2 Intervening in public discourse

Edgar as commentator and activist

In his role as a public intellectual, David Edgar combines a robust and unique blend of technical skills, creative talent, comprehensive understanding, passionate conviction, linguistic wit, and a capacity for sheer hard work. He grew up in a theatre family, his father an actor and stage manager at Birmingham Rep and then a television producer for the BBC. His mother was an actor and radio announcer, and his aunt Nancy Burman was a theatre administrator, running Birmingham Rep in the 1960s and 1970s. In such a family, Edgar learned early the nature and value of performance and the need to be performative – as well as some of the costs of doing so.[1]

Edgar attended Oundle public school near Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, and then read English Literature at the University of Manchester, reinforcing and developing a lifelong enjoyment of words, rhetoric, wit, and language. He was editor of the college newspaper and developed his political commitments protesting against the Vietnam war and university exam policies. His first employment was as a reporter on the Bradford *Telegraph and Argus*.[2] (Good) journalism entails reporting on, and intervening in, public events and discourse, emphasizes fact-based evidence behind positions, and retrieves significant disclosures from seemingly commonplace phenomena – all valuable skills for a lifetime of writing and activism.

Even as Edgar grew into his playwriting career, he continued to contribute to public discourse through writing for significant periodicals, newspaper opinion sections, and other forums. He has now

Fig. 1 David Edgar.

written over sixty performed and published plays with an extraordinary variety of genres, styles and subject matter. And at the same time that he has produced this body of work, he has contributed articles, columns, and reviews on a wide range of subjects to various periodicals, began and taught the UK's first course on playwriting at the University of Birmingham and paralleled that with his activities to co-found a union for playwrights, which he has lead through several successful kinds of negotiations.[3] He also continues to be a regular participant in political activities, involving everything from the anti-fascist and

anti-racist struggles of the seventies to the anti-Islamophobia challenges of the present, as well as more conventional party politics. All of these activities embody his dedication to making/changing the world through committed socio-political endeavour – identifying him as a public intellectual.[4]

We find it useful to consider Edgar's public figure under three primary manifestations: as a prolific creative writer, a respected and skilful analyst of the contemporary world, and as a powerful advocate of complex cultural and political positions. Obviously, these categories inevitably overlap, and this formulation does not assume they will ever be completely separate; but we shall see that Edgar regards the public function of plays and other creative endeavours to be distinct from those of political investigation and analysis, and both in turn – for him – are seen as different from outright advocacy.

In the last chapter, we commented on David Edgar's playwriting *oeuvre*, its main themes and dramaturgical strategies, and placed it in relation to both modernist precursors and contemporary colleagues. In this chapter, we describe the nature of his non-dramatic writings and commentary, and also outline his political activism – the better to complete the portrait of this artist and intellectual.

For Edgar, the play is a unique, supple, and rich art form, which can enhance human understanding of the intricacies of life – especially life in common – through its capacity to dramatize conflict and feeling, to allow audiences to understand complex developments through empathizing with those undergoing them, to override distances in space and time so that the essentials of a situation can be grasped and thought about. Although he acknowledges a certain level of advocacy in his very choice of subject matter, his aim is to explore complexity, to concretize the fact that there are more than two sides to most issues, to leave audiences debating without easy answers. As Edgar says, 'Theatre loves open endings because they can be completed by the audience.'[5] This view of drama informs all of his creative work – scripts for the stage, radio and TV plays, libretti, cinema screenplays, community plays and short stories. Historian and journalist Misha Glenny, speaking of Edgar's *Playing with Fire*, says that 'His blend of unresolved individual political dilemmas against a background of big issues such

as community relations and the relationship between central and local government is one of the most mature pieces of political theatre in a long while.'[6] Such fictional endeavours differ from much of his writing for journals, such as the *London Review of Books*, *Marxism Today*, *Race & Class*, and the *New Statesman*; or the opinion pages or weekly magazines of papers such as the *Guardian* or the *Independent*. Here the extremely detailed research Edgar has undertaken (frequently in preparation for writing a play) has enabled him to present lucid and insightful analyses of contemporary domestic and international problems, and to 'translate' his understanding of the politics of countries he knows well (such as the US) for the benefit of those with less background. He can serve as the obvious 'expert' to review major new studies in fields such as the massive political change in eastern/central Europe (ECE) in 1989, to explore official reports on fields such as 'arts policy', or to provide witty and incisive commentary on aspects of popular culture. Indeed, in the first half of 2010, to take an example, he published articles on civil liberties, the Labour leadership contest, the BBC, coalition politics in Europe, a comparison of novel-writing and playwriting, censorship and the arts, new playwriting, and a review of studies of patriotism and 'Britishness'.[7]

