

6c Developing work from 'The Angry Roads'

– Planning for English and Drama

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Reading critically – an approach to understanding dramatic texts

This section uses tools which are at the heart of Big Brum's approach to dramatic texts. These have been specifically derived from our work with Edward Bond.

In sharing these tools, we are offering an approach that can be used with students in their critical reading of 'The Angry Roads' and other texts – both on paper, and in considering how the work is communicated effectively in performance.¹

We model ways of using this approach with 'The Angry Roads', including some exemplar activities which you might carry out with young people. However, this section is more than a series of activities: it is an introduction to a particular way of thinking about how drama is constructed, and can therefore be analysed.

Core to this approach is conceptualising the meaning of a play as a 'centre' and a central discourse, which include a central speech, a central line, central image and central action.

For more about the centre and Bondian theatre, see 'Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child' (Davis, 2005).

1. The centre

"Bond has described dramatic art as a bicycle wheel – the spokes of which radiate from the central point to the periphery or vice versa: converge from the rim to the hub ... The centre ... makes up the very heart of the work, from which all the textual and theatrical elements originate, all of which should conversely tend towards and relate to the heart." (Davis, 2005, Page 204).

The centre as a concept is useful because every meaningful play, or story or drama has a centre.

¹ It can, for example, offer an approach which meets the following KS3 National Curriculum draft requirement: *"Read critically through: knowing how language, including figurative language, vocabulary choice, grammar, text structure and organisational features present meaning; studying setting, plot, and characterisation, and the effects of these; understanding how the work of dramatists is communicated effectively through performance and how alternative staging allows for different interpretations of a play."* (Draft National Curriculum Framework, July 2013, page 86).

"The central problem of all drama is justice. The play's main metaphors and similes reflect its centre. Its patterns are based on structures extended from the centre." (Davis, 2005, page 88).

The centre therefore becomes the crucial starting point for constructing a performance.

The play's Director, Chris Cooper suggests that the centre of 'The Angry Roads' is repression, denial and evasion, which leads to understanding, acceptance of responsibility and freedom. For Norman the son it is a rite of passage into the modern world. In order to make this journey he has to deal with the repression, the silence in the house and the lies at the heart of the silence. We not only have to hear the silence but we have to *see* it: in the Father, in the son and within the walls of house itself.

To repress something, a thought, a memory, an emotion or feeling is to restrain, prevent, or inhibit (the expression or development of something). It can also mean to subdue (someone or something) by physical or mental force. In psychoanalytical terms repression is a well-known defence mechanism. It acts to keep information out of conscious awareness. This is at the heart of the Father's problem in relation to the accident, the central event in the story which dominates their lives: unspoken and hanging above their heads like a damoclesian sword. In most cases, we repress in order to remove anxiety-provoking memories from our awareness, and by and large this occurs unconsciously. But the Father's memories haven't just disappeared with their repression; they continue to influence his behaviour, the repression influences everything about his relationship with his son. But the son too has also unconsciously repressed his own memories of the family's past. The play is his journey to consciousness, the knowledge that things are repressed. It is also about what we know, what we don't want to know, and how we avoid knowing what we don't want to know.

The central problem of all drama is justice. Particular plays/dramas deal with the centre in relation to specific situations. The play's main metaphors and similes (and metonyms) reflect this. Its patterns or structures are extended from the centre.

In rehearsing a play and creating a TIE programme or process drama in DIE, we work consciously with Edward Bond's conception of the centre. Two applications of the concept have informed our practice:

- The **Centre** of a text and its relationship to acting – play the situation, not the character.
- The **Centre** of a TIE programme or drama workshop for young people – the particular aspects or areas of justice/injustice we are exploring for learning with the participants.

2. The centre in the 2014-15 Big Brum production of 'The Angry Roads'

The Centre of this particular production of 'The Angry Roads' is repression and what we know, what we don't want to know, and how we avoid knowing what we don't want to know.

The centre informs every aspect of the production. It finds its way into decisions about staging, set, and into the choices we have made about how each scene and part should be performed. It relates to the themes we investigate in *Section 6d: Silence, lies and having a voice*. In his rehearsal notes (Section 4) Edward Bond talks about to power of theatre to 'release repression', and describes where that repression may come from.

Activities

These activities would lend themselves particularly well to work fairly soon after the performance and TIE programme. They explore the play's centre, by focusing on a short extract from the play: first, analytically, and then through the imagination.

The following extract from the play [A, below] comes early on in Part One of the play, not long after the Father has entered for the first time.

