

Arden

PLAYS: ONE

SERJEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE,
THE WORKHOUSE DONKEY,
ARMSTRONG'S LAST GOODNIGHT



MASTER
PLAYWRIGHTS

John Arden

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Armstrong's Last Goodnight

As well as *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in 1959 and now acknowledged as one of the best plays of the last two decades, this volume contains two further well-known Arden plays from the early sixties. *The Workhouse Donkey*, first staged at the 1963 Chichester Festival, is 'Arden's masterpiece' according to Michael Billington of *The Guardian*: 'it hit me amidstships and left me feeling it was after all possible to unite passion, politics, poetry, sex and song in a living theatrical form'. The third play is *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, staged first by the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre, then by the National Theatre at the Old Vic, which Ronald Bryden in the *New Statesman* found to be 'Arden's strongest play. Each of his thirty speakers is beautifully alive, a realized private existence integrated into a huge social canvas . . . Arden has steeped himself in the marvellous language of Dunbar and the real Lindsay, lovingly recreating it into a theatrical speech thorny with images, knotted with strength, rough and springy as an uncombed fleece.' Introducing the three plays is a short Preface by the author specially written for this volume.

JOHN ARDEN was born in Barnsley, ~~Yorkshire~~ ^{West Yorkshire}, in 1930. While studying architecture at Cambridge and Edinburgh Universities, he began writing plays, three of which have been produced at the Royal Court Theatre: *The Waters of Babylon* (1957), *Live Like Pigs* (1958) and *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), while a fourth, *The Workhouse Donkey*, was staged at the Chichester Festival in 1963. For a year he held an Annual Fellowship in Playwriting at Bristol University, and Bristol Old Vic staged *Ironhand*, his free adaptation of Goethe's *Goetz von Berlichingen*. *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* was first seen at the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre in 1964 and subsequently at the National Theatre. Left-Handed Liberty was commissioned to commemorate the 750th Anniversary of Magna Carta and was performed at the Mermaid Theatre in 1965. John Arden has collaborated with Margaretta D'Arcy on several plays. These include *The Happy Haven* (1960), *The Business of Good Government* (1960), *The Royal Pardon* (1966), *The Hero Rises Up* (1968), *The Island of the Mighty* (1972), *The Ballygombeen Bequest* (1972) and *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* (1975). John Arden has just published his own selection of essays by him and D'Arcy on the theatre and its public entitled *To Present the Pretence*.

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JOHN ARDEN

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Serjeant Musgrave's Dance
The Workhouse Donkey
Armstrong's Last Goodnight

With a Preface by the Author

The Master Playwrights

EYRE METHUEN

London

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Author's Preface

The late George Devine of the Royal Court Theatre used to make a noble affirmation of his belief in the playwright's 'right to fail': and as an illustration of this doctrine in action he would frequently quote the case of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* – a play which lost the theatre (I think) ten thousand pounds, but which he nevertheless had insisted upon presenting in the teeth of hostile critics and indifferent audiences until acceptance of its qualities was finally secured. Grateful though I was to George Devine, and also to Lindsay Anderson, for their strong championship of my play, I always found this particular invocation of it embarrassing. Not because of the amount of money dropped – for there is no doubt that Anderson's beautiful production had not been a box-office success – but rather for the implication that the play was now a 'modern classic', and that in consequence I had achieved the status of an 'established writer'.

I did not know exactly at that time (the early 1960s) what kind of life an established writer might be expected to lead, but I was quite sure that I was not leading it. I earned a reasonable income from royalties, translation-rights and the like; I was invited to give the occasional lecture to a university or literary society; I did not have my next few plays rejected by the managements to whom I offered them: and I was courteously consulted by directors as to how I would wish them staged. But somehow I was never able to feel that I belonged in the modern theatre. I had some of the best actors and actresses in the country on my cast-lists, and I never got to know any of them very much better than if I had been merely a member of their audiences. The audiences themselves came and went and applauded politely enough, but the distance between them in their seats and the play on the stage seemed irreducible.