Related to these activities has been Edgar's effort to help all concerned to understand playwriting as a craft and an art form: developing and teaching (for a decade) the first British postgraduate course on playwriting at the University of Birmingham, organizing conferences on the subject which enhanced dialogue among practitioners and academic researchers, always working with casts and directors of his plays in the progressive development of final scripts. In addition, in 2007 he organized a new initiative to continue this work as a cooperative under the banner of the British Theatre Consortium. Among its projects was the 2009 commission from Arts Council England to survey the state of playwriting during the decade.[8] The report ran to 150 pages of methodological framework, collected data, and extensive analyses, and produced a number of surprising conclusions, the chief of which was that new writing was actually doing much better than anyone suspected: not only were over 70 per cent of plays produced in the last ten years new pieces, but they were increasingly being performed

in larger theatres (undercutting the presumption that new plays did not fill seats and were typically relegated to the ghetto of 'studio' theatre).[9]

Lest these endeavours seem an obvious and expected extension of a playwright's career, Edgar ruefully observes: 'Playwrights are not really expected to write about their own business (Brecht has suffered particularly on this score); certainly, they are not encouraged to stray from aesthetics into the fields of public comment and political controversy, and, if they do so, they find their pretensions mocked rather than their arguments contested.'[10]

Finally, there is Edgar the activist and controversialist. From the beginning, Edgar had been a promoter, an activist, a campaigner. In the early years, activism and playwriting were one and the same activity for him – his plays were essentially, and unashamedly, agitprop theatre. But a change occurred during the time he wrote *Destiny*:

> *Destiny* was important to me because it gave me a political life above and beyond political theatre. In the early 1970s, the two were indistinguishable . . . In the late 1970s, it was liberating to discover that politics and theatre could operate not simultaneously but in parallel; that I could treat British neo-fascism in one way in the theatre, and in quite another way in articles and speeches for the anti-racist and anti-fascist movement.[11]

Edgar sees his plays as attempts to understand comprehensively how certain phenomena occur. As one result, he has been accused of making characters too sympathetic to those whose positions he abhors (e.g., neo-fascists) – but it is critical to his playwriting that his audiences see how it is possible for someone who fought against Nazi Germany could turn to fascism only two decades later. His writing and speaking about fascism, however, show no such sympathy: there he is concerned to state his opposition in the strongest possible terms. Advocacy and playwriting each have their own place, and each should be positioned to accomplish its particular purpose. His clarity about these different realms seems ironic in the face of critics who, depending on their own politics, fault his plays both for the moral ambiguity of his

characters, on the one hand, or for being too doctrinaire or prescriptive, on the other.

All three of these lines of endeavour – playwriting, commentary, and advocacy – then, combine and complement each other in a variety of ways, as Edgar performs the public intellectual.[12] In the end, his aim is 'political' in the very broadest sense, the pursuit of the good for the community, 'amending the arrangements' of the polity: 'He writes, from the New Deal via European post-war social democracy to the desegregation of the American south, the great democratic achievements of the 20th century were brought about by an alliance between the intelligentsia and the dispossessed.'[13]

Edgar's commentary and advocacy

From the mid 1970s to the time of this study, Edgar has published more than 150 original articles, commentaries, and columns (in addition to an equal number of book reviews, many of the latter being review essays). Somewhat more than half of these are 'advocacy' pieces, about half of that group relating to theatrical/playwriting topics, the other half to a more general range of contemporary issues or subjects. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider all of these writings, so we have selected some major topics which are present – in one form or another – throughout Edgar's career, in order to investigate the way he develops these writings. The topics include: the role of arts in society; political disillusionment; racism/immigration/Islamophobia; censorship and the arts; and the critique of governing bodies and laws.

Arts policy

We begin with an illustration of the kind of commentary and political intervention Edgar can make in the area of national arts policy. In April of 2004, the then Labour Minister for Culture, Tessa Jowell, published a 'personal essay' on public policy and the arts which she said she hoped would initiate an extensive discussion on this subject.[14] Two months later, there had not yet been much public response when David Edgar published a commentary on her essay in the *Guardian*.[15] He began by suggesting that this lack of response was due to its thesis about the value of the arts, one most people already accepted. He then argued that

while that might well be the case, her position still represented a major shift in official attitudes towards the arts and arts policy, from market populism to 'traditional' values, and should be examined.

