

4. 'The Angry Roads'

Writer's Notes – Edward Bond



Extracts from notes on rehearsing *The Angry Roads*, 5th August 2014

The notes are intended to help unravel the obvious problem of a play in which one character talks and the other is silent and instead communicates by gestures and rapping on a table. That must be unique.

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The chief danger is that we try to act before we know what we are acting. In itself acting can't lead to understanding, it can't force a way through to understanding. It always leads to false emoting.

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I've tried to describe ... actions in a way that clarifies the structure. This becomes a guide to how acting it relates to the why and what. That's because the objects and patterns of movement are being used to establish a social situation and to begin to disintegrate the catastrophe in it. The accident is already in the room because it's always there to be bumped into or tripped over. But we were trying to act the situation without understanding how the situation is structured in the text, and so we were preventing ourselves from acting the situation. It was conventionalised and then the danger is to emote to vivify the situation – but it remains meaningless. We should break the text down into brief sections and concentrate on these individually: what has changed in the situation and what were the mechanics in the text that constructed the change? Then we can put the sections together. I described how in *The Edge*

the characters cross barriers and are then in new situations – the site is changed. But of course the text also has to do this. We have to see how it does it.

There is a basic question to be asked about F [Father]: how would we recognise him if we met him? To answer this you have to see what the text says he does – and establish the connection between the various stages. An example is the way the text uses his repeated way of going to doors – and later (a different use) how the text uses him using the window. You can then form an image of the actor as the F. Would he seem very ordinary, interested in watching football on the telly, comfortable with his mates – but with lurking in him a disaster which shows itself uncharacteristically now and then? Or is he repressed, tense, but very careful not to pull the trigger he lives on – does he always tend to face slightly away, a bit bowed as if ducking his head? Which of these possibilities relate to the rapping? Why doesn't he have a pad and write notes? -- would the first type and not the second type write notes? The various uses made of him in the text will suggest some, but only some, answers. The way he brushes the toys from the table is a basis for interpreting him. Why didn't he do it earlier? It's in response to S's [Son] effort to be helpful which, for F, contrasts with the use of the toys.

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I should add something about S's "*You're trapped*" speech [page 8] ... What I say about it applies to other speeches in the play. My analysis is meant to give it a structure in relation to S's intentions. What I impute to S is vague and only part of what the actor could find in the speech. The speech describes S's hold on life, what he means to himself. The actor has to find these things in his self. In this way the actor gives each member of the audience an education in their self. This is doing drama's real purpose. But it is almost wholly absent from contemporary theatre. The classics achieved it through language, which they attached to myth and to social stories. Shakespeare's poetry is simply his documentary of the soul – of the self of the late renaissance. The enlightenment and the scientific and industrial revolution destroyed that language. The soul does not function in technology. Modern theatre does not know how the self may resolve itself, instead it resolves the problems of the plot, of the situation not the person -- and that is really solving the problems of bureaucracy. But if we try to use the language of the classics we are trying to live in the memory of the dead. We can't, and trying to do it creates not reality but art and regret. Instead, drama must now put its characters in extreme situations in which the self speaks to itself. S's words are simple – shout, kill, whisper, hiss, choking, oh, ugh – but the situation on the site of home and accident, and ultimately of the city's angry roads, is extreme and the extremity shuffles and shunts everything into a changed situation. That is drama's purpose and our purpose.

Extracts from notes on rehearsing *The Angry Roads*, 25th August 2014

The accident

It's a cliché (and Brecht) when people say stand back and get a better look. But that's intellectual, not moral – it's when you go further into the situation, when the situation drags you into it, that you see it more clearly – you're in the accident but you see yourself in the accident and see what it's doing to you and that it absolutely concerns you, but it's part of the human condition – and then language becomes very true, close to, the situation. In the past this gap was filled by poetic rhetoric because then cultures knew about it (though often they mystified it and made it visionary) – but our culture is rational-rationalistic (or fake mystical art) and doesn't know about it and so you can't have rhetoric in this gap, it would be fake, pastiche – instead you have raw immediate human experience.

