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DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

44

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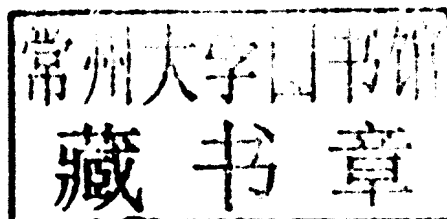
DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 44

Marie Toft
Project Editor



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Preface

D*rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately three to five authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *DC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *DC* as well as other Literature Criticism series.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing Drama Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

sociation (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Barker, Roberta. "The Circle Game: Gender, Time, and 'Revolution' in Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*." *Modern Drama* 48, no. 4 (winter 2005): 706-25. Reprinted in *Drama Criticism*. Vol. 30, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 356-66. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Rocha, Mark William. "Black Madness in August Wilson's 'Down the Line' Cycle." In *Madness in Drama*, edited by James Redmond, 191-201. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Reprinted in *Drama Criticism*. Vol. 31, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 229-35. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Product Manager:

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David Edgar

1948-

English playwright, essayist, and screenwriter.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most productive modern English playwrights, Edgar's many works have ranged from small agitprop pieces written specifically for leftist organizations to large-scale dramas produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. One of his best-known works is his 1980 adaptation of Charles Dickens's expansive Victorian novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, which earned numerous awards in both England and the United States. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Edgar became increasingly intrigued by efforts to forge new states in the former Soviet bloc, which he explored in his trilogy *The Shape of the Table* (1990), *Pentecost* (1994), and *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Edgar was born on February 26, 1948 in Birmingham, England, into a family well-acquainted with theater. His parents, Barrie and Joan Burman Edgar, were a television producer and radio actress, respectively. His maternal grandmother, Isabel Thornton, had been a film actress; his aunt, Nancy Burman, operated a theater company; and his paternal grandfather, Percy Edgar, was a radio broadcaster. Edgar was exposed at an early age to a range of dramatists, from Shakespeare to Agatha Christie. He attended the Oundle School in Northamptonshire from 1961 to 1965, teaching briefly at a preparatory school in 1966 before entering Manchester University to study drama. Edgar quickly turned toward politics, becoming chair of the university's Socialist Society and editing the student newspaper. When Edgar graduated in 1969, he worked as a journalist for the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, for which he investigated a political corruption scandal, the Poulson Affair, and wrote theater reviews. While living in Bradford, Edgar met Chris Parr, a Fellow in Bradford University's theater department who regularly commissioned plays from beginning playwrights, staging them with a student cast. Parr commissioned Edgar's first professional play, *Two Kinds of Angel* (1970), written to be performed by two student actresses. By late 1971 eight of Edgar's plays had been staged. During this

time he helped form an agitprop theater group called the General Will. Inspired by England's Conservative Party leadership, high unemployment, and a variety of confrontations between government and labor, Edgar and the General Will collaborated on numerous plays until 1974, when he broke with the group over creative differences. Edgar had left his position at the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* in 1972, and in 1974 was named playwright in residence at the Birmingham Repertory Theater. Also that year, he was invited to teach a class in playwriting at Birmingham University, eventually leading to the establishment of the first postgraduate-level playwriting program in the United Kingdom, in 1989. In 1976 Edgar's play *Destiny* was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at its studio theater, The Other Place. The play was considered Edgar's most significant work to date. Examining the rise of neo-fascist groups in England, *Destiny* also led to Edgar's involvement with the Anti-Nazi League and his long-running association with the Royal Shakespeare Company, while he continued to work with left-wing theater groups. In 1979 he married Eve Brook, a social activist. That year, Edgar was in the United States on a British Council fellowship when he was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company to adapt the Charles Dickens novel *Nicholas Nickleby* to the stage. The resulting play, which was shown in productions eight hours long over the course of two days, won a Tony Award and a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1982 and was a major theatrical sensation in England and the United States. The fall of the Soviet Union and the reorganization of the former Eastern Bloc countries provided Edgar with much material, from which he shaped some of his most acclaimed plays. In 1998 his wife died of lung cancer. Edgar continues to write plays and contribute essays and articles to newspapers and book reviews.

MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

Edgar is well known for both his commercially successful adaptations and his original plays which reflect the political climate of their time. In addition to *Nicholas Nickleby*, adaptations such as *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978, about a Jewish lawyer in South Africa, imprisoned for opposing Apartheid) and *Mary Barnes* (1978, about the unconventional treatment of a schizophrenic woman) were very popular.

Although, Edgar's early political plays tend to be satirical, *Destiny* and *Maydays* (1983) are both more serious in tone as well as more epic in scope. In *Destiny*, set in England and India, Edgar equates conservative British trends from 1947 to 1976 with the rise of fascism in interwar-era Europe, while in *Maydays*, set in England, Hungary, the United States, and the Soviet Union, and spanning from 1945 to the early 1980s, he chronicles the disillusionment of radical youths, who slowly drift toward conservatism as they age.

It was the dismantling of the former Soviet Union, however, and his trilogy of plays dramatizing it, that earned Edgar his highly esteemed reputation as a political commentator in the post-Cold War age. The first play in the cycle, *The Shape of the Table*, takes place in a palace located in a Czechoslovakia-like former Soviet country and depicts a group of national leaders hammering out a plan to divide their lands. According to Edgar, the play is intended to provide a counterpoint to the euphoria of revolution. The second play in the series, *Pentecost*, is set in an unnamed Eastern European country similar to Bosnia-Herzegovina and revolves around a medieval church fresco and its questionable, culturally significant provenance. The characters debate whether the fresco should be removed from the church and placed in the national museum, bringing up questions of national identity, the reinterpretation of history by outsiders, and the ownership and value of art. When the church is overrun by asylum-seeking refugees who take those inside hostage, a commando group breaks through the church wall to rescue the hostages, and in so doing, destroys the fresco. The third play in the cycle, *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, examines the difficult art of negotiation, this time at peace talks for two rival clans—the fictional Kavkhars and Drozhdans—over the course of twelve years.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Edgar's experience in journalism informed his early agitprop works, which earned attention with the use of elements from vaudeville and rock music. Given this early body of work and his distinct countercultural associations, Edgar was considered an unusual choice to adapt the large-scale blockbuster *Nicholas Nickleby*. Yet even skeptical critics were impressed with the way he compressed Dickens's sprawling novel into a stage production that maintained audience interest over eight hours and still managed to elicit standing ovations. Critics of Edgar's post-Cold War trilogy in general either applauded the works or found them uneven. Paul Taylor of the London *Independent* found that *The Shape of the Table* "contemplates with sad apprehension the moral vacuum left by the demise of another ideal fiction" in regards to the great hopes that ushered in the

Russian Revolution and the fall of Communism decades later. The *Times Literary Supplement's* Andrew Bergsman, on the other hand, found Edgar's interpretation of the situation "naive." Likewise, critics were divided on *The Prisoner's Dilemma*. and *Pentecost*, which Nick Curtis of the *Evening Standard* found uneven and Taylor lauded as a masterwork. Charlotte J. Headrick, in her review of *The Prisoner's Dilemma* in *Theatre Journal*, stressed that "The play forces us to examine how the world's crises affect our own lives. It says that there is still a place for ideas and significant arguments in the theater. With *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, David Edgar has staked out an important claim on that theatre of ideas."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Plays

Bloody Rosa 1970
A Truer Shade of Blue 1970
Two Kinds of Angel 1970
Acid 1971
Conversation in Paradise 1971
The National Interest 1971
Still Life 1971
Tedderella 1971
Death Story 1972
The End 1972
England's Ireland [with Tony Bicat, Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, Francis Fuchs, David Hare, and Snoo Wilson] 1972
Excuses Excuses 1972
Not with a Bang but a Whimper 1972
Rent; or, Caught in the Act 1972
Road to Hanoi 1972
The Rupert Show 1972
State of Emergency 1972
Baby Love 1973
The Case of the Workers' Plane 1973; revised as *Concorde Cabaret*; 1975
The Eagle Has Landed (teleplay) 1973
A Fart for Europe [with Brenton] 1973
Gangsters 1973
Liberated Zone 1973
Operation Iskra 1973
** Sanctuary* (teleplay) 1973
Up Spaghetti Junction [with others] 1973
The All-Singing All-Talking Golden Oldie Rock Revival
Ho Chi Minh Peace Love and Revolution Show 1974
† Baby Love (teleplay) 1974
Dick Deterred 1974
The Dunkirk Spirit 1974
I Know What I Meant (teleplay) 1974