He traced the history of public positions on arts policy, beginning in the postwar era and marked by a patrician attitude to the arts, through to the (different) instrumentalist approaches of the Thatcher and New Labour governments. His conclusion from this brief survey was that Jowell's position represented a very commendable new departure for the government, and ought to be valued as such – up to a point. Edgar charged that 'Jowell edges uncomfortably close to a new social mission for the arts when she argues that culture has an additional part to play "in defining and preserving our cultural identity – of the individual, of communities, and of the nation as a whole".'[16] He interpreted her position thus, showing up its assumptions: 'Jowell defines the purpose of art in defiantly premodern terms as the exploration of the internal world we all inhabit – the world of individual birth, life and death, of love or pain, joy or misery, fear and relief, success and disappointment, revealed to us by artists who can show us things we could not see for ourselves'.[17] There was just one problem, from Edgar's point of view: what artists show us may not be what we want to see. Edgar argues that a central function of art is to be provocative, to 'make things strange', to ask the hard questions. It is when art does that that objections to it arise, and special care must be taken to protect (and support) this vital role. He sums up this rejoinder to Jowell: 'If the arts are to have the centrality to our human experience that Jowell rightly expects of them, the inevitably patrician institutions that provide them need to be challenged and held to account by the spirit of provocation rather than flattened out by the market.'[18]

A number of letters and columns were published in succeeding days debating the merits and demerits of Edgar's position and of Jowell's original arguments. Edgar's piece had succeeded in provoking extended public discussion of this issue. In later *Guardian* articles, playwright Steve Waters commented on both positions, arguing: 'The state cannot prescribe or dictate aesthetics; what they can and must do is secure zones of play and freedom from the homogenising tendencies of the market. Jowell's rallying cry for complexity needs beefing up, but

it should be fought for and urgently'. James Fenton, regular *Guardian* columnist, poet, and former correspondent for *Socialist Worker* and the *New Statesman*, meanwhile, took a more belligerent position against instrumentalism:

> It descends from Stalinism, from the old questions of the form: 'What has your string quartet done, comrade, to further the cause of revolution?' One might have expected such perverse rhetoric to die with Stalinism. Instead it morphed into a social-democratic 'instrumentalism' – the arts were to be judged as instruments of social change. The oboe concerto was expected to help young mothers escape the poverty trap.[19]

A month later, Edgar addressed the National Campaign for the Arts conference and rehearsed the debate with Jowell, gaining more exposure for the issues.[20] And later, in June 2006, Tessa Jowell and David Edgar shared the podium as speakers at the Institute for Public Policy Research, where the issues from their previous dialogue were discussed a final time in relation to the conference theme, 'Identity, Culture and the Challenge of Diversity'. Through all of these sources, a full-bodied discussion of the role of art within culture, its relationship to the nation and to its citizens unfolded as a result of Edgar's first intervention.

Political 'defectors'

Another parallel case of 'attending to arrangements' (read stirring things up) from a more recent time involves Edgar's campaign in 2008 to criticize Left sympathizers and activists who had gone over to the (far) Right. This was not a new theme for him; *Destiny* and *Maydays* dramatized how people can make this journey. Indeed, it was one of the central dramaturgical axes in both plays, and following the premiere of M*aydays*, Edgar responded to a negative review by *Guardian* columnist Peter Jenkins, who accused him of exaggerating the defection of his central character, and indeed, the importance of the far left in Britain. Edgar wrote a letter to the editor of the *Guardian* that shows some of his more rhetorical street-fighting skills as well as elaborating on this concern, pointing out that the word 'fascist' appears

only once in his play while it appears five times in Jenkins's review (a 'cheap shot' in response to what he considered Jenkins's deliberate misreading of his play). He then restates his main concern with defectors:

> What this sleight-of-hand does is to allow Mr Jenkins to attack the significance and indeed the credibility of my argument, which is that contemporary conservatism, in Britain and elsewhere, cannot be understood without understanding the role of defectors within it. The influence or significance of former left-socialists who have become fascists is of course limited (if any such people exist). The importance of left socialists who are now *conservative* [italics in the original] – from Sherman, Johnson, Valzey, Thomas, Levin in this country to Kristol, Glazer, Bell, Podhoretz in the States ... is another matter altogether.[21]

In this fashion, Edgar took advantage of an opportunity within the context of the discourse around his play to make direct political points about the contemporary situation of key figures on the Right. In newspaper parlance, he parlayed 'culture' into 'politics'.

