

**What Is Drama? -
Searching for the answer, working with Big Brum in a Secondary School on
The Angry Roads by Edward Bond**

by
Sorrel Oates

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Drama, using drama with young people, can solve the problems of our society – this is what gives us a possible life in the future... We must create the situations where the young people can say this is what I am, this is what I stand for.

Edward Bond at the 2014 NATD Conference

These words have stayed with me this term and, since my students and I experienced Edward's latest play *The Angry Roads*, have been resonating profoundly for me.

As a secondary teacher in an 11 to 16 school, my whole drive often seems to be towards results, that magical day in August on which the students' whole lives – and my job – seem to hang. Edward's words challenge this and remind me what my job should be and that it is about much more than the A* to C percentage at the end of the year.

At Conference this year, I delivered a workshop entitled *What is drama?* – which was more a cry for clarification than a claim that I could answer the question. By the time we got to my pared down version of my workshop on Sunday morning, we had already been stirring around some answers to this question but for me the elephant in the room were still the demands on us as teachers of exam criteria, Assessment Objectives for Drama and English at KS3, OFSTED, Teachers Standards and any other measures that our schools and the DFE impose on us. We have to meet them or we do not get paid and our students 'fail' and we, genuinely, do not want that.

On the Sunday morning, I put these criteria/demands up on the wall of the workshop room and one delegate when she saw them looked like she'd been slapped in the face – 'You are cruel – it's like being back at school!' she said. But then, I also put Edward's assertions in the room and I wanted to know, to find out, how we could have the two together. How could we both honour our responsibility to the young people we teach to 'create the situations where the young people can say this is what I am, this is what I stand for' and begin to start the process for them and us of giving us a 'possible life in the future' whilst also guaranteeing them the best possible exam grades, because it would be irresponsible of us not to, given that, at the moment, the world we live in demands that we have five 'A* to Cs including English and Maths and more.

I have moments when I think I come close to this – I suspect that all drama teachers

do. I also suspect that we have moments when we feel that we don't. Clarification of what drama is and can be and exam success for me has often come through Edward's work with Big Brum.

In August this year, our Drama department achieved our highest ever Drama GCSE results with AQA. At a time when our school was facing special measures unless our results improved, we – in the Drama department - increased our A* - C percentage by 20% from 67% last year to 87% this year (the school as a whole increased their results by 12% which was a relief and testament to the hard work of staff and students). Big Brum's 2013 secondary programme based on the play *Touched* by Chris Cooper was an integral part of the work my students did in order to achieve those results. This play, as with all of Chris Cooper's (Director) and Big Brum's work, carried forward and developed Edward Bond's work with the Company, being a piece of theatre which without compromise or condescension spoke openly and honestly to the young people it was written for, about their lives and the world in which they live.

My students' responses in the final exam were 20% above the national average with students achieving some amazing individual results: 30% of my students got As on the question where they had to write about an actor who had impressed them – they could only have done that if they had truly been impressed and inspired by that performance as the Examination Board very clearly stated that they would reward genuine enthusiasm and strong personal appreciation of the performance the students had seen. One of my studented students achieved a high B (31/40) in this section of the exam, in contrast to the Ds and Es that he received in his English Exams. He had struggled to put down on paper what he understood intuitively - he struggled with the precise memory of how and why events happen - but the experience of the play and working with Big Brum had resonated so clearly for him, that it lived on in his memory. The authenticity of the acting enabled him to understand the characters and the events of the play in relation to his own life and to be able to reflect on how that had been achieved.

I have worked with Big Brum for the past 19 years, my entire career as a teacher, and am proud to be one of the few teachers in the country who has had every single one of the plays that Edward Bond has written for secondary students performed in my school. This year, in October, two weeks after Conference, Big Brum brought *The Angry Roads*, Edward Bond's latest play, to our school.

That was a month ago and we are still reaping the rewards of that play and that experience. I know that when the Company bring any play to my school that I am booking more than just a performance of a play and a workshop, I am booking an entire year's work for my GCSE students. This year, *The Angry Roads* will form not only the basis of the work that the Year 11s will write about for Unit 1 of their exam, but is also the stimulus for the first performance project the Year 10s are now engaged in and will form a model for the Year 10 unit on Theatre in Education (TIE) in the Summer Term, the marks from which will go towards their final marks for Unit 2. I could only use the play for these projects because of its artistic integrity – the performances of the actors, the content and meaning contained in the play will (and already have) inspired, taught and motivated my students to create performance work of the highest quality. Their writing is informed, intelligent and imaginative as they comment with authority and a sense of ownership on the quality of the acting and the artistic interpretation of the text. In the summer, when Year 10 come to learn about the theory of TIE and what makes an effective piece of Theatre in Education we will have an example that we have all experienced that we can pick apart to clearly show the three key features of TIE: 'resonance, distance and participation'. (Geoff Gillham: 2004)

