

Whistling in the Wilderness: Edward Bond's Most Recent Plays

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Edward Bond, recognized as one of Britain's and Europe's major playwrights, is also a professed socialist whose declared aim is to produce an effective political theatre. One might have reasonably expected that his latest works, a trilogy called The War Plays on the subject of nuclear war, its causes and effects, would be a useful political intervention, perhaps providing a perspective for people (like myself) who find themselves disorientated by the threat of nuclear annihilation. They were produced last summer at the Barbican's Pit theatre, and Malcolm Hay called The Great Peace, the last part of the trilogy, 'one of the most significant new plays for many years' (1). Yet for me the plays were two evenings of pretentious rubbish.

Red, Black and Ignorant, the first play of the trilogy, offers a forty-five minute series of short sketches -- 'Learning', 'Love', 'Eating', 'Selling',

'Work', 'The Army', 'No one can willingly give up the name human', and 'Funeral' -- which, as 'The Introduction' (the first scene) explains, tell us the histories of our times. The second play, The Tin Can People, which lasts seventy-five minutes, takes its title from a group of people who, seventeen years after a nuclear holocaust, are still surviving on the contents of five warehouses of undamaged tin cans. They start dying when a stranger arrives. He is blamed, everyone goes mad, the warehouses are razed to the ground, but he is then welcomed into the community and they all begin to contemplate building a new world in which everyone will live happily ever after.

The final play, The Great Peace, which lasts three and a half hours, is divided into two sections. The first, shorter part contrives a situation wherein the child of 'The Woman' is murdered by her son in the army, part of military expedients to counter famine by leaving fewer mouths to feed. (Why it is children who are killed, rather than the aged and infirm, is probably explained by Bond's recurrent theme of a militaristic society's adverse affects on children -- more of that later.) The action then shifts to a wasteland where we meet The Woman babbling incoherently to a bundle of rags she thinks is her own child. Eventually rescued by another new community, she nevertheless elects (for reasons which are not quite clear) to stay in the wilderness.

All of these plays are characterized by unrelenting descriptions of pain and horror. I believe they are an attempt to produce what Howard Barker has recently characterized as modern tragedy -- pain rather than comfort, a pain which may 'equip us against lies' (2). Bond has repeatedly questioned the rationality of a society 'in which the audience

can sit in the theatre while a few miles along the road men are sitting before gadgets that fire nuclear weapons' (3) and he said that here he wanted 'to show the psychosis that exists after a nuclear war' (4). The result is an unrelenting surreal and expressionistic language.

Michael Billington, reviewing the trilogy in the Guardian, praised the plays for this, 'for going beyond the quasi-documentary realism of Threads and The War Game to envision the kind of society that might finally emerge', and he concludes that Bond is 'writing the first tenuously optimistic bomb plays and suggesting that out of the ashes may come a new order' (5). The plays are not just about a psychotic survival after the bomb but the building of a new and just society.

Ernest Mandel has argued the absurdity of such notions of 'socialism out of the ruins', pointing out that a nuclear war would destroy the considerable human and technical resources necessary for building a classless society. In the 'best case' scenario it would not be socialism that arose from the nuclear ashes but barbarism from which the survivors could advance only in an arduous centuries-long ascent (6).

The quasi-documentary Threads suggested this brilliantly. It does away with dialogue after the bomb has fallen; struggling for bare existence in the midst of a nuclear winter, the survivors lose the power of articulate speech. The image is haunting and drives home the fact-based argument that humanity as we know it cannot survive a nuclear war. Compared to the objectification of a nuclear aftermath of Threads, Bond's surreal descriptions of destruction and psychosis seem a facile indulgence. Yet Bond has a serious intention of analyzing our society and providing

answers; his style is deliberate. In an article which accompanied the original premiere of *Red, Black and Ignorant* (for the Barbican's 'Thoughtcrimes' season in January 1984), for example, Bond wrote: 'A society which does not "know itself" does not act rationally. If the processes by which the state organizes society's various strata and activities are corruptions of the truth, then these corruptions will affect all its decisions, little and great' (7). In the nuclear age, he says, unless our thinking changes, then we are already dead. As the final Chorus of *The Tin Can People* declares,

We make ourselves as much as we make the
houses in which we live
Truly you live in a new age: as you enter your
house to complete it you bring with you
your new tool, the bomb
We can only tell you: you must create justice
(WP1&2, p. 50) (8)

For Bond, the post-nuclear scenario functions both as a projected image of future horrors, and as a way of analyzing our own situation.

