

## AN INTRODUCTION TO EDWARD BOND : HIS EARLIER PLAYS AND THE CONTROVERSIAL SAVED

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Edward Bond, who is believed to be the most important English dramatist of the 1960's, was born in 1935 to a lower working-class family. His parents were originally farm labourers in East Anglia and had come up to London when they could not get work on the land anymore. In 1940, when the bombing began, with other children, Bond was evacuated to the country. He received little formal education. On his return to London, while at school he saw Wolfitt's *Macbeth*. Bond remarked on this play as «the first thing that made sense of my life for me... For the very first time in my life, I met somebody who was actually talking about my problems, about the life I'd been living, the political society around me... there was just this feeling of total recognition. I knew all these people, they were there in the street or in the newspapers...»(1) Bond left school at 15. He worked at a number of deadend jobs at factories and offices. In 1953 he was called to do his National Service in the army for two years and was sent to Austria as a part of the Allied Army of Occupation to work as a clerk. While in Vienna he wrote his serious work, a short story. After leaving the army, for two years Bond tried to educate himself by viewing all the plays in London. He was especially impressed by the Royal Court productions. It was at this time that he started writing plays himself. He became a member of the

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(1) Tony Coult, *The Plays of Edward Bond*. (London : Methuen Theatrefile, 1977), p. 10.

Writer's Group at the Royal Court, and a regular play reader for the theatre. His first performed play, **The Pope's Wedding** (1962), benefited from the practice at the Royal Court of giving a Sunday evening production without decor to provide a chance for the works of new dramatists to be staged with little economic risk. It was this production that launched Bond's career as a playwright. In 1977 Bond accepted an Honorary Doctorate from Yale University.

Bond is an English representative of Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. The idea of this form of drama was introduced in Artaud's **Le Theatre et son double** (1939). It is a form of drama that seeks to shock the spectator into realization of the primitive ruthlessness in man's nature. Stripped of the artificial restrictions of social manners, man is not only innately cruel but he grows even more cruel as a result of being deprived of his physical and emotional needs and being forced to live under stress in a violent, materialistic, egocentric, competitive society. He works like a robot, lives by the clock, is crammed in over-crowded urban areas and sometimes even witnesses massacres. Under these circumstances he consequently behaves worse to one another than even animals who are violent only when threatened. In addition to this thematic characteristic, a technical feature of this type of drama is that it subordinates words to action and gesture. This aspect is especially obvious in the last scene of **Saved** which is written almost entirely as stage directions. Like Jean Genet with his **Les Nègres** (1958) in France and Peter Ulrich Weiss with **Marat/Sade** (1964) in Germany, Bond has developed the theatre of cruelty in England. Bond states that we are «a barbarous civilization» (2) and if we do not put an end to violence, we have no future.(3) As it has been argued by most critics Bond does not directly write about violence but he reflects the influences of a violent environment on the human spirit. (4)

After **The Pope's Wedding**, George Devine, the Artistic Director of the Royal Court, commissioned Bond to write a new play and hence **Saved** (1965) appeared, a play which gave way to a lot of critical uproar. **Early Morning** (1968) followed. This was a surrealist work,

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- (2) Edward Bond, «Introduction» to **Bingo** (London: Methuen, 1974), p. xiii.
  - (3) Edward Bond, «Author's Preface» to **Lear** (London: Methuen, 1972), p.v.
  - (4) Simon Trussler, **Edward Bond** (Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1976), p. 3.

more like a wild fairy tale set in Queen Victoria's court and in heaven. History is manipulated in the play through historical characters like Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Disraeli and Florence Nightingale. Being written in the vein of the theatre of cruelty, the play contains some shocking scenes like practicing cannibalism in heaven, Queen Victoria seducing Florence Nightingale into a lesbian relationship and Florence Nightingale making love to Arthur's severed head. On the other hand, the play is full of political intrigues of the power struggle. *Early Morning* was banned in its entirety by the Lord Chamberlain without any explanation.