Pupils should each be given a copy of Extract A, and asked to read it out loud, working in threes: one reading the part of Norman, one the stage directions and one observing/taking notes.

They should then have a moment within their own group to comment on what they have just read, including what they remember from how the play was performed.

The whole class should then be shown the quote from the Company on the play's centre [B]

Brief whole class discussion – is that what the class 'got' from the play? Note down a few key points, as these may well prove useful when it comes to looking at the pupils' own ideas about the centre of the play.

Leaving the quote [B] visible, divide the class into six groups. Each group will look at one element each of the script and performance, and discuss what they have read and seen in relation to it.

How does each element say something about the play's centre?

- The set – room, lighting, sounds and furnishings
- What has happened leading up to this moment
- What follows on from this moment
- What the actors/characters say
- What the actors/characters do
- Objects [eg the toys, the father's food and drink]

Each group explains some of its ideas to the rest of the class.

Rehearsing Part 1 of 'The Angry Roads'



Extract A. Part One. Pages 3-4.

Father comes back. He carries a mug of tea. He sits at the table. Opens the carton. Heated take-away food. Eats with his hands.

Norman: *Working late?* (Father eats) *Out with the mates?*

Silence. Suddenly Father grimaces. Stands. Goes out to the kitchen.

Norman (Toys) *Take them up somewhere. Right place. Not round here. Fetch a few quid.*

Father comes back unscrewing the cap on a plastic bottle of tomato ketchup. Shakes it on the food.

Norman *Been with your mates?* (Toy car) *Used to carry this round for hours. (Drops it in bin liner) Clutter. Chuck em out. Rid of it. Don't know why I didn't do it ages ago. (No response) Been walking?* (Looks at Father) *On your own?* (No response. Examines toys) *That wont help. If you'd come in straight from work I'd've got something. Eat together.*

There are some toys on the table. Father calmly brushes them off.

Norman *Don't do that? Oi! What's that for ?* (Picking up the toys) *I can get something for these. Look the head's come off!* (Stares at Father) *What you do that for? Just because tomorrow its --. Look its broke. Been walking. This time of night. Come in. Rotten mood. I thought I'd stay up. In case. Thanks a lot.*

Father stands. Goes towards the kitchen. Stops. Comes back. Raps on the table.

Norman *What? The toys? You think I got the toys out to –*

Father goes out to the kitchen.

B. The play's centre

The Centre of this particular production of 'The Angry Roads' is repression and what we know, what we don't want to know, and how we avoid knowing what we don't want to know.

3. 'The Angry Roads' – finding your own centre

"The 'play' (centre) for us, Big Brum, and the 'play' (centre) for the young people will of course be different." – Chris Cooper

There is no single definitive centre for the play, as this is very much dependent on what the young people see in it. Their centre will be different from that identified by the Company.

The following activities help young people develop their own ideas about the play's centre. In facilitating them, you will want to take into account what you have observed in terms of young people's responses to the play and the programme [see Section 6b of this resource].

Central Concepts

"Drama begins in the meaning of opposites" – Edward Bond.²

Drama is all about conflicting ideas and especially actions, so a good way of getting to the heart of any particular play is to think about some of the ideas that come into conflict within it.

In working on *The Angry Roads*, the Company identified several conflicting strands within the play, and listed them as pairs, or binary opposites. Working with binary opposites is a simple but effective means of developing both questions and tasks with young people, as they are a familiar and usually well-developed cognitive tool.

Here is a list of some of the paired ideas that Company members identified from *The Angry Roads* that have been useful in the rehearsal process. This list below is not exhaustive and others will occur, but will usefully frame an exploration of the central concepts:

Repress/Nurture
Known/Unknown
Seen/Unseen
Truth/Lies
Buried/Revealed
Child/Adult
Accidental/Deliberate
Silence/Spoken

But nothing in Bondian drama is conventional, and as Edward himself points out, toys and food become a binary in the play, even though we would not always pair them as opposites. The combining of objects in this way is part of the radical dramaturgy that informs the structure of the play. Thinking about toys and food in this way however has transformed our understanding of the situation in family.

Activity

Taking a couple of the examples above, ask the young people – working in small groups - to think of paired opposites that say something to them about what they have seen in the play (eg child/adult, silence/spoken etc).

Note the pairings that they have come up with. Discussion – what common strands are emerging?

² From Teachers' Resource notes on Edward Bond's 'The Edge', 2012.

The table is at the heart of the room, and also at the centre of activity throughout the play: sorting toys, eating, knocking ... it is a solid object that comes to represent all sorts of ideas, hopes, experiences as the play progresses.