Man Only Dines 1974
 † *Concorde Cabaret* (teleplay) 1975
The Midas Connection (teleplay) 1975
The National Theatre 1975
O Fair Jerusalem 1975
Summer Sports 1975
Destiny 1976
Events Following the Closure of a Motorcycle Factory 1976
The Perils of Bardford [with Richard Crane] 1976
Saigon Rose 1976
Ball Boys 1977
Ecclesiastes (radio play) 1977
Our Own People 1977
Wreckers 1977
 † *Destiny* (teleplay) 1978
The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs [adaptor; from the diary by Albie Sachs] 1978
Mary Barnes [adaptor; from the autobiography by Mary Barnes] 1978
 † *Destiny* (radio play) 1979
 † *Saigon Rose* (radio play) 1979
Teendreams [with Susan Todd] 1979
Nicholas Nickleby [adaptor; from the novel by Charles Dickens] 1980
 † *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (teleplay) 1981
Maydays 1983
Entertaining Strangers 1985
That Summer 1987
Heartlanders [with Stephen Bill and Anne Devlin] 1989
Vote for Them [with Neil Grant] (teleplay) 1989
The Shape of the Table 1990
A Movie Starring Me (radio play) 1991
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde [adaptor; from the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson] 1991
Buying a Landslide (teleplay) 1992
 † *That Summer* (radio play) 1993
Pentecost 1994
 † *Mary Barnes* (radio play) 1995
Talking to Mars (radio play) 1996
Albert Speer [adaptor; from the biography by Gitta Sereny] 2000
The Prisoner's Dilemma 2001
Continental Divide: Mothers Against/Daughters of the Revolution 2003
Playing with Fire 2005
A Time to Keep [with Stephanie Dale] 2007
Testing the Echo 2008

Other Major Works

Lady Jane [with Chris Bryant] (screenplay) 1986
The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times (essays) 1988
State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting [editor] (essays) 1999

*Adapted from the play *Gangsters*.

†These works are adaptations of the plays by the same name.

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

David Edgar, Clive Barker, and Simon Trussler
 (interview date spring 1979)

SOURCE: Edgar, David, Clive Barker, and Simon Trussler. "Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities." *Theatre Quarterly* 9, no. 33 (spring 1979): 3-23.

[In the following interview, Edgar discusses his family and educational background, the evolution of his political consciousness, and the major themes in, and dramatic forms of, his plays.]

[Interviewer]: Your educational background—prep school, public school, university—suggests a fairly conventional upbringing . . .

[Edgar]: Yes, fairly conventional, more or less upper-middle class, except that both my parents and three of my grandparents, an aunt, and various other slightly more distant relatives were involved in the theatre. I think that had a fairly strong influence, and I probably saw rather more plays at a young age than most middle-class children, even from culturally aware backgrounds. I suppose I would have seen almost all of Shakespeare's plays by the age of fifteen, and in the Easter holidays I would go to everything that was available, which was then three Stratford openings, three plays at the Birmingham Rep, and three at the Alex—the Alexandra Theatre—which meant I had a comprehensive knowledge of Agatha Christie, and the sort of plays one would never go to now. That was advantageous in terms of my picking up a number of techniques, and disadvantageous in that I think I spent rather longer than I might in forging an individual style, shaking off that almost osmotically communicated 'forties or 'fifties sense of the dramatic which obviously does fall over into my early non-documentary drama.

Did you find yourself an odd person out at public school?

Not really. I got into CND, which was very popular at school as an outlet for revolt. Like being involved in the school poetry magazine and taking up smoking—there was very little difference between them as anti-authoritarian activities. But in a personal sense I did feel oddly left out—quite definitely the years between twelve and a half and fourteen and a half were the worst of my life, a period of total misery. I was stout, bespectacled, spotty, not very academically proficient, terrible at sports—a complete archetype of the person who doesn't get on very well in a concentration camp. But then I did begin to forge one or two activities that I enjoyed and was reasonably good at, like theatre.

