

3. 'The Angry Roads'

Director's Notes – Chris Cooper



1.

Edward Bond working with Big Brum's Actor Teachers on 'The Angry Roads'

This production of *The Angry Roads* is an important landmark for the Company. It is Bond's tenth for Big Brum. A canon of work that extends over a nineteen-year period of collaboration, that first began in 1995. That was before my time in the Company although, as first an actor and now as Artistic Director, I have been part of the journey through nine of the ten plays. It is, I believe, one that is unique in British theatre.

That it comes at the time when the Company is struggling to survive being cut from the Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation makes the production even more significant, and the conditions we are working more difficult. It's not a question of whether we feel that the decision to cut the Company is fair, which we certainly don't, but what it means for theatre in education as a discrete art form, and how much the new form of drama Bond is developing is valued. It's not just a question of how Big Brum financially sustains the work, but what Big Brum and Drama means. It is, I would argue, a discussion of great importance not only to the Company, but for theatre, culture and young people generally. In 2014 I do not believe we live and work in an environment that is equipped to have that discussion honestly. Given this, it is particularly important that we strive to realise the best production of the play that Edward has written for us.

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. Without the experience currently held within the artistic team at Big Brum, it would not be

possible to achieve what the play is insisting of us: actors Richard Holmes and Danny O'Grady, the designer Ceri Townsend and me.

The design is an apparently simple set which appears conventional or perhaps even 'traditional kitchen sink' but is anything other. It is designed to bring the audience onto the site of the play, and that is a task of subtle choices requiring an understanding of space, objects and colour and tone, and of innovation. It is born out of new understandings gleaned from the practice of the collaboration. The design creates three spaces within the one room, so that the play can use them as Bond himself puts it, "objectively-creatively and psychologically-creatively." They belong to the play's structure and its initial meaning – and then by its use of them the play will change the meaning.

"The Greek and Jacobean stages had structures that physically represented the human social structure. Modern theatre doesn't have this. Instead it has an empty space, or gift-boxes inherited from baroque and Victorian theatres, or up-dated variations of Neue Sachlichkeit, which is like handing over the audience to cultural brain surgeons, or of course post-modern dens and stadia which attempt to make Walt Disney sacred. So a modern drama has to mould itself to its own specific set-structure." - Edward Bond, e-mail.

The three sites relate to different dimensions of reality. The relation is not abstract – the dimensions inter-relate through the story's events and those of the audience's lives.

If we can realise the play's structure spatially, then we can provide a site for the actors to be creative in. This remains the most difficult task for Richard and Danny. They have to create the drama by enacting the play's centre. The Angry Roads is a play about 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 (Norman) 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 lives like a black oppressive storm cloud.

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; their 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 Father and Norman are engaged in a struggle over the truth in order to make meaning of their humanness. For Norman it will be the difference between being buried alive and being free.

"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[orman] 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."

- Edward Bond – rehearsal notes (see Section 4).

How do we enable ourselves to dramatise this use of space? To quote Bond again:

"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."

In a very fundamental way this requires grasping the structure of the play, and to do this we have to know how to read it. This will appear obvious, but in reality it isn't. It becomes surprisingly and increasingly difficult, because our own values and assumptions and ideological prejudices often come between the play and the audience. That is when actors and directors generalise, trying to force the situation rather than understand it (as referred to above). This is where emotion so often gets in the way.

There is a common misconception that actors generate energy through emotion, which makes theatre dramatic. The reality is that the energy in drama comes through time and space and objects in the situation, which generates the appropriate emotion in the characters. Rehearsing the play requires us to forensically break everything in the text down to see what is there. In a Bond play nothing is generalised, and if we step over a problem the play loses its meaning. In order to enact the drama, we have strived to accurately reflect what happens in every detail. This is liberating for the actors, because when we understand what happens, why and how something happens becomes a question of making creative choices.

Bond has said that drama is the relationship between the kitchen table and the universe. Through the familiar or ordinary we discover the extraordinary and engage with the biggest problems of what it is to be human. In *The Angry Roads* we are enacting a familiar domestic family drama, but in the extremity of the story, and the 'accident' at the heart of it, the play takes us to the universe, the 'total human situation':

"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 – editorial note]." - Bond e-mail.

This requires, more than anything getting the little things, the details, right.

Working on this play has been a huge challenge, creative and exhilarating. Bondian drama engages us with ourselves, with the fundamental purpose of drama in society, exploring the human condition. There is nothing new about this. We need to understand. It's as intrinsic to the species as our DNA. But we are exploring our condition in a culture which increasingly understands value in the narrowest economic terms: the price of everything and the value of nothing, to paraphrase Wilde. 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.

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