

The Angry Roads

Richard Holmes and Danny O'Grady are actor/teachers with Big Brum TIE Company. In this interview they talk about their experiences of working on the company's latest collaboration with Edward Bond. *The Angry Roads* has been touring to schools in the autumn of 2014 and the tour continues in the New Year. Interview by Roger Wooster at the Blue Orange Theatre, Birmingham 10th December, 2014 and first appeared in *the Journal for Drama in Education* Vol. 31, No. 1, February 2015.

R.W. What have been the particular challenges that this play has presented to you as actors? Including the fact that one of the characters is an elective mute.

R.H. As an individual it was difficult, because I do like talking! As the actor the difficult thing was that the character does not speak, but he communicates through a sequence of knocks [*he knocks on the table to demonstrate*]. The hardest thing I found as an actor was not to over-explain the story through the knocks or make the father's silence mystical or menacing. I couldn't do the audiences work for them, while at the same time doing enough to let them into the story and accept, quickly, this is how it is. So I had to make the knocks very simple and that's been very difficult. I went through a whole process where, originally, I was trying to learn the way that prisoners communicate – a sequence of knocks that relates to an alphabet grid of five columns, the first column being A-E the second F-J and so on, A being one knock B two on the first column then each subsequent column being prefixed by further knocks to denote the column etc... but in the end that felt wrong and over-complicated. It would have perhaps been clever, in a symbolic way, demonstrating the father's repression "as a prisoner", in himself, but it would have been abstract and not useful for the audience... we needed just to tell the story of a man and a son who spend all their time together. Actually what we are exploring is a man that doesn't speak but says a lot, using his son's voice, and a son prevented from talking about his own story. And that's a difficult thing – so we tried all sorts of things. Another way we started over-explaining was when we started using the objects in the play to demonstrate the conversations, however this moved from drama event into drama effect.

R.W. Did Edward [Bond] or Chris [Cooper] express any opinions about how that mutism should be used and explored?

D.O'G. Yeah... Edward tended to mention what *shouldn't* be done rather than what *should* be done. That can be difficult – I know what he's trying to do – he is trying to allow us to find it, and in saying what shouldn't be done I suppose it narrows it down. He did describe the man to us – or at least what he imagined him to look like. He says things like 'how would the man appear in the pub, to his friends?'. He always comes back to the story and what's in the text and what's said. We know that the man has friends, work colleagues and that he does talk to them and he communicates – he doesn't talk but he writes notes. He tells them things. That's in the story and we can't take that away from it. He always said 'imagine how he would appear in the pub'. 'Would he be a withered man hiding from the world quite consciously or would he appear with a bit of bravado and act out his knocks in that manner?' He poses questions but he doesn't say which one's right, which one to go with. He just says 'think of him in that way and then bring him into the house. But like Richard said, these two have been living together for sixteen years – the boy's sixteen, so it's really difficult. The audience need to meet that – a couple of men who've been together for sixteen years – they don't need to meet a boy that has to work out everything that the dad says. They can meet the boy in the middle of a conversation and he is working it out because he has lived with him for sixteen years

and they can deal with that. But most of the time in theatre and TV everything is so over-explained that we are not doing any work in the audience.

R.W. Indeed. And young people are very much more used to have that spoon-feeding of material to them from film and TV. So how have your audiences responded to the ambiguities of the play and the mode of communication within the play?

D.O'G. It has varied but... I'll give you an example from today when we had children from the pupil referral unit; they'd been thrown out of school. There were two lads who had taken themselves a little bit away from the group physically, but were still contributing verbally. And in the piece they were getting a little bit frustrated with the fact that the dad wasn't talking. They were asking each other 'why doesn't he talk?' and then about half way through it 'clicked' and it changed and they were getting angry that the son was questioning so much and I heard one of them say 'I would fucking knock him out'. Because there's a point in the story where the father goes off and the boy calls to him 'you rowed, rowed, rowed, rowed'. And on about the third I saw out of the corner of my eye, the lad get so frustrated and he said 'Aah! Fucking knock him out!' - getting very angry with the constant questioning.

R.W. Or the silence?

D.O'G. Or the silence. With the questioning I think he flipped from 'why isn't he talking?' to 'Right, he's talking too much'.

R.W. Well, they want the play to give answers. And you're not giving them.