The Angry Roads is not an easy play to read or watch, it is a profound challenge, but as a teacher I think that is to be embraced. The demands the AQA syllabus are that the students have to have read and done some practical work around the play before they see it. I am not sure that this is the best way for students to encounter Edward's plays as they seem to be written for Big Brum to share with the young people through the medium of live performance initially. Up until taking on the AQA course, I always let the students come at the plays not having read the text. We might do some exploration of ideas contained in the play, a seeding of questions they might encounter but we – and I often included myself in that – didn't touch the text until after the programme – that way we came to it with a felt understanding generated through the work we had done with the company. AQA's demands have obliged me to find a different approach and so now we read the play and I have to find ways for us to allow our questions to take us usefully into the TIE programme.

This time, having read the play, my students' reactions were: 'What on earth is that about Miss?' 'I don't get that!' 'How does Norman understand the father?' 'What's that dead pigeon all about?' 'Does Norman actually exist or is he just a figment of the Father's imagination?', 'How on earth are they going to act that?' I take the positive from this, a mix for me of relief and excitement because this meant we had something to do, something to stretch our brains and really explore; that meant they were intrigued and excited - in a frustrated kind of way! That, for me, is a wonderful way to start learning – start with questions, start with a drive to make sense of something, start with a fascination and you've got somewhere to go; start with something that just confirms what they know and you learn nothing new. What I relish about Edward's plays is that whilst they are rooted absolutely in young people's lives they still demand that we question what we thought we knew and therefore enable us to make new meanings in relation to our lives from the lives of the characters in the play.

I resist the temptation to try and answer their questions – I don't really know the answers anyway – I am hoping to discover them along with the students – Dorothy Heathcotes's child as crucible paradigm – 'me and you have to keep stirring everything around' ('The Fight for Drama the Fight for Education': *NATD publications*: April 1990) - being paramount and the only useful way to teach here. They are very trusting, my students, as they allow the unknowing and confusion to just sit in the room - perhaps they are used to it by now as a mode of being that will eventually bear fruit? So, even before we have seen the play, we start to explore what it says to us. We identify actions and moments that have lodged in our minds – I am led by the students in this: the dead pigeon; the father knocking on the table; Norman sorting through his toys; the father wrapping his head in bandages; the woman being run over by the taxi. We don't worry that, at the moment, they may not make sense to us, it is quite liberating not to be trapped in the prison of seeking the right answer. We recreate them as images and give them a title; we re-enact them, noting the challenges for us as performers and the sense that is revealed to us when we *do* rather than read. We note the precision contained in the stage directions and how, if we follow them rather than doing our own vague interpretation of them, they help us to understand what is contained in the play. And so, we are beginning to understand Bond's ability to capture the complexity of an event, of a human being, in a single action, we are coming close to understanding his concept of 'Theatre Event'. By the end of our first practical explorations, we are ready to meet the play as performed by Big Brum. We still have questions and are really fascinated to see how on earth they will do it (which is useful) but we feel a little more 'expert' in our understanding or ability to begin to understand (which is reassuring).

The play is remarkable: it draws you into the world of silence and lies which surround Norman and his Father; it asks you to consider the extremes of the struggle for communication between the generations and to explore the fight for Norman as he tries to make sense of the world he inhabits both inside and outside the room and the time in which the play is set. We never leave the front room of the house but in our imagination we travel backwards in time to unravel the story behind the Father's silence. It is a challenge to watch – we were an active audience, leaning in, moving away, turning to look at each other, our responses and thoughts evident, you could not watch impassively.

Writing about the challenges for the actors in the company Chris Cooper said:

It is a challenging piece, because once again he has pushed the work even further into new territory since the last play, *The Edge* (2012), in his developing understanding of what drama is and how the human mind seeks reason through the imagination. It follows therefore that Bond has pushed the Company into new territory that takes us beyond the limits of our previous understandings and beyond our comfort zone, demanding ever-deepening understanding. (Director's Notes, Big Brum Teacher's Resources for *The Angry Roads*)

The same could be said for us, as an audience. We were out of our comfort zone, some of us happily so, others more anxiously. In these situations I trust to the drama and the work of Big Brum, knowing that eventually all of the students will be happy that they 'messed with our minds' as one student delightedly put it!