The political intervention concerning defection was much more direct in 2008, although it again turned on a playwright. As we mentioned above in Chapter 1, David Mamet had renounced being a self-described 'brain-dead liberal' and formally moved to the Right in March 2008. In April, David Edgar published a long essay in the Saturday Review section of the *Guardian* designed to provoke a fresh debate about defectors from the Left. Entitled 'With Friends Like These ...', it did no more than mention the Mamet defection, while its wide scope took up both an historical and a present moment examination of the implications of disengagement from previously held progressive positions by several generations of former Leftists. The thesis of the article appears in its second paragraph:

> Just as past generations sought to reposition the fault-lines of 20th-century politics (notably, by bracketing communism with fascism as totalitarianism), so now, influential writers seek to redraw the political map of our own time. And, intentionally or

not, they are undermining the historic bond between progressive liberalism and the poor.[22]

Dating his own interest in the topic of defection to the time of *Destiny*, when the Labour government was falling apart and a number of former socialists and communists 'contributed to proto-Thatcher tirades', Edgar mentions Kingsley Amis, Max Beloff, Reg Prentice, Paul Johnson, and Alun Chalfont. He locates a new moment of mass defection in the 2008 present, noting Nick Cohen, Andrew Anthony, Ed Husain, and Melanie Phillips as 'self-confessed deserters'. All had recently published books that had attracted significant attention, and as three of the four were also regular newspaper columnists, Edgar was clearly picking a fight.

The essay he puts forward contains a history of Left defectors responding to what he calls 'Kronstadt moments' (from the 1921 Bolshevik suppression of a sailors' uprising at Kronstadt, the port of St Petersburg). These are times when extreme events provoke communists and radical socialists to renounce their former commitments, such as the Stalinist purges in the thirties, the 1939 Nazi–Soviet pact, the full exposure of Stalin by Khrushchev and the invasion of Hungary in 1956. For Edgar, 9/11 and 7/7 have become present-time 'Kronstadt moments'.

Edgar explored explicitly and at some length the reasons why many activists leave Leftist organizations: 'their authoritarianism and manipulation, their contempt for allies as "useful idiots", their insistence that the end justifies the means and that deceit is a class duty ... and most of all, their dismissal as "bourgeois" of the very ideals that draw people to the left in the first place'.[23] However, he also accused those who have turned to the Right of turning against the people they originally felt moved to defend – usually the poor. The reason for this dis-alliance with the oppressed is, according to Edgar, a kind of anger that these victims do not turn out to be heroic or ideal enough to sustain the wish to defend them. Here, the biting rhetoric of the activist rather than the commentator takes aim: 'The discovery that the poor do not necessarily respond to their victimhood with uncomplaining resignation is as traumatic as the complementary perception that

they don't always behave in a spirit of selfless heroism'. This sarcastic derision is then followed up with an account of famous defectors in the UK and the US, detailing the rancour of their revised positions. Irving Kristol's *On the Democratic Idea in America*, according to Edgar, 'blamed the free market for encouraging unreasonable appetites in the working class'; Norman Podhoretz, who once wrote approvingly about the beat generation, now finds 'homosexuality was a death wish and feminism a plague'; Kingsley Amis turned from communist to supporter of Thatcher, opposing the expansion of higher education because 'more will mean worse'.[24]

The real point of the essay, however, was to engage the recent defectors over the Islamophobia apparent in most of their defections. As Edgar perceives it, Muslim Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain were being persecuted and discriminated against, 'particularly during Cohen, Aaronovitch and Anthony's formative years'. Quoting their anti-Muslim statements and attacks on multiculturalism, he charges: 'the culture of betrayal has blinded contemporary defectors to the significant achievements of the alliance between British Muslims and the left'.[25] In so doing, they end up splitting the alliance between intellectuals and the group that is under sustained political attack, the comparatively poor and racial 'outsiders' in a *faux* imperial Britain. Edgar's grievance is that the persuasive power of those who have 'the authority of the convert' influence people away from 'the vocabulary of alliance that has done so much good in the past and is so necessary now'.[26]

Edgar certainly met with quick response and forensic engagement. Andrew Anthony responded on the same day (he must have seen Edgar's column in advance?) with a broadside that engaged the rhetoric as much as the substance; his opening matched every bit of Edgar's derision: 'Do we get the idea that describing the Soviet model, with its vast network of gulags and millions of state murders and total party control as "totalitarian" was a historical error? Certainly that's the suggestion left hanging like a two-pig-owning kulak.'[27]

By 25 April 2008, when Edgar posted his own response to Commentisfree, Oliver Kramm and Denis MacShane had also fiercely attacked the piece. He spends the first few paragraphs directly refuting

the claims of his detractors ('I do not think and did not say that totalitarianism was an incorrect description of the Soviet Union [Anthony], but that communism and fascism aren't the same thing').[28]