R.H. I don't think the play is ambiguous, I think it is refreshingly concrete and that is very clever. I mean Edward is just a genius. What he holds in the man who doesn't speak is the reality of the adult world. Reality has lost its voice. We adults speak the language of ambiguity, the young speak the language of the concrete, they have to, which makes it difficult for us to understand each other because we don't speak the same language - and I don't mean the colloquial language. We did once but perhaps we've forgotten it, or we have rejected it or became actually contemptuous of it. Ideology makes the world, our history and ourselves ambiguous: the imagination makes it concrete. I think that what Edward holds in the man's silence is the adult world that won't and can't speak to young people, and the world of the young who want to know who they are. The play actually asks the audience for the answers... answers to the big questions and I think that is what the young people recognise; it may be frustrating because it doesn't give answers, however I think they appreciate the honesty of the play, and the fact it invites them into the problem and asks them to help. It's a play on the riots actually... that happened a few years ago. The young articulate their questions and when the world is not listening, or it's not talking to them the imagination seeks reason, and not always creatively. The riots were an act of the imagination, a destructive act, which comes out of repression. The destruction is learnt. We wonder where they learnt the language of riot. I'll give you a really good example of that. We had the van stolen with the set in it and one of the props is a pigeon. In the play it has been found at the roadside - it's bloody and dirty, however, the prop is stuffed. The taxidermist sent the prop through the post but hadn't addressed it to 'Big Brum' so it was sent to the school we are based at and was opened by the school secretary. The staff had recently had workshops on Extremism and on seeing the stuffed pigeon they took it to the police station. We have been based at the school for ten years and often things are wrongly address, and in the past they ask if the articles are ours, this time for some reason it was different. Their anxiety was fuelled by the police when we went to collect the parcel. The taxidermist

had packed the bird in a box and sealed the box with grey tape. What the police tried to prove was that the tape holding the box together was a swastika. He held it for us to look at pointed and said “ what can you see?”...

D.O’G. I didn’t know what he meant.

R.H. At first I thought “is it a cross?”.

D.O’G. It looked like a cross.

R.H. And then he said “it’s a swastika”...

D.O’G. ...the police man said “So you can understand our worry”.

R.H. I mean it wasn’t a swastika. It was a, badly taped box, but he had to make meaning to the stuffed pigeon, which the policeman kept referring to as the ‘dead pigeon’ and I kept saying ‘no, it’s not a dead pigeon, it’s a stuffed pigeon. Again he said “so you can understand our worry”. Even after explaining that we were a theatre company and it was a prop he kept saying “so you can understand our worry”. The joke was that the box had been stamped as recorded delivery which the school signed for. His worry had not gone as far as tracking down the sender. He wanted to see a swastika, he wanted to see extremist behaviour and that is what he saw. That is more violent than any riot.

R.W. The Angry Roads is the latest of a long series of plays that the company has worked on with Edward Bond. Why do you think that he, and Big Brum, wanted to do this play now? Is it essentially of this moment? Or could it have been done at any time?

D.O’G. ... There was something... If I talk a little bit for Edward but only from conversations he’s given to us... I think he had a burning desire to write this play for some time. So rather than it being particular to 2014, 2015, I think this play has been in him for a long time. And in the same breath it is *utterly* particular to these times. It’s a continuation of two or three of the Big Brum plays – he sometimes calls them the ‘family plays’ or the ‘home plays’ and he keeps saying he wants to move away from that but there’s something in him that isn’t moving away from that because there is still something to be written, and I think that this is the one that he really needed and wanted to write. It’s been in him for a long time. He had the choice to write this play for three actors but he chose to write it for two and he says that was because he didn’t know the third actor, but I think there is more to it than that. I think he had wanted to write *this* play. You’d have to ask him, but a lot of it may have had to do with what we’ve been describing: the silent yet full of incessant talk about nothing, adult world that he wanted to present on stage to the young people - about the young person full of questions, full of the frustrations but full of the potential to be that person – or to change, to change it. And he does leave it with boy going out into the world. He has got his suitcase and he’s taking his experience with him out into the world and we don’t know what he does do, where he’s going to go or what he’s going to become, but we do know what he is taking with him. So that is a worry. It is a concern. It’s a responsibility and I think that is what Edward is proposing to the young people and to us in that final moment.

R.H. I think the other thing is... I think Edward feels at home with Big Brum - which is very nice, you know we all need to feel at home in the world. He doesn’t feel at home at the RSC – he was never made to feel at home there or at the Barbican or any of the theatres really. And I think that what he sees in Big Brum is a place where he can

be at home and write the plays he wants to write. He says that he thinks this is the best play that he's written. It's his favourite play. We talked to him about it quite a lot didn't we? I think Big Brum is a place he can push himself and develop his writing. I think he has that sense of trust. We were talking about it earlier. It's not like he has chosen us because we are the best actors or that we understand everything... possibly he likes working with us because we are willing to try and understand and we're willing to try and keep trying.