Using a real table as a focus [this could be a plain school one], explain that is a real table, but for the purposes of this activity it is the table in the centre of the room in 'The Angry Roads.'

Split the class into four groups, each with a large sheet of paper and pens:

- Group 1. The top of the table;
- Group 2. The table legs;
- Group 3. The sides of the table;
- Group 4. Under the table.

Ask each group to draw what they think their aspect of the table is like. They can also use short phrases or sentences, but their ideas should be as concrete as possible.

In turn, using tape or blu tack, each group attaches or places its images and word onto the relevant part of the table. As a whole class, talk about the characteristics of the table: what have we just said that it looks like? What marks are on it? What words are we using to describe it?

Explain: as well as being at the heart of the room in *The Angry Roads*, this table is the centre for the play, and in and around it are all the big ideas that are at the very heart of the drama.³

In pairs, and thinking about what how they have just described the table, ask students to come up with their own phrases or short sentences that sum up they feel is at the centre of the drama.

Whole class discussion – can the class come up with a short statement that sums up their combined ideas? What is “our centre” for the play?

Extension work

³ A key strategy in Big Brum's work [and especially that with Edward Bond] concerns the use of objects as the means by which society and the self can meet on stage. In our culture the links between ourselves and our objects are psycho-social. We can take an ordinary object, and make it extraordinary by investing a new vitality or energy in it, which transcends its instrumental value, social function or ideologically received meaning through what Edward Bond calls *cathexis*, a term first used by Freud. The table is a good example of this. It is a table, a territory, a battleground and a mouthpiece simultaneously. It is the where Norman places his toys, and the Father removes them – putting his food and drink there instead. The value of it shifts, it goes on a journey within the site of the play and becomes associated with the repressed thoughts and feelings of both Norman and the Father. Importantly, the table never loses its instrumental value: it remains a table. The connection with the audience/participant, however, is that we all have our own objects that function in the same way, a favourite chair, blanket or cup etc. The resonance is physical (metonymical) it is felt as much as understood, we connect with a smell or sense of touch or the sound it makes as much as what we think about it, and the way that the object is used wrenches it from the ideologically received meanings and allows us to see the situation, and therefore ourselves, in a different way.

You could revisit the extract from Part 1 [A] and look at whether you would approach it differently, now that the young people have identified their own centre for the drama.

They may want to look at the list of elements that have been used before, when they do this (but it may be best to start off without those prompts, as being too analytical of technical elements may distract from an exploration of how meaning can be conveyed).

They might also want to try role playing parts of the scene, to get a sense of whether people would for example be doing things differently, using objects in a different way (especially the table), standing or sitting in a different place.

In this, it may be helpful to focus on a very concrete and specific element of the text – for example, some of the ways that the Father knocks on the table.

Does the new centre that the young people have given to the play change the way that the drama unfolds?

4. Pointers to the centre – central discourse, speech, line, image, action

In Big Brum's work, we have often found it useful to look at specific elements within the drama, when exploring its centre. These are routes into meaning, however, so it is important that they do not simply formulaic.

You may find each of the following useful in work with young people, as a means of helping them identify their own centre for *The Angry Roads*. It is frequently helpful to bring with specifics such as these, before moving on to the wider conceptual notion of what the over-all centre is.

What would the young people identify as their central discourse, speech, line, image or action for *The Angry Roads*?

Central Speech

The centre of the play is expressed through a central discourse which constantly refines and develops the situation in the site of the play through the characters in the story. In this production the central speech occurs on page 6.

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Norman: People shouldn't do things like that to a kid. You could make it right -
 - now -- before tomorrow --. (*Imitates Father's rap on the table*) You
 could tell me. In your way. (*Father pulls the cup towards him*) No you
 don't need any milk. (*Quiet*) Why did you go back there tonight? It
 doesn't help. (*Picks up a toy. Does nothing with it*) If Mother hadn't told
 me I wouldn't know anything. I don't know how you lost your voice.
 All I know you could've been born dumb. I want to go away. You
 could look after yourself. You communicate with your work mates.
 Get on with them. Write notes. Tell them things. In here in this house -
 - you don't write for me. You'd have to say too much. I have to work
 it out. Bang bang bang. You could've learnt a sign language.
 Something. You don't trust me. You don't trust yourself. I don't know
 if you even speak to yourself anymore. Perhaps there's just silence in
 your head. Can you remember your voice? The sound you made?
 Sometimes the table creaks and I think it's you. I start to answer. Start
 a conversation with a piece of wood. (*Taps table*) Least it says the truth.
 One night I woke up. Nightmare. Heard my heart beating. Banging. I
 thought it was you saying something. Talking to me. I'm haunted by
 sounds no one else notices. I ought to go away. While I can. When I'm
 here on my own I don't feel lonely. When you come in I feel it - I'm
 alone. I'm sitting here on my own now. When you come in tomorrow
 I may be gone. D'you know I keep a case packed under my bed? The
 essentials. I ought to go. Mother did.