I was not quite certain what could be done about this – I was not looking for the sort of 'participatory' exercises that involve actors crawling about the auditorium demanding direct person-to-person responses from individuals among the public – it was rather that I was troubled by a general lack of warmth, a withdrawn coldness, a too-precisely-defined correctitude of artistic technique which seemed to tell the audience: 'thus far and no further – we are the professionals – actors, director, designer, author – and you are to contemplate the work we choose to show you – if you take it in the right spirit you will probably be the better for it.' (To which the audiences naturally responded with a mute defiance and an obvious reluctance to be impressed.) When I was actually writing my scripts I had no such attitude of mind. I regarded myself as preparing a story which would be told to the audience on my behalf by the actors, which would in fact be *me* saying something of interest to a whole crowd of people whom I would have liked to believe my friends. If I personally told

such a story to a group of real friends round a supper-table I would have expected them to react, to interrupt, to comment in a manner provocative of some more prolonged discourse. If this did not happen in the theatre, was I to blame for my style of writing, were the public to blame for their false expectations, or should one blame the entire theatre and its inherited manner of presentation, publicity, and technical device?

It did happen, once, and that was at the Glasgow première of *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*: where the production – in comparison with the Royal Court or Chichester – was under-budgeted, unevenly cast, hastily-prepared, and yet there was a vigorous sharing of a lively experience with the audience – it was of course the experience of Scotland – of a discontented 'region' of the United Kingdom aware of its historical claim to its own unique identity and language, and aware of a theatrical reflection of that claim in the play upon the stage, a reflection consciously projected by the actors in response to a realized demand for it. After *The Workhouse Donkey* had been so skilfully presented at the Chichester Festival I wrote the preface to it that appears in this volume: it will readily be understood that the type of experience alluded to there would not have been possible under any circumstances in that theatre at that time. Yet when I wrote the play I had vainly hoped that it might.

In 1967 I found myself working with Margaretta D'Arcy on a vast 'war-carnival' political show in the University of New York – there was little or no 'literary' or 'classical' content in the work (which was both improvised and collectively-assembled), and my 'established' status was very much at a discount in that environment – the Vietnamese subject-matter had put us both under suspicion from all sorts of respectable quarters – and the result was a remarkable fulfilment of exactly the kind of aspiration I had given voice to in the *Donkey's* preface. Particularly in regard to the number of writers, actors and other artists with whom we were able to develop warm and reciprocal relationships in New York.

An 'established writer', I came to understand, if he is anything at all, is a writer of whom some are jealous, many are wary, and who is above all not expected to desire an intense and integrated part in the presentation of his work. He stands outside the working theatre to which he gives over his scripts complete for others to breathe life into*: he stands outside the general stream of non-theatrical society, except

* I should mention that unlike some other dramatists I never had a permanent working relationship with any one director. The diversity of the plots and moods of my plays may have had something to do with this. But I don't know whether it would anyway have made much difference. Also one hears of these professional partnerships that suddenly break up after years of fruitful work, leaving the playwright cast adrift and feeling bitterly betrayed – directors can always find another script elsewhere . . .

insofar as he may be occasionally made use of to sign appeals and protests for the furtherance of some good cause.

I remember, when *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* had been running for a few weeks in the repertory at Chichester, I revisited the show to see how it was getting along. (I had been at the rehearsals and at the first night, and then I had gone back home to Yorkshire.) I looked forward so much to that revisit, as I thought highly of the production and performances, and I longed to discover how the audiences were continuing to respond to them. It was a terrible disappointment. The actors whom I met before the show and after it were pleasant, chatted amiably, and quite obviously had no idea what on earth I was doing there. Afterwards I asked myself the same question and could find no sensible answer. The play was no longer mine, it was not me but the National Theatre Company who was telling the story of the Scottish bandit to the public each evening. I had already fulfilled my function, and I ought to have stayed away.