D.O'G. It may be the burning desire to understand and to keep posing those questions and even though I don't think we are hitting the nail on the head with this piece we are constantly going on with a desire to do that.

R.H. We would be being remiss if we didn't do this play. You know. And it's partly because it's Edward and partly because it's just a beautiful play to be in - like all of his plays. For an actor he writes in a way that nobody else does. Possibly Shakespeare. Not all Shakespeare. There is a beauty in it, you can't help but feel when you are in it, or experience when you are out of it.

D.O'G. Today, and most days, we'll say at some point, probably during the interval when we come out of role and we talk to them, one of them will say 'aren't you going to talk?' And with no differentiation between the father and Rich. But the kids today were more articulate in their frustration than usual - which is probably why they've been chucked out of school! They might say aggressively 'When you gonna talk?!' They're fully immersed.

R.H. And he also writes a play that can be designed by Ceri [Townsend] and that is pushing Chris [Cooper] as a director and pushes us as actors. So he is quite clear that he writes for us [Big Brum].

R.W. I'm interested to know more about this dynamic between Edward Bond as an extremely important European playwright (and has been for sixty years) and a TIE company in Birmingham. Most TIE companies will choose their material - 'let's do a project about this; how shall we do it?' and then decide to devise, or possibly get a writer in. But there seems to be quite an unusual symbiosis, with Edward coming to you and saying 'I've got a play I need to write'. Is that the way round that it is?

R.H. In a way it's become a little fudged. We're giving him the platform to write the plays that he wants to write, but we do commission him. We do commission a play from him every other year, sometimes two a year. He gets approached by people from all over the world to write plays, he says 'no' to them. He wants to write for Big Brum. The working relationship has been happening for 18 years.

D.O'G. I think it's fair to say that we never ask or request specific content or a specific theme. Nothing like that.

R.W. Some companies might find that a limitation: they are losing control over what they want to take into schools at this particular moment in time. Is that not an issue? Or maybe things have just fortuitously worked out?

R.H. He knows who he is writing for. He knows the work is for young people and he finds that really exciting. He has said that he is 'starting to understand how to write plays'

D.O'G. Going back to your earlier question about 'why now?', when we do ask him to write plays there is a very strange dynamic because he will write a play that is

burning in him, now, from the world, in its particular, but because he understands drama and theatre and how to structure a piece of work – he can do that in his sleep – he brings the particular of ‘now’. Two years ago we did a play called *The Edge*. Edward had had an encounter in a street in London late one night when he saw an old man lying in an alleyway, drunk on the floor, passed out, completely legless. At the other end of the alleyway he saw a party of young revellers... loud... enjoying life... full of life, and in that contradiction, in that conflict if you will between that passed-out old gentleman and the young revellers, is what sparked his need to write the *particular* play; but that concern is a universal. So he made it about that man in the street and a young man, but it’s a universal dilemma that he brings to the table each time.

R.W. Now, the project you take into schools consists of the play plus a workshop element. Does Edward have any input into the workshop element? Does that come entirely from Chris and yourselves?

R.H. Yes, yes, from us.

R.W. Does Edward express his opinion about what the workshop element should seek to achieve?

R.H. No, he doesn’t. Whenever he comes to see the programme he gets excited about how the young people respond, it’s how they respond I think which is helping him develop his writing in that sense...

R.W. I suppose what I am asking is whether he, as a playwright, feels that the play should stand on its own and that the workshop is superfluous and trying to extract something from the play which should be self-evident?

R.H. He has never given that impression.

D.O’G. He’s very responsive to the interaction with the young people. I think he has said it is the most important part of the event and that it is only something Big Brum could provide. His plays *do* stand alone, course they do, and when offering a performance in the theatre that is what we would usually present. However, the workshop elements we offer are devised to stay with the problems of the play, not to strive to provide ourselves a definitive answer or define what we have understood. If we are getting it right it’s a very difficult room [*auditorium*] to be in after the play as so much is going on in here [*points to his head*], in here [*heart*], in the body, in the sensations that we have, that it is tough to reflect, and it’s tough to choose the right task to do it, but the workshop will not be about extracting from the play, rather it will be about using the play as a means to extract from ourselves and our world, I think.