Throughout the trilogy Bond's analysis fuses the future with the present but it is most fully developed in *Red, Black and Ignorant*. The play opens with a character called 'The Monster' who declares that 'in the past children thought the world was watched over by gods/but now we kill them' (WP1&2, p.5). He continues with descriptions of the nuclear apocalypse, and we learn that his monstrosity was caused by his being born in the midst of it. The scene ends with him saying that the audience are about to see scenes from the life we did not live, i.e., by implication from the life we are still living. These scenes stress the connection between our present way of life and post-nuclear

existence, showing the origins of *The Monster* to lie essentially in our own time. Thus in Scene Two education is described in terms of a fiery baptism: 'In lessons a blowtorch ran over my body/My nerves are burned out so I felt no pain', and later, 'A bullet has passed from side to side of my brain' (pp. 6-7). The other scenes in the play attempt to show how all aspects of our way of living foster an irrationality which will turn the imagined holocaust which opens the play into a reality. 'The Wife' concludes in the final scene:

You who live in barbarous times
Under rulers with redness on their hands,
blackness in their hearts and ignorance in
their minds
Everything before your time was the childhood
of humankind
With the new weapons that age passed
But you went on building your house with
bricks that were already on fire (WP1&2,
p. 19)

In the other two plays the action shifts to the aftermath of the nuclear war, but the survivors continually reiterate the theme that our society is 'already on fire'. A survivor in *The Great Peace* says that

In the end their democracy became the way the
military gave its orders t'civilians
That took a lot of trainin: they 'ad t'start killin
their kids even before they 'ad enough
words t'beg mercy (WP3, p. 56)

This echoes *The Wife's* summing up and *The Monster's* opening speech, and it is a motif of the murder of children that recurs throughout Bond's work. It represents for him the way an unnatural or

irrational society socializes its children, reproducing the irrationality and bringing us closer to ultimate destruction: 'And so bombs lie among the crumbs on your kitchen table and the books on the school desk' (WP1&2, p. 50).

In these plays Bond is saying that capitalism in general, and nuclear weapons in particular, already make us dead. A survivor in *The Great Peace* speaks of us 'having so many bombs even the living are corpses!' (WP3, p. 52); *The Monster* says, 'Even as they lay in their silos the rockets/ destroyed the societies they were said to/ protect' (WP1&2, pp. 14-5).

So why don't the plays work? They are all so excruciatingly abstract and the images are contrived and forced. *The Monster's* ravings about the gods looking over children and then the earth whistling in derision is sentimental, and *The Monster's* charred state -- a physical reminder throughout the play of the way we treat children -- can shock without generating understanding. Bond is using the imagery of nuclear war and its consequent degradation as a way of passing comment on the state of the world now. But it lacks a persuasive quality. When *The Woman in The Great Peace* tells a story about living in a burning house in which she beat out the flames on her dress with one hand and nursed her kid with the other, Bond can be said to be providing thematic and imagistic unity. But when *The Woman* goes on about her child getting 'used t'the stink of scorchin and charrin: it developed a little cough from the smoke', it all begins to sound contrived. Her conclusion, 'That's 'ow we nurse kids now', may well elicit the response, 'No we don't' (WP3, p.28). Bond is making personal declarations of how he feels

about the world instead of demonstrating these ideas in a concrete and dramatic way.

The problem is further compounded by Bond's tendency to produce long and arch speeches. The story which *The Woman* tells, for example, is actually submerged in no fewer than seventy-six lines (in the printed text) of soliloquy, most of it a delirious, incomprehensible raving. Lines such as the following are merely self-indulgent, redundant

16

Per'aps you'd be better off as an animal?
A rabbit 'as fur - that's more use than a name
Birds fly out of danger
A fox 'as four legs an a mouth that's 'as good as
a 'and
There used t'be foxes t'eat birds an birds t'fly
out of foxes' mouths
The wind still sometimes uncovers trash a fox
could live on (p. 28)

Little wonder that Michael Ratcliffe in his Observer review thought these plays represented English literary theatre at its most egg-bound (9) -- ironic in view of the fact that Bond's original involvement with the Royal Court was to get away from literariness. Brecht realized there is nothing clever or profound if you can't be understood (10).

Without doubt Bond is sincere and genuine in his fears for the fate of the world, but this declamatory style with its imagery of incandescence doesn't feel right -- he shouts too much (for which Trotsky reprimanded Mayakovsky) 'where he should merely speak' (11) Bond's images resemble a private nightmare to which we have 'privileged' access, and Weightman's remarks about Lear are even more

apposite here: 'the horror Mr. Bond presents... is not symbolically representative of the evils of our society (12).