Central line (highlighted above):

You don't trust me. You don't trust yourself. I don't know if you even speak to yourself anymore.

Central Image

In this play the central image/s come from the accident, which is the central event of the drama. It is the luring in both Norman and his Father from the very beginning of the play. Its presence is there throughout the play, and as Edward Bond says in his rehearsal notes (Section 4), "*The accident is already in the room because it's always there to be bumped into or tripped over.*"

For much of the play, the two protagonists spend a great deal of time and energy trying to avoid that which can not be avoided. As we move into the play's 'third movement' (the final pages of Part 2), its impact on the lives of both the Father and Norman becomes irresistible: bringing together all the repressed personal, social, relational, psychological and shared human elements of their linked histories.

How we act or direct the descent of Norman and his Father into this crucial memory presents particular problems for a theatre production, especially if we want to point

towards meaning rather than just 'emoting.' This is further complicated by *The Angry Roads* being "a play in which one character talks and the other is silent."

Edward Bond has this to say about how we might approach the descent.

"They are in two places. The room where they reconstruct the accident - and the accident itself. It's necessary to mark the distinction. The accident is the street and kinetic, the power of the car and the physical presence of people. The room is the place of commentary, knee-jerk-reflection on the accident. When the two places become one, then N will ... be able to understand the purpose of the accident, its meaning ... "

"This sounds complicated but the scene becomes much clearer (to act and to watch) when it's understood what space the characters are in at each particular time. It's like a football match – all the players react to the ball wherever it is on the field."

Usually, the drama would arise from the dynamic between the two protagonists. In this instance, however, it arises from the two of them responding to an event in the past.

Even though they are both in the physical room (and were both present at the past/imagined events), it is the accident which is the 'football' that they are responding to.

The descent into the accident starts on pages 12 to 13 of the script, when Norman makes it impossible for the Father not to 'blurt out' two knocks that bring a fresh insight to the story.

The central images emanate from this central event; the spoken images that Norman reveals (Pages 8 and 12 and 13), but in the actions and responses of the Father to what is being enacted in the living room.

Activity

Start with the stage direction:

Father turns. Stiff with rage. Marches to the table. Slams his fist on the table twice.

Working in small groups – with young people taking it in turns to act part of the scene out in pairs, in front of peers – responding to the events of the accident rather than to each other (watching the football rather than the players).

Their peers then comment on how what they are seeing changes as the action unfolds.

If Norman were to write a diary entry the night after leaving the house, what would he put into it? What purpose or meaning can he find in the accident?

Central Object (see pages 5 and 6, above)

The table. The realisation that the table is a third actor in the drama which Norman and Father take sides over was both revelatory and liberating for the Company in rehearsal. There are others that could be chosen, of course: as referred to above, toys and food are central too. So is the Father's coat, his second skin; an image of himself that has been buried under the debris of the accident, that he clings too whenever he steps out of the home and into the streets.

Central Action

Knocking. The Father knocks on the table in order to repress and deny and tell lies. It's a perverse form of communication. Norman interprets the meaning in them and as the play progresses the truth comes knocking.

Central Sound

As so often in Bond's plays the central sounds in this play come from the primordial and the prelingual, the inner core of being. The centre of the play can be found in the sighs and 'Ohs', and 'Urghs' which are later transformed into howls and groans: the attempt to articulate the inarticulable, the unspeakable.

5. Using centre to look at other texts

Initial feedback from English and Drama teachers tells us that this idea of a central discourse, speech, line, image, concept, action is a really helpful and workable one. It also suggests that *centre* can be useful for looking at non-dramatic texts (eg identifying key images and lines in *Of Mice and Men*, and how these help create the story's meaning).

In the Teachers' Resource for Chris Cooper's 2013 play for Big Brum, *Touched*, we looked at ways of using Centre as an approach both to this text and to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – which it had many connections to.

Further reading

Davis, David (ed.) (2005) *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child*, Trentham Books

Davis, David with Chris Cooper (2014) *Imagining the Real - towards a new theory of drama in education*, Trentham Books

Edward Bond www.edwardbond.org