The most interesting collateral effect from this exchange was the appearance of hundreds of blog comments – it really did provoke a debate over substantial social issues. A lot of the blog comments might appear stupid or pointless, but the majority of them weigh in (on one side or another) in an attempt to parse out the most important elements in the debate.[29] Indeed, we think the democratic struggle that makes democracy real can be seen in the 'long anger' of this debate, as an illustration of what political theorist Chantal Mouffe has repeatedly insisted is a key feature of any democratic political community – 'agonistic pluralism' – the friction and clash that 'clearly differentiated positions and the possibility of choosing between real alternatives' constitutes democracy at its most embodied and real.[30]

We find Mouffe's formulation compatible with Edgar's conception of a suitable performance of public intellectuals: they ought to be prepared to survey the social, economic, political, cultural, and intellectual environment, and contribute to our better understanding of it – partly by providing informed background, context, and perspective; partly by advancing controversial evaluations or critiques; partly by pointing out unconscious assumptions or stereotypes. These kinds of contributions are essential to the general discourse that shapes public opinion.

Most writers experience social pressure to perform such a role, but many shun away from it because it does not reflect their self-understanding of themselves as writers. Edgar, on the other hand, sees the role of public commentator as central to his own vocation as a writer, at least partly because he began his writing career in journalism. It is possible, of course, to make too much of Edgar's early training as a journalist, but it should certainly not be overlooked. While not a narrow empiricist, he does show – in his plays, his commentaries, and his argumentative work – a constant concern for the facts of a case. A journalistic training in interview techniques and information gathering which emphasized the need for hard evidence for conclusions is certainly essential for someone who wished to affect the public

conversation about important issues in a persuasive way. Sometimes Edgar's journalistic practice shades his activist agenda. His rhetorical skills mean he can make a clever comment or puncture an opponent's argument in ways that feature verbal dexterity and wit at the expense of the close argument he pursues on other occasions. (These balance out for us, if regarded from a full cognizance of his multiple 'performances'.)

Edgar and the academy

One result of Edgar's endeavours to produce well-grounded examinations of current issues based on significant research is that his work is used extensively by theatre historians as evidence for their own research work. Studies by theatre scholars such as John Bull, Stephen Lacy, Simon Jones, and Baz Kershaw cite Edgar as part of their historical surveys.[31] Graham Saunders, in *Cool Britannia*, begins with Edgar's version of political theatre history as a succession of waves signalling renewal (if only to question it) and later he makes extensive use of Edgar's theorizing about 'faction', his term for drama which is completely fact-based but not necessarily tied to history 'exactly as it happened'.[32] Edgar's published work in *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Contemporary Theatre Review* have also put his ideas into academic discourse, as have his frequent lectures at academic conferences. His collection of essays, *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (1988) made a major contribution to cultural history with a series of essays on the pre-Thatcher era and the Thatcher years, reflecting on the theatre's development during this period but also commenting on the wider political scene. The volume's essays on fascism come from the period following *Destiny* but are not limited to a playwright's perspective; the analysis of the New Left and its contradictions is the work of a political commentator who happens to be a playwright. The original sources of these essays ranged from the *New Socialist* to the *Listener*, and from *Race & Class* and *Marxism Today* to the *Guardian* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Actually, Edgar gained credence in the academic world by partially joining it. Already by the mid seventies he was contributing to the work of undergraduates at the University of Birmingham through a

fortnightly seminar on playwriting, and by the late 1980s he had developed this into a full-blown course as part of the M.Phil. at Birmingham. Typically, he did not frame this work primarily as an attempt to invade academia, but as an extension of work he and others were already engaged in to support and assist playwrights, especially beginning ones (through the Theatre Writers' Union and subsidiary organizations):

> The most prominent self-help group was the Manchester-based Northwest Playwrights, founded in Manchester in 1982 by the local branch of the Theatre Writers' Union. There were also groups in the North East, and, later, in the West Midlands. Three of the underlying principles of the Birmingham course, then and now – that it is taught by practising playwrights, that it combines theoretical exploration with work on student texts, and that it involves live performance of students' work – were principles that defined the self-help movement.