Then, having been brought up in a fairly liberal political tradition, which included involvement in the peace movement, I found actually going to university and confronting what I viewed as wild men of the left quite an upsetting, difficult experience. And for a while, I became quite obscurantist and élitist, and even wrote a column to match in the university newspaper which I now read with groaning embarrassment.

In between school and university you taught briefly at a preparatory school—this was simply to fill in time?

Yes. It was the school that I had attended, and they had a tradition, which I'm sure the teaching unions would not allow nowadays, of taking people who had a year between school and university. I was on the payroll and filled in for the geriatric staff in the spring term, when they were all dying of flu. It helped me to realize that teaching was not what I was going to spend my life doing.

Had you started to write at that time?

I did the traditional thing of writing little plays from a very young age—things like a life of William Shakespeare at the age of eleven, which I'm certainly not going to release to anybody! I think my family took a decision not to attempt, Mrs. Worthington-style, to discourage me from going into the theatre—in fact they were quite encouraging, and I wrote a lot of plays at school. They were never performed because they were all huge epics—a life of St. Stephen, and a play called *Polynices*, which was strongly influenced by the *Antigone* of Anouilh, who is perhaps one of the more dangerous influences on my work.

So: I'd written plays for a long time, and I think I'd wanted to be an actor from about the age most normal people want to be engine drivers, until really realizing that this was not on. Then I designed a couple of plays at school and directed another couple—including an inevitably all-male *Mother Courage*—and went to university with the idea of being a director. But I found out I wasn't particularly good at that either, and really came to writing through that sort of process of elimination.

So it was a very conscious vocational choice, to read drama at Manchester?

Yes. I think it was a mistake, in that it meant that I ploughed through a lot of criticism that I probably would not otherwise have read, and a lot of plays that if I hadn't read already I would have read anyway, or seen. I've always felt the lack of a discipline, really any discipline, like history or economics or even, god forbid, chemistry—a system of looking at the world. The discipline which I did develop, which has had advan-

tages and disadvantages, came through being a journalist. I think that three-year period in my life was much more important, really.

Would you go so far as to say that an academic training in a department of drama is not the right training for any dramatist?

No. It wasn't the right training for me, in part because I've never really had a problem with technique—by which I don't mean that my technique has not been highly faulty, but that I've never found it a banging-the-head-against-the-wall matter. What I have found difficult is dealing with subject matter: I just wish I didn't have to go back on each subject and . . . well, if I'm doing a play about inflation, to have this compulsion, every time, to go and read *An Intelligent Child's Guide to Economics* first.

So it was not university that bred in you the habit of going to the extraordinary lengths of research that you've felt necessary for some of your plays?

No. I think at university the most important things that happened were nothing to do with the drama department or academic life at all. They were to do with being at a university in 1968—you know, bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be in full-time higher education was very heaven. Editing a student newspaper, and being involved in the political life of the union, and then going into journalism gave me a talent, which has had mixed benefits, for getting inside a subject very quickly and quite precisely.

It's what I call a colander effect—you do actually find that your mind gets trained to letting the bits that are not immediately useful disappear through. That's splendid for a piece like *The Case of the Workers' Plane*, the play I wrote about the Concorde in Bristol, which I researched in about a month, actually on the ground, getting a fairly comprehensive knowledge of all that was necessary to write that play. But there were all kinds of . . . tensions which actually went through the colander. So that one is aware in retrospect that actually the journalistic mind loses all sorts of things.

Could you say a little more about 1968, which obviously was crucially important—the fact that you were at university in that year.

I think I got into left-wing politics on a kind of rhetorical level, really. There's a kind of mythology on the left that middle-class people become revolutionary socialists because they wake up one morning, look in the mirror, and suddenly realize that there is an inevitable tendency for capitalism to collapse, and that all history is the history of the class struggle, that all value emanates from labour, and bang, there we are. But I

think many middle-class people become revolutionaries simply through an *instinct* against social injustice. And, obviously, there is also simply the entertainment value of being revolutionary at a particular time, which is one of the reasons why more students were revolutionary in 1968 than are now.

