

PENGUIN PLAYS

John Arden

**The Waters of Babylon
Live Like Pigs
The Happy Haven**

John Arden

Three Plays

The Waters of Babylon

Live Like Pigs

The Happy Haven

Introduced by John Russell Taylor



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Three Plays

To Gwalchmei Francis Arden

Who put his head out in October,
Kept it out until November,
Drew it in then.

 Please remember :
He was young enough to take his choice.
What he did not like he did not have to face.
We who are older
Must needs be bolder.

The pen must crawl :
The black ink fill the waiting space :
For tortoise and child alone
The shell is an honourable home.

J.A.

Introduction

The years since 1956 have been a time of violent and rapid change for British drama: there have been not one 'New Wave' but several, fashion succeeding fashion and wave succeeding wave with dizzying speed until all attempts to find some consistency in the New Drama movement have been defeated and we are left simply with a number – a very encouraging number – of individual writers who continue to write interesting plays and have in common only the fact that ten years ago we had not heard of any of them. One of the most strikingly independent of these writers, and, if one may venture to prophesy from work to date, one of those most likely still to be writing major plays in ten or twenty years' time, is John Arden.

The first thing to strike one about Arden, looking back over a career which already includes seven full-length plays and six shorter plays for stage, radio, or television, is the remarkable degree to which he has succeeded in ignoring fashion, or at least in forging his own fashion, choosing early his own line, and then sticking to it with a dogged, take-it-or-leave-it consistency. When the New Drama started with *Look Back in Anger* it was in a realistic mode and a socially conscious mood; Arden's answer was a radio play written partly in verse, partly in prose, on a semi-allegorical subject heavy with myth and esoteric lore. When, almost in spite of this, he was approached by the English Stage Company, which at that time seemed likely to become the London home of committed drama, the first play he offered them was a verse drama on a subject from Arthurian legend: the next was *THE WATERS OF BABYLON*, which, even more puzzlingly, turned out to be a play, written partly in verse, about prostitution and municipal corruption, and which, moreover, did not take up any of the attitudes that a

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subject with such obvious social implications might then have led theatre-goers to expect.

Since then Arden has continued to shatter any preconceptions we might have about what to expect from him almost before they have formed in our minds, disregarding entirely the fashion for the theatre of the Absurd which swept British drama after the fashion for commitment, writing period drama at a time when everyone else was preoccupied with the contemporary scene, and gnomic comedy-dramas littered with ballads and rhymed dialogue set squarely in the present at a time when everyone else seemed, egged on by the example of Brecht, to be looking to the past. And all this without ever appearing to write as he does just from perversity or a determination to be different for the sake of being different. Arden is a genuine original, and far more important than the differences between his plays and those of his contemporaries is the internal consistency which makes them a logical, coherent progression, all first, foremost, and unmistakably the product of one exceptional mind.

To a certain extent Arden's originality may be explicable by the oddity of his background in the general context of the new drama. He was born in Barnsley in 1930, and is virtually the only dramatist of his generation to have been to both public school and university. He studied architecture at Cambridge and Edinburgh, and has practised as an architect, but also at school and university took a more detailed and scholarly interest in English literature and the history of drama than most, with the result that he is probably more clearly, intellectually aware of what he is doing in his plays than virtually any other dramatist writing in Britain today: if he writes a nativity play it is in the light of his studies of medieval mysteries and miracle plays; if he incorporates a ballad in a dramatic scene its function is governed to some extent by his thought about the ballad tradition and ballad imagery. Knowing what one is doing in this way is of course a mixed blessing: many of the learned verse-plays of the 1900s were too weighed down by knowledge and theory ever to get off the ground as

living drama. But in Arden's case, given an intuitive flair for the theatre and stage effect, this particular danger is remote, and the advantages of his brand of constructive intelligence emerge without any of the concomitant disadvantages.

Arden seems to have been drawn to drama very early on; his schoolboy literary efforts included a tragedy about the death of Hitler written in the style of *Sweeney Agonistes* and a pseudo-Elizabethan verse drama on the Gunpowder Plot. While at Edinburgh he wrote a period comedy called *All Fall Down*, about the building of a mid-Victorian railway, which was in fact his first staged work, being put on by a group of fellow students. This he now regards as prentice work, and he dates the real beginning of his career as a dramatist from his radio play *The Life of Man*, which won a B.B.C. Northern Region prize for original drama and brought him to the attention of the impresario Oscar Lewenstein, who in turn brought him to the notice of the English Stage Company. *The Life of Man* is a strange work, telling of the illfated last voyage of a packet-boat with a mad captain and an odd Welsh seaman who seems to be a sort of avenging angel disguised as a scapegoat, but already it contains many characteristic features of Arden's mature style: the unpredictable alternation of racy, idiomatic prose and quite highly wrought formal verse, the extensive use of traditional song and ballad, and in the Welsh sailor Jones's evocation of his roaming shepherd life an interest in the bold, free, nomadic life of the 'sturdy beggar' which was later to bear spectacular fruit in *LIVE LIKE PIGS*.