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End of accident

N [Norman] in total human space -- but not in a final situation because that is always in change, because it has the social in it. This is the Freudian paradox – Thanatos, the death instinct, that what human life really seeks is the stillness of death. But ... this is ideology. It was Freud's response to the first world war. But combatants didn't seek the oblivion of death – they wanted the security of killing; longer life. So Freud's theory is empty. (I satirised it in one of my first plays – the Heil Hitler speech in *Early Morning*.) It's compulsive destructiveness that has to be explained. The explanation is the relationship between ideology, imagination and drama. N finds it difficult to say what he discovers in the accident. It is too shocking for him. If instead of being born (or here: once you have been born) you were forced back into the womb (the baby mashed up and forced back into the mother by the taxi – their double flesh becomes one) you have the perfect Thanatos, life wrapped up in death. Ultimately that is the ideal of ideology, the death wish of Fascism – but the paradox is that you have to stay alive to kill -- the Fascist has to stay alive to see he's dead and so his dead self stares at him and so the desired state can never be reached – so Fascist life is a sort of hallowed death with toys from the capitalist market (not rewards in heaven). That is our present culture. You could say that N had naively held onto his toys before selling them so that they would have increased value as antiques. But that is interpretation. The play is enactment. Ideology uses the kinetic and the intellectual to repress, drama uses the same forces to release repression. It can do this because imagination can re-describe, recreate, the situation – and this isn't fiction because if the description is intellectually right it inevitably incites the kinetic

involvement. This produces enactment. Ultimately what is repressed is radical innocence – human creativity.

F [Father] remains imprisoned in the accident. N is freed from it by going to the accident. The oddity of his home causes him to do this. But the oddity selects and exaggerates the peculiarities, oddities, of general life, the lives of the audience. Material forces do not control us, and imagination does not free us. Culture and selfhood result from the inter-creativity of the two. How could it be otherwise? – that would be like walking through the rain and whichever way you went one half of your body got wet and the other half stayed dry. It's the "moral butterfly effect." It's said that when a butterfly flaps its wings on one side of the world it starts a chain of necessarily related events that causes a tsunami on the other of the world. Morality ramifies through all the structures of human existence – it isn't a set of labels always securely in one – the "right" – place. Events change their meaning. Eagleton says the men killed the baby in *Saved* because they are bored . . . but if they were bored there were hundreds of things they could have done and infanticide would be way down on the list. They were motivated by the nostalgia to be human, humanness had been lost in the ramifications that are fostered by injustice. In enactment the ramifications readjust.

The last line: "*Is it possible? They didn't tell me I had a brother.*" It seems impossible because the accident was public knowledge. But it is possible -- that and stranger things happen. In the play there is the ambiguous relationship between N and his mother. The point is not "can it happen?" but that it happens all the time. Ideology asks us to believe the impossible. Hitler said if you want the lie to be believed make it big (make it unbelievable so that it will be believed). Then the effort to believe it will guarantee its truth. And this isn't an abstract pattern – the proof of truth will be extracted from the confused ramifications caused by ideology and then the belief will not only be psychologically true but will also lead to action that will make it a social fact – so it's true. And in morality it isn't the flapping of the butterfly's wings that brings down skyscrapers – it's more insidious, it's the pattern on the butterfly's wings. In ideology the boundary between imagination and objective reality collapses. That's why it's the last line.