Bond's new play was *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968). In the same year of its production this play was given the John Whiting Award. It is about the Japanese poet Basho who perfected the haiku form and his taking the road to the deep north to find enlightenment wherever he can. During this time, Basho fights against the tyrant Shogo and eventually causes his downfall. The new rulers, Basho and the British colonialists, however, prove more vicious with their tyranny over the spirit than Shogo with his tyranny over the flesh. This revolution is consequently met with a counter-revolution. Typical of Bond's plays there are scenes of violence in this play as well: Kira, a priest, commits hara-kiri on the stage, children are slaughtered at the mission school, and Shogo is dismembered when captured.

The following play *Black Mass* (1970) was performed for the Anti-Apartheid movement to mark the tenth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre. In this play, Bond himself played Christ who comes down from his cross and poisons the Communion wine of the Prime Minister of South Africa. He is, however, immediately discovered as the murderer of the Prime Minister and is banished from Church; his place on the crucifix is taken by policemen.

In 1971 Bond wrote a play titled *Passion for the Festival of Life* organized by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. This play was performed on the main grandstand of Alexandra Park Racecourse to about 3,000 people. The shock in this play came when the audience discovered a pig crucified on the cross.

The same year saw the production of *Lear* (1971) considered to be one of Bond's most outstanding plays. In this rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the sisters are in the foreground rather than

Lear himself. This play too has its share of violent scenes with the soldiers' killing the Gravedigger's Boy who gave shelter to Lear and raping his wife and also with the putting out of Lear's eyes.

**The Sep**, a comedy written in 1973, is about the nice village draper's fears that visitors from outer space are stealing people's brains and replacing them with machinery and about the villagers' feeling threatened that creatures from another planet have come to take their jobs and homes. The draper's trying to 'kill' a corpse is the only obviously violent incident in the play.

**Bingo** (1975) is a speculation about the last years of Shakespeare's life. Here Bond condemns the great dramatist for lack of political commitment. At the end of the play, Shakespeare commits suicide crying «Was anything done?» as if to reflect that life had been a failure.

**The Fool** (1975) takes place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and reflects the life of John Clare, a farm labourer turned poet. The play deals with how the pursuit of money negatively affects the creative imagination and how Clare eventually becomes mad as a result of being estranged from both land and literature. **The Fool** was voted best play by **Plays and Players** in 1976.

**A-A-America** (1976) consists of two short plays: **Grandma Faust** and **The Swing**. Both plays analyze the values that form the American society.

Later plays by Bond are **The Bundle** (1978), **The Woman** (1978), **The Worlds** (1979), **Restoration** (1981), **Summer** (1982), **Gerak** (1982), **Red Black and Ignorant** (1984), **The Tin Can People** (1984), **The War Plays: A Trilogy** (1985), and **Human Cannon** (1985).

As can be seen from this brief introduction to Bond's earlier plays, he has written on a variety of subjects not quite departing from the vein of the theatre of cruelty. Although dramatists of the previous generation like Osborne, Pinter and Wesker were socially conscious writers as well, they were not preoccupied with such a variety of subjects as Bond. The problems that Bond writes about are far from being solved, yet they are now widely recognized. On the other hand, Bond has not brought a technical novelty to the theatre other than perhaps developing outdoor setting. Moreover, an

efficacious practice of Bond is that, like Bernard Shaw, he supplied the texts of most of his plays with an «introduction», an «Author's Notes», or a «Preface» which shed light on the work.