Meanwhile, though, came the first play in this volume, *The Waters of Babylon*. It was accepted by the English Stage Company as the initial venture in a new series of experimental productions-without-décor staged on Sunday evenings for members of an associated club, the English Stage Society. The idea behind these productions was that in this way new talent among writers, and for that matter directors and actors, could be tried out with a minimum of risk and expense, and if the initial response seemed to justify it the productions might subsequently find a place in the ordinary repertory of the

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company. Such was certainly not the case with *The Waters of Babylon*: it never reached more than the one performance, and was generally greeted with extreme puzzlement if not outright hostility. And yet, looking at it again today, it is difficult to understand why. Once one has cleared the initial hurdle of the style, with its unexpected mixture of verse and prose, the story is quite easy to follow; the play is by no means obtrusively experimental. It simply describes a few disreputable days in the life of a Polish architect-cum-pimp, Sigismanfred Krankiewicz (known as 'Krank'), who attempts a little rigging of a municipal lottery in order to pay off another Pole who is blackmailing him into permitting a bomb plot to be hatched under his own roof. So far, so good: picturesque low-life, cheerful tarts, a gallery of more or less crooked local politicians brightly caricatured, and some vividly rounded central characters whom Arden has been fond enough of to incorporate in later plays as well: Krank in his television play *Wet Fish*, Charlie Butterthwaite, 'Napoleon of Local Government', as the central character of *The Workhouse Donkey* and on the fringes of a couple more. Why then did the play prove so difficult for its first audience?

The answer to that is the key to the greater or lesser difficulties which audiences have found with all Arden's work: you never know where he stands in the play. The subject of *The Waters of Babylon*, taking in as it does such topics as prostitution, the ethics of local government and the propriety of officially sponsored gambling (the play began in Arden's mind, he tells us, as a satire on the Premium Bond system), would lead audiences to expect that a point of view was going to be offered on some or all of these questions, that the author's general attitude on them would be clearly conveyed, and that indeed the prime purpose of the play would probably be to convey it. But not at all. The central character, for instance, Krank, is not only a pimp, but claims to be an heroic victim of Buchenwald when in fact he served there as a member of the German army. He should be a monster, but in the event it is not at all unfair to call him the play's hero: he is

certainly one of the most amiable and generally liked of the people in the play, his relations with the string of prostitutes he manages could hardly be friendlier, and all the time he succeeds in wriggling out of whatever too-easy classification and judgement we might from any given piece of information be tempted to force on him. This is characteristic of Arden's treatment of all his characters and of the ideas they might be supposed to stand for: no clear separation of the people in the play into good and bad, heroic and villainous, is possible; they are all, even the most boldly conventionalized like the upright negro councillor Joseph Caligula, the fatuous M.P. Loap, and the shifty chauvinist Henry Ginger, too complex to be comfortably pigeon-holed and so dismissed from mind.

Which, of course, was very disturbing to audiences used, whenever a play dealt or appeared to deal with a 'social' subject of some sort, to a clear pattern of blacks and whites. It was not so much that the blacks and whites did not come in the expected places: controversial, thought-provoking plays which set out to turn our ideas on a certain subject upside-down were nothing new. But it was very worrying if the play seemed on the contrary to present no unmistakeable blacks and whites at all. Plays which limit themselves unequivocally to private matters, to hermetic battles of will or the ravelling and unravelling of intricate emotional entanglements, can get away with leaving their moral principles undefined, but a play which introduces pimps, corrupt politicians and even Nazi war criminals without making it clear that the author is against them is all too liable to be interpreted instead as being for them.

What Arden was in fact up to emerges more clearly in *Live Like Pigs*, the first of his plays to be given a full-scale public production. Here again the subject appears to be social, and here again there is a determined refusal to take sides on a number of questions where almost any audience would conventionally be inclined to suppose that side-taking was imperative. The centre of the play this time is a conflict between two families in adjoining semi-detacheds on a new housing

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estate. The families, one is tempted to say, represent two different, incompatible ways of life: the Jacksons are good, solid, respectable, impeccably conventional members of the lower middle class; while the Sawneys, who are moved somewhat against their will into an ordinary little house next door, are essentially nomadic vagrants, the last descendants of the Elizabethan sturdy beggars now barely existing on the fringes of a society which has no place for them.