Extracts from notes on rehearsing *The Angry Roads*, 3rd September 2014

The play's structure

I divided the play into three "movements," as in a symphony. The first movement ends on p. 9 when F stamps (shuffles?) on the ground. This movement sets out the main struggle but in places anticipates the other movements – for instance, in references to N's childhood. These usually occur at a break in the questioning. The second movement is more solemn and

introspective – not what happened in the accident but what happens in us, and (in the opening of part 2) what happens in society. The second movement continues into part 2. A “smaller” accident comes on stage – the fractured arm. This raises the problem of work and of being trapped in an exploiting society. This is the social situation. Before the break into part 2 F states that N was present at the accident though he was not yet born. This is what I called the question in the total human situation – what being alive means, and neither religion nor science can answer this question. The question is not raised at the beginning of part 2 because the second accident is a distraction. The second movement ends again with N’s childhood and a sense of despair. The purpose of the second movement is to explore the social and psychological causes and consequences of the accident. The third movement begins abruptly with the violent return of the dormant (in the second movement) question. The third movement will combine the first two movements and the hinge for this is “N was present at the accident before he was born” – so the accident is part of the shared total human situation. This last movement focuses in on the actual street accident.

The play tells a lot about F – his past, his jobs, his marriage, his affairs, his relations to his mates and his boss. About N it tells almost nothing except that he is a living question. He relents from the question almost only to return to his childhood, which for him is the origin of the question. He is fanatically persistent and must terrify F – though in the moments of gentleness its clear they need each other, if for different reasons.

The third movement begins with the abrupt return of the question. Beyond the incidental details of the street accident it concerns the human situation. That drives N’s persistence – everyone must either ask that question or substitute an inappropriate answer in place of the question – and then their life either becomes a hobby or they become fanatics (all fanaticism is nihilism, the avoidance of knowledge). Because the question lies in the total human situation N needs to answer it (by seeing how the particular accident is informed by the general situation) but this is also threatening – because humanness is an accident and it may lay waste and cause despair. The persistence in facing the accident is the means of surviving the accident and ceasing to be accidental. Therefore, drama.

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The way to act my plays is to understand that they are preparations for the moment when the characters will know they have entered this total human situation [in this play, the accident]. Theatre (as distinct from drama) can’t enter this situation – it blots it out with stunts and effects. The situation doesn’t always release kinetic energy. For instance, in *The Edge* when the stranger wakes up, hears crying, remembers as a child hearing his mother cry and then says he would kill Ron, he enters the total situation in perhaps a

stoical-eeriness. He remains a victim. At the end of *The Edge* the son thinks he has had a young person's heart attack. And it's then that the stranger enters the situation in a new way: he has the chance to kill the son but can't – but he doesn't know what prevents him. That is the difference between him and Norman at the end of *The Angry Roads*.

Of course in the total human situation N identifies with (becomes) the baby. He is both it and not it – in fact he goes further than being the baby – being the baby enables him to see the situation *sub specie aeternitatis*, to see the perspectives of nothingness. If he just “became” the baby (thought he was it) he would be mad. But drama is imagination at the root of sanity.

A last note: it is interesting that the accident contains the elements of the Christian myth. This is why I call Christianity the last Greek play, but it was used to sterilise drama. The play gives the events a modern complication.

Post Script: note on announcement of Big Brum NPO funding cut, July 2014

I'm writing this on learning that the Arts Council have removed their funding support to Big Brum. Of course this has a particular significance for me. Big Brum is my last contact with English professional theatre, if Big Brum were to close I would truly be in exile. But more important to me is the loss of Big Brum to young people. Seeing a professional performance when I was 13 or 14 changed the direction of my life. It made me understand the processes of my life. I was no longer – as most people now are in our culture – a foreigner to myself. I had seen a play by Shakespeare. I am not comparing my work to his – but I am likening Big Brum's work to the work of his Globe. I met myself and my times at his Globe. I was living in war time and in the post war of ruins and austerity. Shakespeare wrote in a time of equal distress but also of victory – and I lived in such a time. The fit was perfect. The capitalist market in all it does and in all its forms, destroys culture. In time we will see that it is at war with young people. Inevitably youngsters shut their eyes in shock – what else can they do? – just as I did at the shock of war – but Big Brum's work lets them open their minds in understanding and gives them the power to make victories. I am not exaggerating – this is the power of drama and it has accompanied human beings throughout their history. These cuts are a wound to all young people – and they are an immeasurable debt that society will have to pay.