Certainly, it was a very exciting time to be about. In Manchester, every television panel discussion had to have a revolting student on it—you got some money by tugging down to Granada and giving the revolutionary socialist perspective on things. It was a very heady time. And I'm not sure it is over-grandiose (though it is grandiose) to say that one felt at the centre of things, in the same way that a young, upper-middle-class Englishman with a pilot's licence in the 1940s might have felt at the centre of things. But I don't feel that until I left university my socialism developed beyond combining being quite a good public speaker and quite a good polemical writer with a sense of social injustice, emerging from horror at the hydrogen bomb, plus a sense of disillusion with the Labour government and of outrage at the Vietnam war. What with all those demonstrations and sit-ins, occupations and motions of solidarity, and belting about the country on coaches, there really wasn't all that much time to think about what it actually meant.

So at that stage it was a fairly gradual development of what you previously called a liberal attitude?

Yes, or rather a hardening of that attitude. I do remember a key conversation, shortly after the Tet Offensive, when the Viet-Cong got within the boundaries of Saigon. Somebody said, look, there are two points of view about the Vietnam war. Why is it the majority of the population support the Viet-Cong? And why it is that the Viet-Cong, this small peasant army, is actually beating the vast American war machine? And I remember finding the only possible answer to that question quite . . . well, striking.

In terms of your own abilities, what determined your decision to go into journalism?

I wanted to go into journalism to write at ease, and, as it happens, strangely enough, I actually did that. I still wanted to become a playwright in theory, but I obviously couldn't do that immediately, and I certainly didn't want to go into the theatre in any other capacity. I'd been rather put off the theatre, in fact, by the conservatism of the drama department, which I think was partly not the department's fault. It was just that it was about fifty years behind the union—I mean, on the one hand you had this thrusting, vibrant student union, and on the other this slightly fusty department, in which one was being taught about 'the drama'.

As a journalist you specialized in the theatre and in education, though I know you were also involved in the first exposé of the Poulson scandals. Had it not been

for Chris Parr happening to have been in Bradford at that time, do you think you might have gone on to a journalistic career?

Well, it's very difficult to say. I think I was never a hundred per cent committed, waiting-eight-hours-in-the-car-across-the-street, every-time-you-hear-a-siren-leap-in-your-car-and-follow-it type journalist. I'm very proud of being involved with the Poulson story, though if I actually look back on my limited contribution to it, I do remember quite frequently thinking, oh god, have I got to go to Pontefract *again*, to follow up some ludicrous little lead. The only type of journalism I would really have wanted to make a career of would have been that sort of investigative journalism, and I don't think I was really cut out for that.

Although you said earlier that the experience gave you the kind of discipline that perhaps university hadn't.

I think it's because . . . in journalism, you research something, and it becomes public property, but I was more interested in saying things which I believed passionately in. So I'm quite glad things turned out as they did.

Could you say something, then, about how things did turn out as they did—which I think really means beginning with Chris Parr happening to become fellow at Bradford?

What happened was that Chris Parr had this extraordinary (though it seems to me very obvious) policy, which very few other universities have taken up, of getting students to do new plays specifically commissioned for them by up-and-coming writers—who could still use being paid between twenty and fifty quid per play. And that was the bargain. He did three of Howard Brenton's plays, and a number of John Grillo's. He also developed a number of new people, including myself and Richard Crane. I had gone to a lot of his productions, and covered one or two of them as a journalist, and got to know the people socially very well. And I had the idea of writing a play about the Springbok tour—which was the first but by no means the last occasion when I've been overtaken by events, because the tour was cancelled. Chris didn't like the play at all, but even before the tour was cancelled he commissioned another one for two actresses (who were very good, and he felt needed something rather larger than was available for them to get their teeth into), so I wrote *Two Kinds of Angel* for those two student performers. After that Chris did *Acid*, *The End*, *A Truer Shade of Blue*, and a number of other works. And then I had two offers. One was to participate in writing *England's Ireland*, and the other was to do a project with Max Stafford-Clark at the Traverse Theatre Workshop. And I couldn't have taken those up and stayed in journalism. By that stage,

Two Kinds of Angel had been done in London, and various other things were beginning to get done elsewhere, and I thought I'd make the jump.

