the Second World War up to the present time. The author characterizes it as a play « about two kinds of defection, it is about defection from East to West, the more traditional forward defection of a Soviet dissident who is imprisoned and then released and comes to England, and also the political defection of people who were revolutionaries in their youth who consciously and publicly revoke their old beliefs. So it is not just about the extreme left, it is also about the right, it is about where those people end up » (9).

Again, it is a play that is epic in its dimensions : more than three and a half hours on stage, moving in a vast sweep through post-war socialist history between England, Hungary, Russia and the USA, employing about 40 characters. As is the case in *Destiny*, the characters who are introduced at the beginning of the play meet again after years have passed by and discover their mutually very different attitudes towards socialism.

Maydays begins in England on May 1st, 1945, when the 17 year-old Crowther delivers a speech on a communist meeting celebrating the victory over fascism. Immediately after this scene Edgar confronts his audience with the Russian invasion of Hungary, and it is this very invasion which has a desperate effect on Crowther later in his life, while the audience is anxious to know if Glass, who is to become one of Crowther's students as the play develops will be able to hold fast to his communist ideals throughout the sixties and the seventies. While younger students are revolting against the Establishment, Crowther, now older and a teacher, has lost his sympathy for revolutionary left-wing slogans. On the other hand, Glass, son of a priest, throws himself in the student movement, almost pitifully trying to distance himself from his roots.

Parallel to these events in England and the USA Edgar develops the plot of a dedicated Russian party-member who turns into a defector and flees to the West where he is employed by right-wing politicians for their own condemnable aims. This is a so much more serious story compared to a lot of happenings in the West which the author presents in a somewhat wickedly funny light. In an unforgettable meeting of ultra-conservative university members, Lermontov, the Russian defector, learns to his amazement and his pain that he has to witness, as if in a mirror, the same tyranny from which he believes he has escaped : in the east as well as in the west strong and ruthless political forces try to manipulate him and his freedom as an individual.

Probably even more forcibly than in *Destiny*, Edgar was confronted with the problem of continuity of action against historically and geographically dislocated events. On stage, this is achieved by a brilliant use of cross-fading lights, thus giving the impression of connection, and by, for instance, moving trucks in and out. By these visual and audio-visual means the inter-relation between plots and characters is forcefully demonstrated. Edgar is concerned with a historical explanation of events, not with a mere chronicle. He comments, « To explain, it is first necessary to be recognizable, and only then, having won the audience's trust, to place those recognizable phenomena within the context of a perceived political truth. It is indeed in this combination of recognition with perception that the political power of theatre lies » (10). His characters are not motivated by psychological factors, at least the audience is not encouraged to look for them, but they were put into a political and social setting which was familiar to, and therefore recognisable for an audience. Edgar continues, « So what I hoped would happen was that the audience would recognize the characters from the inside, but be able, simultaneously, like a sudden film-cut from close-up to wide-angle, to look at how these individual journeys were defined by the collective journey of an epoch » (11).

My remarks on David Edgar and his audience might be summed-up by contrasting them with some of John McGrath's ideas on political theatre. John McGrath is well-known, above all, as founder and director of the 7:84 Theatre Company, as author of several plays and writer of critical articles on the objectives of socialist theatre. In his book *A Good Night Out* (12) and elsewhere (13) he gives an elaborate description of the principal differences between West End theatres, the subsidized theatres and the fringe, or touring theatres, and their respective audiences. With regard to the subsidized establishments like the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Companies and the major reps he classifies the audience as « typically from the cultured, higher-educated, professional, or managerial groups and their children, plus the cosmopolitan culture-seekers of all lands (14). And, while referring to playwrights like David Edgar, Edward Bond, John Arden or Trevor Griffiths who among others have written for these audiences, he does acknowledge that « it is no doubt useful to the general movement of socialist ideas to have them aired prominently, to enter the national (or at least metropolitan) consciousness ... but » - he continues - « the process is not contributing to the creation of a new, genuinely oppositional theatre » (15). And the reason he gives for this allegation is that this kind of theatre, being social democratic but not socialist, is bound to work within the capitalist framework and requires as its precondition the health of the capitalist system, which, in fact, is what it pretends to fight.

Consequently, John McGrath is convinced that a socialist theatre must play for a working class audience only, and with his 7:84 company he has done exactly that, whereas David Edgar disputes the success of those efforts and would rather recommend to acknowledge the audience as it is, namely not consisting « in the majority of manual workers ... » (16). Taking that into account he, himself, does not hesitate to address the audience as it exists. « What is obviously needed » he points out, « is a way of transforming the techniques that have been developed in metropolitan theatres into forms that are formally and geographically accessible to audiences directly involved in the struggle against exploitation and oppression » (16). Among the various writers who have endeavoured to do exactly that he believes to be one who has found his own style, « If you went into a recent play of

mine and knew something about the theatre and hadn't picked up your programme, you would know it was by me » (17).

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NOTES

- (1) *Theatre Quarterly*, V, n° 19, p. 54.
- (2) David Edgar, *Public Theatre in a Private Age*, BTJ / DATEC Special Reports, An occasional Publication of the British Theatre Institute, n° 1, Autumn 1984.
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) David Edgar, « Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities », *Theatre Quarterly*, IX, 1979, n° 33, p. 16f.
- (5) *Public Theatre in a Private Age*, *ibid.*
- (6) David Edgar, « On Drama Documentary », in : *Ah ! Mischief. The Writer and Television* (ed. Franck Pike), Faber and Faber, 1982, p. 26f.
- (7) David Edgar, *Destiny*, Methuen, 1982, p. 96.
- (8) David Edgar, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*, Rex Collins, 1982, p. 44.
- (9) From an interview between D. Edgar and the author of this article which will be published in *English-Amerikanische Studien*.
- (10) *Public Theatre in a Private Age*, *Ibid.*
- (11) *Ibid.*
- (12) John McGrath, *A good Night Out*, Methuen, 1981.
- (13) John McGrath, « The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre », *Theatre Quarterly*, IX, n° 35, 1979.
- (14) *Ibid.* p. 45.
- (15) *Ibid.* p. 46.
- (16) David Edgar, « Ten years of Political Theatre, 1968-78 », *Theatre Quarterly*, VIII, n° 32, p. 32f.
- (17) *Public Theatre in a Private Age*, *Ibid.*

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