A few years later (1972) Margaretta D'Arcy and myself had a dispute with the Royal Shakespeare Company about their production of a play of ours: we felt, as we made our case public, that we were speaking not only for ourselves but for playwrights in general, and, by extension, for actors in general whom we knew to be only too often as unhappy as we were with the bureaucracy of big subsidised managements. Some actors supported us, so did several writers, but there was a surprising degree of complete incomprehension, and an alarming attitude on the part of many younger 'fringe-theatre' people that the whole thing served me right for having become an 'established writer' all those years ago with *Serjeant Musgrave* – that notorious box-office calamity . . .

I am still paying back George Devine's ten thousand pounds – not in cash, but in reputation. I am presently waiting to be sued for libel ('exemplary damages'): I am continually informed in all manner of print by all manner of critics that my later work (post-1967, which is to say since I started regularly working as the older half of the Arden/D'Arcy writing-production partnership) shows a distinct falling-off in dramatic tension and inspiration: I am accused of having turned my back upon the professional theatre – whereas the professional theatre, at least in certain large and influential areas, has let it be known that Arden's work is only acceptable if D'Arcy is not impertinently attached to it: I am regarded by the 'established' English theatre as having abdicated my responsibilities by living and working in the Republic of Ireland, while in Ireland I am held by many to be a foreign interloper only over for the tax-benefits (largely illusory, I might add, unless one is not only 'established' but also a millionaire) who is doing honest Irishmen out of their inalienable place in the sun: and yet I have been working consistently at plays and projects which have aroused audience-enthusiasm and involvement to a degree I

could not have conceived fifteen years ago – except as it were in a dream, like my preface to *The Workhouse Donkey*.

Meanwhile in England there is now an organization of playwrights, the Theatre Writers' Union, which, if it succeeds in its currently-expressed intentions, should once and for all put back the writer where he or she historically belongs – in the active interior of the chaotic working theatre. Within such a union there need be no isolation for the established playwright, nor sense of exclusion for the beginner. I think that if this organization had existed when I wrote the three plays in this book, the plays themselves would not necessarily have been very different, but the conditions under which they would have been produced, and the experience of those productions upon the development of their author would have been utterly at variance from what happened to me . . .

As it is, they are here offered in one volume to the reader as examples of the kind of script by which some of us once vainly believed that the whole nature of the theatre could be changed, regardless of its financial and political position within society, and regardless of the then universal isolation of the playwright. This book is perhaps a little like Vitruvius' famous handbook of the ancient architecture, which he wrote, during the days of Imperial Rome, as though the god-like proportions of the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian Orders (devised for the simple small-scale rectangular temples of obsolete Greek city-states) were still the basic principles of structure. In fact they had long been degraded to applied decoration upon the huge hulks of brick-encased concrete by which the Caesars confirmed their military power, while outside the bounds of Empire the barbarians were already developing those frames of wood and wattle that eventually grew into the cathedrals of the Gothic middle-age. *Progress* in the arts is an indeterminate, very relative concept. It does not and cannot invariably mean 'going forward and doing better'. More frequently it denotes mere movement, in what direction no-one can say until after we have got there. I wonder will I ever have reason to write any stage-plays quite like these again . . . ?

J.A.

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance

AN UN-HISTORICAL PARABLE

To Margaret

INTRODUCTION

This is a realistic, but not a naturalistic, play. Therefore the design of the scenes and costumes must be in some sense stylised. The paintings of L. S. Lowry might suggest a suitable mood. Scenery must be sparing – only those pieces of architecture, furniture, and properties actually used in the action need be present: and they should be thoroughly realistic, so that the audience sees a selection from the details of everyday life rather than a generalised impression of the whole of it. A similar rule should also govern the direction and the acting. If this is done, the obvious difficulties, caused by the mixture of verse, prose, and song in the play, will be considerably lessened.

The exact date of the play is deliberately not given. In the London production, the details of costume covered approximately the years between 1860 and 1880. For instance, the soldiers wore the scarlet tunics and spiked helmets characteristic of the later (or 'Kipling') epoch, while the Constable was dressed in tall hat and tail coat as an early Peeler – his role in the play suggesting a rather primitive type of police organisation.