As well as overblown speeches of gratuitous horror, another major failing is Bond's love of arcane symbolism. Both these faults can be seen as products of Bond's increasing urgency over the years to 'tell the truth'. But this 'truth', he demands, must be unsullied by 'appearance': 'The dramatist cannot confront the audience with truth by telling a story. The interpretation is counterfeited by society... our language is fouled by its involvement in that society...' (13). However, in trying to distance an audience from appearances, Bond loses a major point of contact with them, as can be seen in the second play, The Tin Can People. We first meet the survivors in this play in what is called a 'paradise in hell', paradise because the survivors have managed some semblance of living owing to the existence of five fully intact warehouses full of tin cans. Later, after the warehouses have been destroyed and the stranger invited into the new community, Bond has one of his characters deliver the following summing up speech:

A tree grows but it doesn't own its own field. The owner can come along at anytime and cut it and burn it. It's the same with us. When things we need to live are owned by someone else, we're owned -- we can be cut down and burned at anytime. Now no tins - so we can only own what we make and wear and use ourselves. That's the only difference - but it means that at last we own ourselves. (WP1&2, p. 51)

Tin cans represent a fool's paradise, a situation in which people are possessed but do not realize it. In

The Pope's Wedding, Bond's first play, the final scene consists of the dead body of the old hermit surrounded by hundreds of tin cans. Bond recently described this as 'representing an affluent society with a dead centre' (14), while the mention of trees possessing fields recalls The Worlds (1979): 'A man buys a house. Does he own it? No, because to keep it he must get more money. He must obey the laws of money. And so the house owns him' (15). What is suggested, therefore, is that this play is a parable of our situation. But the link with our world is tenuous; it is only those familiar with Bond's ideas and previous work who will be able to make much of it. The tin cans appear to be an attempt by Bond to 'make the truth physical' (16); yet all they do is serve as physical symbols of Bond's personal notions, and without a concrete context they become abstract and simplistic. For the message might read: Let's have our own 'tin can riots', burn down the supermarkets and all go and live in communes. The abstract symbolism distracts from the real material problems of living (what Bond might reject as 'appearances') and unfortunately reduces the real insights Bond has -- such as the way 'the commodity' is imbued with a false magic and the possession of the possesses in consumerism.

The most fundamental weakness of The War Plays is that they are undramatic. Instead of concrete characters and situations there are a series of intellectual abstractions, a kind of 'symbolic logic' for the stage. However, as Peter Brook has advised, 'we cannot assume that the audience will assemble devoutly and attentively. It is up to us to capture its attention and compel its belief' (17). Bond's second play, Saved (in which the murdered-child motif was first used), provides a useful comparison. Unlike, say, the stage symbol of The Monster or the extended metaphor of the tin cans, this play does 'make the truth physical'. Here Bond

dramatizes reality rather than packaging up his ideas about the world in abstract symbols. The idea underlying the image, that an unnatural society cripples children's intellectual and emotional development, is demonstrated. The claustrophobic 'desert of bricks' in which the action is set dominates the play -- not in terms of stage set but through the dialogue and the events that refer to it and from which it is inferred. The dialogue reveals only separateness, as do sexual relations between characters. Each character is always seeking to grasp and possess both space and objects. Their almost casual aggression seems inevitable given their situation. When the baby is stoned to death the suggestion is very much that growing up in this world would have been a progressive death, while the stoning itself is perpetrated by other dead beings.

The murder of a child is symbolic and assumes a deeper significance only because the total action of the play has already prepared for it. In Saved Bond has created a world which penetratingly reflects an aspect of the society we all share. It shows human beings acting in a specific material and economic milieu; and it is this material situation which pervades each word and action. It is implicit that this deeper reality -- the Britain of the 'sixties still waiting for the socialism promised in 1945 - is responsible for the deaths of both the child and the murderers, not individual human viciousness. In directing their attention to a recognizable social reality, Bond requires the audience at least to engage with the ideas, regardless of their social perspective. As the uproar which followed its premiere in 1965 testifies, this play did actually challenge an audience, whereas The War Plays are a *recherché* piece of intellectual teasing.

Occasionally, however, a good line does shine

through the knotted mess of images and speeches which is The War Plays. We are becoming, or have become, 'Deadmen... trained to perform the one action: press with the button finger' (WP1&2, p. 47), the 'Chorus' in The Tin Can People declares. It is a suggestive image, not only of superpower leaders with their fingers on the button, but also as a caricature of an increasingly push-button society, where America's Star Wars Programme becomes almost innocently exciting to those who spent their youth playing 'Space Invaders'. Bond draws attention not only to the consequences of a nuclear exchange, but also to the ideological effects of 'The Bomb', that nuclear politics is itself destructive whether the bomb falls or not.