In the workshop after the performance, the actor/teachers always work in the crucible paradigm, stirring around our questions and ideas, constantly saying that they don't have the answers - and it is a genuine response on their part – they are on a voyage of discovery with us. We unpack a moment in the play – the moment when the Father looks at his son for the first time – afterwards we wondered if it was the first time ever or just in the play? The students are encouraged to try the actions in a number of ways.

One version resonates for all of us: the student in role as the father walks in, holding a cup of tea, she looks into the cup and then looks at the student playing her son. She looks carefully, exploring his face. Asked what she was doing, she says that when the father looked into the cup he saw his face reflected in the water and then, when he looked at his son he saw himself in his son's face. The actor/teacher who plays the Father is thoughtful – 'Tomorrow, when we come to that moment I am going to try that' - later the student asks me if he meant it and I can reassure her that he did, absolutely, because I know that there is no condescension in this form of drama, there can't be.

As Chris Cooper said in his notes on the rehearsal process:

Edward Bond keeps asking the question: What is it to be human? The answers lie in the audience. He uses drama to open the door to this most profound, complex and meaningful question for young people and takes them by the hand as they cross the threshold. But he can only do this through the precision and creativity of the actor. For the Company this is both a huge privilege and responsibility.

After the company had left, back in the classroom, I felt that responsibility pass to me as the teacher. We started to work on the play ourselves. For the Year 11s this

meant preparing to write about how the actors had realised the play in performance in order to answer Section C on the AQA written paper and for the Year 10s it meant exploring the play further in preparation for creating their own piece of theatre based on the play.

With both sets of students it has been fascinating to see what resonated for them. The silence of the Father and the struggle for communication between him and his son and Norman's fight for understanding and ultimately his freedom was strongest for them. They were also intrigued by the absent mother – as any child would be – and why she did not take Norman with her.

Year 10 have started to create performance pieces that explore these ideas and there have been some interesting developments in their skills as devisers as the content of the play has allowed me to be really rigorous with them, demanding that they are clear about the meanings they are creating and the forms that they use. One group was exploring the accident that silences the father and the way in which Norman tries to make sense of it. They started with a re-enactment with Norman reading the speech from the play that describes it but as they started to re-enact it they, like Norman, found it hard to find the truth about the event – there seemed to be many versions and a re-enactment did not show that struggle for the truth which they had discovered was so important. They started to try to enact the accident in a number of different ways. Then they placed Norman in the accident, commenting on it, changing it, the other actors repeating the scene as he tried to make sense of it. They made the other characters oblivious to him as he sat in the car, moved between them and at the crucial moment when his father runs over the woman who is holding Norman's half-brother, they had Norman step forward and take the baby as it flew through the air, he cradled it and said the line from the end of the play:

Is it possible? They didn't tell me. I had a brother.
(*The Angry Roads*: Edward Bond)

And of course the question now is what should he do with the baby? He can't save it, he wasn't even born, so that is the next dramatic challenge for them. They have also started to play around with the blurring of the roles of the Father and Norman – with the actors swapping roles, Norman trying out what his Father does and is, as they explore the idea of the parent contained in the child and the child in the parent, asking how do we separate ourselves from our parents and say 'this is what I am, this is what I stand for?'

So, I am back to Edward's assertion and request to us at Conference to create situations which allow young people to do this. I think that I am doing this whilst, miraculously, fulfilling all three of the assessment criteria of the AQA GCSE to:

recall, select and communicate their knowledge and understanding of drama to generate, explore and develop ideas

and to:

apply practical skills to communicate in performance

whilst being able to:

analyse and evaluate their own work and that of others using appropriate terminology.
(AQA GCSE DRAMA Syllabus 2014)

In addition, if it were within my remit with Year 10, we are also meeting some of the English Speaking and Listening criteria for KS4 and you would be hard pressed to argue that 'rapid progress' in understanding of both the form and content of Drama had not taken place in that lesson should an OFSTED inspector or line manager be sitting in the corner of the classroom observing you. This is not unusual in the drama classroom but it is unusual for teachers to be using material like this and I would urge them to do so.

Edward's work challenges students and teachers and that is to be embraced; it is where active and real learning takes place, when we really have to think, when we move out of our comfort zone, out of our zone of proximal development, away from a confirmation of what we know and find new understandings because as he has said:

Big Brum's work lets them (young people) 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. (From: Edward Bond's statement on hearing that Big Brum's Arts Council funding had been cut. July 2014)

What is Drama? This is Drama.