The songs should be sung to folk-song airs. There are many available tunes which equally well suit the various songs – perhaps these are as good as any:

Sparky's song (Act One, Scene 1): 'Six Jolly Wee Miners' – Scottish.

Sparky's song and chorus (Act Two, Scene 2): 'Blow away the Morning Dew' – English.

Sparky's song (Act Two, Scene 3): 'The Black Horse' – Irish.

Attercliffe's song (Act Three, Scene 2): First three stanzas – 'John Barleycorn' – English Air. Final stanza – 'John Barleycorn' – Irish Air.

Musgrave's song (Act Three, Scene 1) proved in production to be more satisfactory if the words were spoken against a background of drum rolls and recorded music.

The characters perhaps need a few notes of description:

The Soldiers: these are regulars and seasoned men. They should all have moustaches and an ingrained sense of discipline. Musgrave is aged between thirty and forty, tall, swart, commanding, sardonic but never humorous; he could well have served under Cromwell. Attercliffe is aged about fifty, grey-haired, melancholy, a little embittered. He is the senior O.R. of the party and conscious of his responsibility. Hurst, in his twenties, is bloody-minded, quick-tempered, handsome, cynical, tough, but not quite as intelligent as he thinks he is. Sparky, also in his twenties, is easily led, easily driven, inclined to hide from himself behind a screen of silly stories and irritating clownishness. The Dragoon Officer is little more than the deus-ex-machina at the end of the play. All he needs to be is tall, calm, cold, and commanding. His Trooper is a tough, reliable soldier.

The Townsman: The Mayor is a bustling, shrewd, superficially jovial man with a coarse accent and an underlying inclination to bully. The Parson is very much a gentleman: he is conscious of the ungentlemanly nature of the community in which he lives. He must have the accent and manners of a balked aristocrat rather than a stage-clergyman. He too has some inclination to bully. The Constable has a continual inclination to bully, except when in the presence of his superiors. He is as inefficient as he is noisy. The Colliers are all embittered but not so as to make them unpleasant. Walsh is a strong man, physically and morally. He knows what he wants and is entirely impatient with those who are not so single-minded. The Slow Collier is not particularly intelligent but has a vacuous good humour. The Pugnacious Collier is pugnacious, and very quick to show it. The Bargee is something of a grotesque, a hunchback (though this should not be over-emphasised), very rapid in his movements, with a natural urge towards intrigue and mischief.

The Women: The Landlady is a large, immobile widow of about fifty. She sits behind her bar and watches everything

that happens. She is clearly a woman of deep sympathies and intelligence, which she disguises with the normal north-country sombre pessimism. Annie is a big-boned girl, not particularly attractive, but in an aggressive sort of way she provokes the men. Her emotional confusion expresses itself in a deliberately enigmatic style of speech and behaviour. Her voice is harsh.

As for the 'Meaning of the Play': I do not think that an introductory note is a suitable place for a lengthy analysis of the work, but in view of the obvious puzzlement with which it was greeted by the critics, perhaps a few points may be made. This is not a nihilistic play. This is not (except perhaps unconsciously) a symbolist play. Nor does it advocate bloody revolution. I have endeavoured to write about the violence that is so evident in the world, and to do so through a story that is partly one of wish-fulfilment. I think that many of us must at some time have felt an overpowering urge to match some particularly outrageous piece of violence with an even greater and more outrageous retaliation. Musgrave tries to do this: and the fact that the sympathies of the play are clearly with him in his original horror, and then turn against him and his intended remedy, seems to have bewildered many people. I would suggest, however, that a study of the roles of the women, and of Private Attercliffe, should be sufficient to remove any doubts as to where the 'moral' of the play lies. Accusations of nihilism seem to derive from the scene where the Colliers turn away from Musgrave and join in the general dance around the beer barrel. Again, I would suggest, that an unwillingness to dwell upon unpleasant situations that do not immediately concern us is a general human trait, and recognition of it need imply neither cynicism nor despair. Complete pacifism is a very hard doctrine: and if this play appears to advocate it with perhaps some timidity, it is probably because I am naturally a timid man – and also because I know that if I am hit I very easily hit back: and I do not care to preach too confidently what I am not sure I can practise.