The good qualities of Bond's ideas looked at in abstraction emphasize the failure of this trilogy to communicate them. The multi-layering of imagistic themes, along with the declamatory speeches and private imagery, detract from understanding -- especially in performance in the theatre. The ideas Bond presents are accessible only when reading these plays as texts. He is trying to challenge us into thinking more deeply about our society and making connections on different levels -- the fire already within us, for example, the implicit relation between nuclear politics and consumerism (tins possess us which suggests ghosts; bombs turn us into corpses, but we still live, which also suggests ghosts), and so on. David Hirst's recent book on Bond (completed before The War Plays were produced) speaks of Bond's deeply poetic style, both verbal and physical images having 'a precision of complex orchestration' (18). This is a good description of The War Plays, but in the theatre this complexity was reduced to a stream of confused and confusing words that quickly became monotonous. The Woman's interminable cryptic soliloquizing began

to seem like a brick wall on which I kept beating my head. For Hirst, Bond's poetic dramas 'yield only a fraction of their quality in reading; only by experiencing them in performance does the full richness of their texture make itself felt' (19). Richness of texture, perhaps; but it is only by reading them that one has the slightest idea of what is going on. As for the performance, two lines did catch my attention:

Ow much longer does this go on?
Round an round inside a skull (WP3, p. 43)

The Great Peace, alas, went on beyond 11pm so I couldn't get the drink I needed after Bond's onslaught of wild and whirling words, words, words.

The failure of The War Plays is the failure of Bond to recognize an audience. And without people there is no politics. The trilogy is in many respects 'clamorous of reality' -- dealing with important themes -- but the clamour is 'inarticulate. The 'acid test in theatre', as expressed by Peter Brook, is what remains after the performance is over, the 'central image... its silhouette' (20). That Michael Billington understood Bond's central image to be one of optimism in the ashes indicates the obscuring power of Bond's style. For my part, the central image was an empty chattering in the wilderness -- The Woman wandering aimlessly in a wasteland, chattering incoherently to a non-existent baby. Mr Bond is talking to himself, and that hardly constitutes effective political drama.

The fault lies not in Bond's politics but in his 'art'. He once said, 'The artist's job is to make... public images in which our species recognizes itself and confirms its identity' (21). By this criterion The War Plays fail. Bond himself has fallen victim to what he once

warned others against; he has become 'shut up in private fantasies, experiments in style, unrewarding obscurities' (22).

Notes

1. Malcolm Hay, 'Edward Bond: British Secret Playwright', Plays and Players, June 1985, P. 9.
2. Howard Barker, '49 asides for a tragic theatre', The Guardian, 10 Feb. 86.
3. Edward Bond, 'Introduction' to The Fool (Eyre Methuen), 1976, P. viii.
4. Cited by Malcolm Hay, p. 9.
5. Michael Billington, The Guardian, 27 July 85.
6. Ernest Mandel, 'The Threat of Nuclear War and the Struggle for Socialism', New Left Review, 141, Sept.-Oct. 1983, p. 27.
7. Edward Bond, 'Imagine Owen with knife and blowtorch showing the effects of a nuclear blast on a child...', The Guardian, 16 Jan. 84.
8. Edward Bond, The War Plays, Parts One and Two and The War Plays, Part Three (Methuen New Theatrescript), 1985. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
9. Michael Ratcliffe, 'Egg-bound Bond', The Observer, 28 July 85.
10. See John Willet, The Theatre of Bertholt Brecht (Eyre Methuen) 1977, p. 88.
11. L. N. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution (University of Michigan Press), 1960, p. 151.
12. John Weightman, 'Stage Politics', Encounter, 37, Dec. 1971, p. 31
13. Edward Bond, 'A Note on Dramatic Method', The Bundle (Eyre Methuen), 1978, p. xv.
14. Cited by Malcolm Hay, p. 8.
15. Edward Bond, The Worlds (Eyre Methuen), 1980, p. 78.
16. See 'Ma-king the Truth Physical -- Edward Bond and Young People's Theatre', an interview by Tony Coult, SCYPT Journal, 6, Sept. 1980, pp. 4-10.
17. Peter Brook, The Empty Space (Penguin), 1968, p. 108.
18. David Hirst, Edward Bond (Macmillan), 1985, p. 16.
19. *ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
20. Peter Brook, p. 152.
21. Edward Bond, 'Introduction' to The Fool, p. xv.
22. Edward Bond, 'Introduction' to Bingo (Eyre Methuen), 1974, p. ix.