As a first play, Two Kinds of Angel is not very characteristic of a lot of the work that came immediately afterwards. . . .

No, that's right. It's a highly melodramatic piece, which I can't look at any more, relying on a series of fairly obvious effects culled from watching the wrong sorts of plays at an impressionable age. But at least one had got that assurance, actually to be able to write a one-hour play for two women which jumped about in space and time. I don't think I thought stylistically about how to do it at all.

Even though you get that very strong juxtaposition of different styles within the play, the cutting between personalities?

I picked that up, really. I haven't read a lot of my own work recently, but I think I would find an influence from the then-Bradford school—from Grillo and Brenton, particularly, in that play. But I think there was certainly the freedom to be able to say, the characters freeze, or, they're back thirty years ago, or, one of the characters suddenly becomes somebody else. I don't recall having any problems with that sort of thing.

You don't seem to have gone through a 'realistic phase' at all—thinking, say, of John McGrath's development and his feeling that in order to get into a stylized theatre, a writer has to first of all go through a realistic phase.

I don't know, but that may have to do with the fact that I've always been quite good at parody, which again has advantages and disadvantages. And so a lot of my early non-agitprop stuff was imitative—which in a sense I don't mind. I teach a playwriting course at Birmingham, and the three things I tell the students are: you are going to be melodramatic, you are going to be autobiographical, and you're going to plagiarize. Don't worry. Start worrying if you're still doing it in two terms' time.

But I did take a conscious decision not to write a play about a sensitive young man coming down from university and having sex problems, with a big scene with a tart with a heart of gold at the end of the first act. I think I was very pleased that my first play was about two women. And I've only really recently begun to be sure enough to be able to start writing plays in which my own life features at all. If people are going to write about themselves, they will write about their direct ambience, but I could never have written a play about journalism or a play about being at a public school,

even if that market hadn't been cornered by Lindsay Anderson. That's been quite conscious, because I didn't want to get into the kind of naturalism which I always had a sense was not what I should try.

Did you also take a conscious decision not to write a play, for example, about anarchic criminals coming up against an anarchic constabulary. . . .

Yes, though I think I've done one or two which approached that. I've never done a kind of *Alpha Alpha*, but if you think about a play like *Acid* . . . well, I did write an awful lot of 'headline' plays—Charles Manson on the Isle of Wight in *Acid*, William Calley from the moon in *The Eagle has Landed*, plays which were I suppose very much within that tradition.

At the same time, wouldn't it be true to say that they were very much more cerebrally conceived and written, rather than from the gut in the way that the early plays of Brenton were?

Yes. With *Two Kinds of Angel*, here was a highly melodramatic piece which had to end in violent death. And I felt a kind of distaste for that quite early, and really I was trying to find ways to write about socialism, about the working class, from my own background. I think maybe there's a guilt element in that, which sort of said I must exclude myself, and therefore my gut response was irrelevant. What I could offer was a reasonably analytical mind and a talent for research, therefore I would write documentaries. I think that was the kind of process I went through, and I've only really very recently found ways out of that. There was a very conscious, a very strong feeling: what can I do? What contribution can I make?

Does it make any sense to try and distinguish between the plays you wrote for Bradford University, and the work which you then did with the General Will? These different relationships made for very different kinds of play, didn't they?

Yes, I think so. For Bradford I wrote five or six plays of very different kinds. *A Truer Shade of Blue* was a small farce about sex. *Two Kinds of Angel* was a semi-naturalistic two-hander. *The End* was a vast spectacular. *Acid* was a sort of social-realist piece about terrorism—though I did in fact also base some of it very loosely on *The Bacchae*. Kind of jumping in and out, plus a great deal of rhetoric: it wasn't a happy amalgam, although I think there was some quite fine individual stuff in it. But its ending, which has the daughter basically giving the line of the piece to these three Charles Manson-type monsters, I now find embarrassing.