Edgar taught the course from 1989 to 1999, when he passed it on to other playwrights, and some 115 students took it over this decade, a number going on to work as dramatists themselves – including Steve Waters, who now runs the M.Phil. at Birmingham in addition to his creative work, Sarah Wood, Lucy Gough, Amy Rosenthal, Charles Muleka, Fiona Padfield, Clare Bayley, Helen Blakeman, Ben Brown, and Edgar's partner, Stephanie Dale. Sarah Kane was also enrolled on the course, though not felicitously – as Edgar has commented: 'And, sure, I'm proud of Sarah Kane, who was not polite about the course, but who came to Birmingham determined that the only dramatic form of any worth was the monologue and left having written a three-hander called *Blasted* (the world premiere of the first half of which was her performance piece).'[33] Edgar also eventually revised and published the material he used in the course as *How Plays Work* in 2009, and it has become a university text in a number of courses. Its approach reflects the fact that Edgar believes playwriting to be partly a product of individual creativity, and partly a set of skills to be learned, individually or socially. He discusses the western canon in terms of its basic dramaturgical elements (action, character, genre, structure of scenes and

plots, and special devices). The best parts of the book are his close readings of how key scenes work in Shakespeare or Sheridan, Brenton or Churchill, showing once again his command of the entire anglophone theatrical tradition. We point out some of the ways Edgar's own plays make use of his 'devices', especially in *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (see Chapter 6).

In tandem with this course, Edgar organized and put on an annual conference on playwriting and theatre at the University of Birmingham, with topics such as 'new writing', 'regional theatre', 'theatre and nationalism', and 'the role of text in theatre'. These conferences, in both their presentations and their invited attendance, deliberately joined together practitioners of theatre – writers, actors, directors – with academics, as Edgar felt such cross-fertilization was not only vital but long overdue. He published a collection representing ten years of these discussions in *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting* (1999), beginning with an extended historiographic essay putting theatre of these years in the larger postwar context ('Provocative Acts: British Playwriting in the Post-war Era and Beyond').[34] This essay has also been much cited by theatre scholars, such as Stephen Lacy.[35]

Research offshoots

Some of Edgar's work has received a wide hearing as a result of its appearance before the public in various forms. As we pointed out in Chapter 1, the essay 'Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968–1978' had three formal publications in two journals and a book (*Second Time as Farce)*. Another example of Edgar's ideas appearing in several places for different audiences occurs with his account of the splintered harmony between street theatre, social realism, and performance art towards the end of the seventies. He put forward his ideas in a talk at the annual conference of the Political Studies Association and offered a version to the English faculty at Oxford University, published it in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1982), and finally published it in the introduction to *State of Play* (1999).[36]

As we have indicated, Edgar's plays are extremely well researched. A side effect of that research skill is that Edgar is often asked to provide book reviews in fields where reviewers are ordinarily chosen for their academic expertise. When the *Guardian*, for example, wanted a reviewer for the flood of new studies of eastern and central Europe that came out in the year following the 1989 events in that region, Edgar was the one to contribute an extensive and informed review essay on the subject.[37]

For the 2009 Arts Council report 'Writ Large', Edgar drafted the historical overview of the fate of new writing for the English stage and the evolution of institutional responses and support (or lack of it) for new plays. Most of what was known – and debated – about this subject was impressionistic or anecdotal, and the group's report set out empirically what the state of play really was.[38]

Allied to these efforts for both the general public and the more specific public of theatre-oriented people was Edgar's effort in organizing and promoting the work of playwrights. In 1975, for the first time, what had been expanding levels of subsidy for theatre work were clearly going to be cut back. Edgar was part of a group that met to consider that policy shift, and was involved in co-founding the Theatre Writers' Union as a response. He was active in this group from the start, eventually becoming its president, as it sought to negotiate what its membership saw as a much needed revision in the way playwrights were paid for their work. This union work provided Edgar with an insider's look at the nature of negotiations and the relationship among the activities of negotiation, the problems of representation of the larger membership, and the outcomes of such talks, which would later inform some of his plays; but in the short run he also learned a lot of practical skill in promoting the interests of his colleagues and himself. Eventually, the Theatre Writers' Union proved to be too small to accomplish its aims, and so he led the group into the larger Writers' Guild, where it now resides. He first became president of the Writers' Guild in 2007, and was re-elected in 2009, a term that will last until 2013.

Edgar as activist

David Edgar was 20 and at university in 1968. Like many others of his generation, he was caught up in the surge of political optimism of that

moment, and shared in the generally leftist analysis of the ills of existing society and the dreams for a comprehensively better future. For many, such ambitions made for some amalgam of the late sixties' counterculture approach to human community blended with a Marxist analysis of socio-economics. 'I was trying to find ways to write about socialism, about the working class, from my own background ... What I could offer was a reasonably analytical mind and a talent for research ... There was a very conscious, a very strong feeling: what can I do, what contribution can I make?'[39] In Britain, such endeavours on the Left took a particular turn at the beginning of the seventies because the British economy weakened seriously in those years, while the trade union movement became much more active. It seemed to many on the Left that some kind of workers' revolutionary activity might be possible after all. Since Soviet-style Communism did not seem promising (especially after the Red Army crushed the Prague Spring in 1968), these factors pushed those with revolutionary ideas towards Trotskyist thinking, since from that ideological perspective it was possible to criticize the USSR from the Left while still holding out hope of an eventual worldwide workers' revolution. Edgar's efforts to make a 'contribution' in these circumstances led him to write a large number of agitprop plays, dramas deliberately kept simple to put across Marxist ideas and motivate the working class for action. The problem with this work, he discovered, was that although agitprop was aimed at the working class, the audiences his plays were finding were distinctly middle class and already seemed mildly sympathetic to his perspective. They did not need to be won over; he was singing to the choir.[40]