Saved which is named among Bond's best plays is episodic in nature as almost all of the dramatist's works. The story is mainly about sterile family relationships that lead to violence in society. Pam sleeps with Len, a lodger in her parents' house. The parents do not mind this affair as long as Len regularly pays his rent. When she is through with Len, Pam plunges into a relationship with his friend Fred, and has an unwanted baby. Despite this love affair Len remain loyal to Pam. However, the two constantly quarrel and Pam wants Len out of the house. Similarly there is no communication between the parents either; Mary and Harry are just like two strangers sharing the same house. In the meantime, Fred has grown tired of his relationship with Pam and leaves her. Pam cannot bear Fred's leaving her and tries in vain to win him back. In the park, Pam and Fred have a quarrel which ends in Pam's abandoning the baby to its father's care. Fred is embarrassed to play the sensitive father in front of his callous friends who are ready to mock the slightest sign of affection that he might show. Eventually, out of frustration and boredom that culminates in violence, Fred's teenager friends start abusing the baby who has been drugged into passivity by its mother and therefore cannot even respond with a cry. Since the baby dies, Fred is put in prison. On other hand, in the house Harry catches Len and Mary, who have developed an Oedipal love affair, in a seemingly intimate position. Harry is infuriated and throws insults at both of them. This big family row ends in yelling at Len to get out of their house and Mary's smashing the teapot on Harry's head. Len cannot decide whether to stay or to leave; everyone in the house is now against him. However, Fred later comes up to his room and they make up. The last scene which is almost entirely written in stage directions, displays Pam reading the *Radio Times*, Mary watching the telly, Harry filling his football coupon and Len quietly repairing a chair that was broken during the big row.

When the play was sent to the Lord Chamberlain for licensing, some words like «Buggers», «Christ» and the whole of Scenes Six and Nine were cut. In addition, there were strict footnotes to the stage directions : «The couple must not lie down on the couch so

that one is on top of the other,» and «Pam must not undo Len's belt.» (5) Therefore it was decided «to sidestep the censorship by presenting the play as a club performance for the English stage society...» (5) As the play created a lot of uproar, the Royal Court responded «with a public discussion chaired by Kenneth Tynan...» (5) When in 1968 the Theatres Bill put an end to stage censorship, the play was performed in full. In 1968, *Saved* won the George Devine Award.

*Saved* is mainly about lack of love and rejected love : there is no love among Pam and her parents or among the parents themselves; Pam and Fred are mainly interested in each other physically as long as the relation lasts; Len is perhaps truly in love with Pam, however, he gets only hostile responses from her; on the other hand, Pam's love for Fred is unrequited as Len's love for her, and the baby is in desperate need for the love of its mother who is incapable of showing any genuine affection. Thus, Mary, Harry, Pam, Len and Fred end up frustrated and unhappy in a loveless, sterile environment. It is this same frustration caused by sterile relationships that lead the teenagers in the play to abuse and eventually kill the baby. Hence the baby is actually «saved» by death from living in this culture that values aggression more than tenderness and that has undergone an erosion of family ties under sexual, social, economic and political frustration.

Bond does not present life in nature as an idyllic alternative to this violence. Most of Bond's plays take place in the countryside; and when his play takes place in an urban area, as does *Saved*, he uses mini-imitation settings as the park. However, characters are not portrayed as living harmoniously in nature; the strife among them continues as in the scenes where Len and Fred are fishing and when Len and Pam are rowing in a boat and of course when the gang of teenagers are abusing the baby in the park. Thus, the stoning of the baby becomes even more horriying as it occurs in a park which is supposed to be a place of peace and harmony. Bond says that he has based the event on his experience during the war when a bomb exploded near him, «There was suddenly this enormous sort of bang which one can't describe, you know, because it's a noise almost in-

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(5) Coult, p. 13.

side you. I went along to the park and saw all the trees stripped bare, and picked up this little bird with its head blown off. I would think very much, that was one of the reasons why I wrote that scene in *Saved.* (6)

The play ends in what Bond refers to as «a silent social stalemate.» The visual picture in the last scene is very strong, and parallel to the dictates of the theatre of cruelty, actions, gestures are so forceful that the effect of dialogue has been minimized.

With its realistic reflection of the tragic consequences of emotional and cultural deprivation *Saved* has now become a classic performed in almost all the capitals in Europe.

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(6) *Ibid.*, p. 78.