R.W. So what do you see as the function of the workshop yourselves? To get some sort of explication? To check what they’ve got from the play? To check they ‘got it’? What’s going on?

R.H. It’s definitely not about checking that they’ve ‘got it’. I think it’s about asking the central question that the play is raising and exploring that centre. All our work explores Justice. We explore Justice, in an unjust world; we try to meet the audience in the theatre, in the drama on the stage as opposed to having them alienated outside the drama. The workshop tends to continue that relationship with the audience. We have to meet on the stage we are exploring ourselves, because the story we are exploring is our story, all of our stories. No it definitely not about ‘did you get it?’ actually I think it’s about ‘what *don’t* we get?’. The school becomes a civic

place where we can learn to talk to each other about those big civic questions concerning being human; we can meet ourselves and learn how to talk to ourselves. This is why we work in schools, theatres or a library because they are civic spaces. They are spaces that have been created by humans for the purpose of asking those fundamental human questions that unfortunately society forgot. I think those spaces have become silent.

R.W. Finally, I would like to ask you about the intermediation of the teachers in this process. Do you think that teachers fully understand what you are trying to do and make best use of it?

R.H. That's a really good question. I'm not very good with teachers. I enjoy working with young people, but I hide from teachers; I find it difficult to talk with them. I did when I went to school and I do now I work in them. I think it must be one of the hardest jobs to do. Ideology is constantly slamming doors between them and their young people. I see teachers on a daily basis *wanting* to work with young people but it's almost as if the teaching tools they're being given are weapons. I believe teachers feel something new is occurring and want to engage, but there is no civic space for them, they are not allowed to be in the problem looking for the answer.

D.O'G. It's new theatre from Edward. It's not what people are used to. So actually, and more and more over the last four or five years, I've seen that teachers are usually so impressed with the interaction with the kids, the kids' responses, the questioning from the facilitator. Even if that is not how they work, they always see the value in that and they are usually impressed with that. But with Edward's plays, the actual drama... it is a new form of theatre that we are trying to offer... that Edward is offering... clearly offering. And it is very difficult to approach. There is no spoon-feeding, nothing wrapped up in a ribbon and you can find yourself very lost in it or very antagonistic towards it and get frustrated, I think. Or you can find yourself condemning something because you are not quite sure what is happening there. I'll give an example and it's probably because I'm an adult too. I find it hard to engage with this material too because you think about it so much. Norman [*the son*] in the story, his speech is so staccato... he never finishes his sentences. Edwards sees it as a series of photographs. And I always get very paranoid and I can kind of feel - it might just be a completely paranoid feeling - feeling the adults in the room thinking 'he doesn't finish his sentences. That actor doesn't finish his sentences. He's always interrupting, or he's waiting for the other actor to interrupt him', you know. But the kids never have a problem. They see it... you know they're in the story and they say 'he doesn't finish his sentences'. It's not a problem. And they can just do that.

R.W. It perhaps makes them work harder at working out what it is that he is trying to say?

D.O'G. Yes it does.

R.H. In his book *New Perspectives on Classroom Drama* Bolton highlights the dangers of Hornbrook's assault on education. The times we live in today are far more destructive. Schools are not civic places of learning - they have become market places where we are taught to sell ourselves, taught to sell our humanity. Young people, and teachers, feel this; they may not be able to articulate the feeling, but they feel it. They're trapped in a system that doesn't allow them to teach, or learn actually. The drama offers a freedom, where you can own yourself. Who can resist that opportunity? The imagination is evoked and seeks reason creatively. So, yes, they work harder. The drama has become about saving our humanity.

D.O'G. It's mad. And drama has fallen in to that as well. Young teachers are taught 'tool kits' of how to teach drama. And you find yourself pulling out a hammer to fix a leak. If you've got that approach... if that's what your approach is... you don't know what the problem is. And that's all you can do – pull out different tools... that's all you've been taught.

R.H. I think that Dave [Davis'] new book *Imagining the Real*, is putting out a challenge to us all as Gavin [Bolton] did in a different time, twenty or thirty years ago... he's putting that challenge to us and it's a big challenge a very exciting and terrifying challenge.

R.W. That seems an appropriate place to draw things to a close. Unless you have anything else you would like to add?

I don't know what NATD are doing in response to David Davis' book, but that would be a fascinating conference. NATD are in the vanguard of the development of drama teaching, a scary position to be in. It would be really good to know what the next step will be and how they are responding to that.

R.W. Thank you very much indeed.

Details of Big Brum's work, how to contact them or make a booking can be found at www.bigbrum.org.uk