As we have seen above, writing *Destiny* in the mid seventies provided an answer to the dilemma this raised. Although this play was not entirely clear of agitprop elements, its success as a fully formed drama enabled Edgar to see that he could work in the future in parallel: write plays to explore the complexities of contemporary political developments and at the same time pursue other activities – journalism, organizing, speech-making, marching, debating – that might have more of a chance of influencing the political future of the working class. *Destiny* also provided a principal focus for his early development

of these aims: the interconnections among racism, xenophobia, and fascism. In the mid seventies this was a powerful focus, as the National Front had gained considerable ground by emphasizing issues of immigration and 'law and order' during the decade.

So Edgar went to work, not only writing *Destiny* but also publishing six other articles on the National Front, anti-Semitism, racism, neo-Nazism, and immigration by the end of the decade. He helped organize demonstrations, made speeches, and pursued other forms of political activism. Such endeavours began to challenge some of his Marxist outlook. Whether in traditional or Trotskyist form, a Marxist analysis began and ended with class struggle: issues such as racism or feminism were definitely epiphenomenal, or some form of 'false consciousness', produced to hide the real importance of class. But the politics Edgar was dealing with no longer seemed to be structured along the single axis of class. The working class was slowly evaporating in advanced industrial countries by then, anyway, while phenomena such as racism and, later, feminism and environmentalism seemed to have an independent valence all their own. Marxism would remain a bedrock starting point of political analyses for Edgar, even down to the present; but it became more and more clear that the overall political problems of the day stemmed from far more complicated causes – and their solutions, if they had any, would require far more complex visions than those of Marx and Engels in 1848. As Edgar says, looking back from the present:

> Where do I position myself now? I'm a left-wing social democrat in a tradition that goes back through the twentieth century; I'm very much reminded of the Fabian tradition within British Labour and left-wing politics. I always hesitate now when people ask me, 'Are you still a Marxist?' Well, no, I'm not a Marxist in that it's not serious to say – as did the original Communist Manifesto – that 'Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains.' I'm not a Marxist because I don't believe that solution is workable. Am I a Marxist in terms of do I think that Marx is right and that he gets righter and righter and righter in terms of his analysis of capitalism, imperialism and

> globalization? In that sense I still am, but thinking that there remain severe and dramatic limitations.[41]

This kind of change in Edgar's political outlook has happened over a number of years, but it was already underway by the late seventies. In practical terms, it meant that he could focus his political activities on separable critical issues of the day (without always needing to refer them back to the class struggle) and could make alliances in action with individuals and groups that a Marxist more concerned with his ideological purity might disdain. By 1981, Edgar would even become a member of the Labour Party (which, it should be remembered, still had a serious left wing to it at that time).

At the time he wrote *Destiny*, Edgar's conception of what the appropriate tactics for political activism should be were built on the premise that a people like the British, who had recently endured an horrific war against Nazism, would not knowingly take up Nazism for itself. His conviction was that the majority of the voters did not realize the extent of the connection between the National Front and Nazism, and that if they understood the true nature of the party, they would reject it. Therefore it is not surprising that his activism during this time took the form of working with the Committee Against Racism and Fascism and the Anti-Nazi League, including serving as a speaker at over fifty of their events during the decade.[42] The Anti-Nazi League was created in 1977 in an alliance between the Socialist Workers Party and several trade union groups to bring together left and liberal activists to fight the rise of right-wing groups. Along with marches and organizing, Edgar devoted a good deal of energy to writings with titles such as 'The National Front *Is* a Nazi Front'[43] and 'Achtung!',[44] aimed at informing the public about the real aims and structure of the National Front; or writing for a US periodical that primarily addressed itself to a Jewish audience (*Present Tense*), in which he emphasized both the hidden anti-Semitic agenda of the National Front and the fact that as its aims and activities were becoming better known in Britain, opposition to it had been growing.[45]