J.A.

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre on 22 October 1959, with the following cast:

PRIVATE SPARKY	Donal Donnelly
PRIVATE HURST	Alan Dobie
PRIVATE ATTERCLIFFE	Frank Finlay
BLUDGEON, <i>a bargee</i>	James Bree
SERJEANT MUSGRAVE	Ian Bannen
THE PARSON	Richard Caldicot
MRS. HITCHCOCK	Freda Jackson
ANNIE	Patsy Byrne
THE CONSTABLE	Michael Hunt
THE MAYOR	Stratford Johns
A SLOW COLLIER	Jack Smethurst
A PUGNACIOUS COLLIER	Colin Blakely
WALSH, <i>an earnest collier</i>	Harry Gwynn Davies
A TROOPER OF DRAGOONS	Barry Wilsher
AN OFFICER OF DRAGOONS	Clinton Greyn

Produced by LINDSAY ANDERSON

Music by DUDLEY MOORE

Decor by JOCELYN HERBERT

The play is set in a mining town in the north of England eighty years ago. It is winter.

Act One

SCENE ONE

A canal wharf. Evening.

HURST and ATTERCLIFFE are playing cards on the top of a side-drum. A few yards away SPARKY stands, as though on guard, clapping himself to keep warm. There is a pile of three or four heavy wooden boxes with the WD broad arrow stencilled on them, and a lantern set on top.

SPARKY. Brr, oh a cold winter, snow, dark. We wait too long, that's the trouble. Once you've started, keep on travelling. No good sitting to wait in the middle of it. Only makes the cold night colder. (*He sings*):

One day I was drunk, boys, on the Queen's Highway
When a recruiting party come beating that way.
I was enlisted and attested before I did know
And to the Royal Barracks they forced me to go.

Brr! And they talk of the Crimea! Did I ever tell you that one about the field kitchens at Sebastopol? Well, there was this red-haired provost-sarnt, y'see . . . and then the corporal-cook – now *he'd* got no hair at all . . . now the Commissary in that Regiment was – oh . . . (*He finds no one paying attention.*) Who's winning?

HURST. I'm winning.

ATTERCLIFFE. Oho, no you're not. The black spades carry the day. Jack, King and Ace. *We* throw the red Queen over. That's another shilling, you know. Let's have it.

HURST. All right. Deal agen, boy. Or no, no, *my* deal, this

game. Now let's see if I can't turn some good cards on to my side for a difference. Here: one, two, three, four . . . (*He deals the cards.*)

SPARKY. How much longer we got to wait, I'd like to know. I want to be off aboard that damned barge and away. What's happened to our Black Jack Musgrave, eh? Why don't he come and give us the word to get going?

ATTERCLIFFE. He'll come on the stroke, as he said. He works his life to bugle and drum, this serjeant. You ever seen him late?

SPARKY. No. (*He sings*):

When first I deserted I thought myself free
Till my cruel sweetheart informed upon me -

ATTERCLIFFE (*sharply*). I don't think you ought to sing *that* one.

SPARKY. Why not? It's true, isn't it? (*He sings*):

Court martial, court martial, they held upon me
And the sentence they passed was the high gallows tree.

HURST (*dropping cards and springing up in a rage*). Now shut it, will you! God-damned devil of a song to sing on this sort of a journey! He said you didn't ought to, so don't! (*He glances nervously around.*)

SPARKY. Ha, there's nobody to hear us. You're safe as a bloody blockhouse out here - I'm on the sentry, boy, *I'm* your protection.

ATTERCLIFFE (*irritably*). You make sure you are then. Go on: keep watching.

SPARKY (*returns to his guard*). Ah. Ha-ha . . . Or did you think *he* could hear you? (*He gestures towards the boxes.*) Maybe, maybe . . . I thought I heard him laugh.

ATTERCLIFFE. Steady, boy.

SPARKY (*a little wildly*). Steady yourself, you crumbling old cuckold. He might laugh, who knows? Well, make a rattling any road. Mightn't he, soldier boy?