It happened to be a coincidence that I originally wrote *The National Interest* for Bradford, as a documentary on the first year of the Conservative government. It

happened that a group of people wanted to set up a new theatre company arising out of Bradford, and this became the General Will: but the first performances of *The National Interest* were under the auspices of Bradford University. And really the whole series of work for the General Will came out of that coincidence. It might have been that a group interested in another sort of work might have done another kind of play of mine, and that would have been the line of development.

*Would you agree that of all the Bradford plays, **The End** was the one closest to the kind of work you went on to do with *The General Will*?*

Yes, in a way. Chris Parr had this project for doing a series of spectacular events geared to specific environments, which included Howard Brenton's *Wesley*, which was done in a Methodist hall, and *Scott of the Antarctic*, which was done in an ice rink, and *David, King of the Jews*, which Richard Crane wrote for Bradford Cathedral. *The End* was written for a university with a computer in it, and was very much designed for that environment—so the sequences set in a Polaris submarine were geared to the fact that there was a stage with a fire curtain which went up to reveal the Polaris, and a huge hall which you could take the seats out of, which was the main acting area, and there was room for the computer console as well. So it was very much an environmental piece. Having said that, the techniques it used of fairly rapid, brisk, multi-doubling, and the cartoon-storytelling style were clearly features that carried over into the General Will. And I think that the most finished technique that came out of Bradford was for anecdotal storytelling—sliding very quickly from different images which would tell a consistent story through any number of different settings or images. So if one bit of it was best done in Chicago-gangster-style and the next bit was dressed up completely differently, then one developed a style of managing that and of using it to make simple points, quickly and clearly.

*Would it also be true to say that in some cases it became a self-limiting element? **The End** would be very difficult to do without that specific technological back-up, for example.*

Oh, yes. But I don't mind that. It's the opportunity to do it once—have a play's ending decided nightly by the decision of a computer.

And in the same way, some of those early plays for the General Will are so closely related to specific issues or periods that it would be difficult to revive them.

Absolutely. And yet—though this is a complete guess—I think four or five times the amount of people saw *The National Interest* as have ever seen, say, *Bingo*. Which is not to say that I don't think *Bingo* is a much better

play, but that those General Will plays did get around. *The National Interest* ran until *State of Emergency* came in, which was about a year later, then *State of Emergency* ran for eighteen months, being done two or three times a week. So a hell of a lot of people saw it. Those plays weren't as flash-in-the-pan as they might have been. But, yes, they're dead now . . . finished.

In terms of the other people involved, was the General Will a natural evolution from what began at Bradford?

Yes, though it very quickly ceased to be so. There were four people in the Bradford University *National Interest*, of which only two went on into the General Will, so two other ex-students came in. Very quickly one of those dropped out, and another person came in from outside. I think within fifteen months, that is just into *State of Emergency*, the group had no connection with Bradford University at all.

Can you say something about the structure and development of that company, as a group?

Well, it was very typical, really. It started with a group of people who wanted to go on being in the theatre, and wanted to do political plays. It was always very small, and it developed its skills in a fairly anarchic way, though it got musically very good towards the end of my involvement. It became in a sense much more practical and serious when it started getting Arts Council money.

What was your relationship as a writer to the group?

The National Interest I wrote completely by myself. We then developed a system of writing which is really the way, broadly speaking, I've written with collective companies ever since—that is, I write the words, but the process of deciding what each scene is to say (and, indeed, the way it is to be said) is a collective process. Though it must be said that the writer contributes more to the process than most other people. *The Rupert Show* I wrote more or less by myself. With *State of Emergency* we developed a technique whereby I would bring in a great pile of cuttings, and people would look at different areas and report back. That was quite easy in the sense that it was a chronology play, so we knew we had to do Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, we had to do the 1972 miners strike, we had to do the railwaymen. So we'd talk and we'd range around ways of doing something, and get an idea, then I'd go away and write the scene and bring it back the next day.

Rent was perhaps the classic example—it was written in a week. That was at the time when I'd finally given up journalism, and I had an extraordinary baptism of fire. I left journalism on Thursday; on Friday evening I was sitting down in Pembrokeshire with Howard Bren-