But a difficulty immediately arises here: the two families are created primarily as individuals, each with his or her own faults and virtues, and as soon as one begins to suggest that they are in any way representative of anything other than themselves one runs up against all sorts of contradictions and complications; whatever they are they are certainly not average examples of it. In a more general sense, though, it remains true that the head-on collision between the Jacksons and the Sawneys does remain a conflict between two ways of life. It is just that the two levels upon which the play works – as a social drama embodying certain general points about society, and as a personal comedy-drama played out between two groups of highly idiosyncratic individuals – are quite separate, and neither is artificially modified to bring it into line with the other; especially does Arden refrain from limiting his characterization of individuals in any way to fit them into some general thesis.

Even when this is accepted – and audiences during the play's brief run at the Royal Court found it difficult enough to accept – the play's shocks to conventional expectation are not over. For on the level of a quasi-symbolic conflict between two ways of life we would still, normally, expect the author to take the part, in general, of one side rather than the other. The popular side to take would be that of the Sawneys, romantic figures from the past, noble savages we might say – though in the event there is precious little of nobility about them – who bring a tonic gust of fresh air into the shabby, constricted world of modern suburban conformity. On the other hand, a play written to exalt the Jacksons ('an undistinguished but not

contemptible family' as Arden calls them in his introduction to the text) and their civilized, responsible way of life in an ordered welfare state, is not at all inconceivable. But we would normally expect one thing or the other. Either, our preconceptions would lead us to suppose, the dramatist must be for order, authority, and all the rest of it and against the forces of anarchy and disorder, or he must be against established complacency and for those who rebel against it. Arden's unique contribution is his ability to avoid both these pat formulations, and to write a play which gives both sides their due, without sentimentality and without a hint of patronage. We may ourselves choose a side to sympathize with, if we really have to, but the choice remains ours; the playwright too has no doubt his own views on the matter, but the last thing he wants to do is to force them on us.

The third play in this volume, *THE HAPPY HAVEN*, followed Arden's next major play the strange semi-historical drama about the nature of violence, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*. It takes up again the tragi-comic form of *Live Like Pigs*, and like *Live Like Pigs* it deals with a 'social' subject of the sort upon which one might expect any dramatist to take a strong line; which one would expect him to choose, indeed, largely because he had a strong line to take on it. It is about life in an old folks' home, and about the experiments performed by the doctor in charge, using the inmates as involuntary guinea-pigs, to produce a scientific rejuvenator. Now presumably all audiences can be assumed to be, if only in the vaguest, most sentimental fashion, sympathetic towards the old; moreover, whatever our ideas about experiment in medicine, we would probably most of us have some reservations about experiments conducted on unwilling or unsuspecting subjects. We would also probably incline to think that such matters were not the ideal subject for broadly grotesque comedy. And yet Arden here cheerfully offers us precisely that (a 'pantomime', he originally subtitled it), and in addition leans over backwards to show us the doctor's side of things as well as that of his patients, while depicting the old people themselves as anything

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but sugar-coated sentiment-traps: they are permitted to be as good or as bad, as pleasant or unpleasant, as people of any other age-groups; they are in fact less 'old folk', a special case, than just people who happen all to be over sixty.

All this made the play seem to its first audiences at the Royal Court at best mystifying (whatever was Arden up to?), and at worst a heartless joke in the worst possible taste. (The fact that, for mainly practical reasons, the play was acted almost entirely in masks did not aid easy comprehension either.) Looked at more coolly, however, it seems one of his richest and most satisfying plays: a lot of it is very funny, and some of it is very beautiful. The tough, unsentimental characterization of the old people seems to me to give the play humanity, to make it in any sense that matters a more sympathetic picture of the old than any rose-tinted fantasy, because it gives them, what the sentimentalists generally strip them of, real dignity and independence and forbids us to insult them with our easy pity. Technically it is probably Arden's boldest play yet: the mixture of highly formal verse and extravagantly informal prose has never been more stark and uncompromising, and its success bears out Arden's contention that 'If people are speaking formal verse with lines that rhyme, the audience does not have to worry whether it sounds natural. They are talking poetry. It's with the half-and-half thing that one is in trouble.'

But above all what one takes away from the play, beyond even its bounding theatrical vitality, is the splendour of its great moments of eloquence, like Mrs Phineus's speech in the second act:

I'm an old old lady
And I don't have long to live.
I'm only strong enough to take
Not to give. No time left to give.
I want to drink. I want to eat,
I want my shoes taken off my feet.
I want to talk but not to walk
Because if I walk, I have to know
Where it is I want to go.

I want to sleep but not to dream
I want to play and win every game
To live with love but not to love
The world to move but me not to move
I want I want for ever and ever
The world to work, the world to be clever.
Leave me be, but don't leave me alone.
That's what I want. I'm a big round stone
Sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm . . .

Of that sort of writing, with that sort of hardwon strength and sinew, only John Arden has the secret in the modern English theatre; it already makes it presumptuous to call him promising, but makes one look forward to his future achievement with more certainty than one does that of any other dramatist working in English today.

JOHN RUSSELL TAYLOR