He could also see the merit in activities such as the Anti-Nazi League's 'Evening of Music and Comedy Against Racism', a blend of

cultural event and politics that a more traditional Marxist might find illegitimate or compromised. The Anti-Fascist League sponsored a huge carnival/rock concert in 1978 with the intention of targeting young people with their message. Edgar spoke about these activities some years later (1982) to the National Anti-Klan Network Conference in Atlanta, Georgia:

> I am convinced that the Anti-Fascist League and its carnival achieved three major successes. One was to convince the country that the National Front was really a fascist organization. Second, to pare down the National Front vote to the absolute hard core of its racist supporters in the general election. And third, it prevented, if only for a while, the Nazis from making significant inroads into working-class white youth.[46]

His writings during this period were polemical – written with rhetorical skill to accuse, underline, and create an impression, not necessarily to argue carefully and systematically – this is the activism part of the writing. For example, in October of 1978, in the run up to the general election, Edgar wrote an opinion piece for *The Sunday Times* which argued that the BBC should cancel coverage of the National Front campaign and not give it neutral, uncritical attention. For someone like Edgar, for whom freedom of speech was/is a primary value, this was a strong statement. He details the programme of the National Front and compares its racial policies to the Nazis, stressing that the NF believed in an international Jewish conspiracy and that 'the Black, Asian and Jewish "races" represent a *threat* to the existence of the British nation' (italics in the original). The argument against allowing the NF election coverage hinges on their ideology based on biology, and Edgar insists that 'broadcasting companies cannot and should not be neutral about racialism (of this form or any other)' and quotes the BBC's testimony to the Annan Committee that a racially intolerant person does not have the right to the same treatment as a person who condemns racial intolerance.[47] In all of his writing on this issue, Edgar stressed that the National Front was a Nazi party with no redeeming virtues (see Fig. 2). He reviewed a number of books on the National Front between 1977 and 1982 that were, in his opinion, insufficiently

Fig. 2 The cover of *Race & Class*, pamphlet 4 (1977).

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critical or accurate in their portrayal of the party. Besides the specifics of his criticism of authors Martin Walker, Paul Wilkinson, Stan Taylor, and Nigel Fielding,[48] Edgar always inserted his own analysis of the specifics of the National Front history and ideology to make the pieces arguments in their own right against the party. All of these ways of combating the threat of fascism in Britain added up to a strong activist contribution to the anti-racism struggle.

Looking back on these activities of the seventies from twenty years later, Edgar argued:

> I wrote a play, called *Destiny*, which is about the rise of the National Front in the late 1970s. It contributed as a minor part of an overall campaign to persuade the public that the National Front was not just an anti-immigration pressure group, it was a Nazi organization. That campaign, along with a number of other factors such as the election of Margaret Thatcher and our electoral system, created a much more arid climate for the extreme right – one of the reasons why it has done so badly here compared to some other European countries.[49]

At other points in later years, Edgar emphasized the fact that the anti-National Front campaigners in the seventies did not see how powerful the appeal of Margaret Thatcher's own anti-immigration positions would be – had they understood that at the time, they might have been somewhat less concerned about the threat posed by the front, since the Tories appeared to gain a lot of electoral support from precisely the groups that might have been susceptible to the front's appeal.

By the early eighties, Edgar's activism, combined with the direction of domestic politics in that decade (Thatcher in the UK, Reagan in the US), led him increasingly towards the support of those movements – multiculturalism, feminism, environmentalism – he and others on the Left judged progressive, without regard to their immediate connection to industrial struggle (although he supported the miners' strike, and wrote *That Summer* in 1987).[50] In 1985 he felt obliged to provide a qualified defence of the Live Aid Concert,[51] and to articulate the better outcomes of the sixties against backlash from both the Right and the Old Left in 'It wasn't so naff in the 60s after all'.[52] In these defensive

pieces, he had begun to pinpoint the attacks on progressive movements from those who had once led and supported such movements, but who had now moved to the centre or all the way to the right in their politics. On the creative side, such an interest in the politics of defection – combined with his personal experience of revising his own views on the incipient revolution – led directly to *Maydays* in the early eighties.

In more recent times, his strong conviction that intellectuals must intervene and criticize the post-9/11 patriotism which has conceptually re-divided the world into a binary 'us and them' around 'the clash of civilizations' between the West and Islam has found Edgar engaged both intellectually, as in his 2008 defectors essay and other pieces of journalism, and creatively in his plays about multiculturalism and Britishness in the late noughties: *Playing with Fire*, *Testing the Echo*, and his contribution, 'Black Tulips', to the plays about Afghanistan at the Tricycle under the umbrella title *The Great Game*. However, some aspects of the campaign against Islamophobia have put severe pressure on other areas of Edgar's committed practice, as is nowhere more evident than the '*Behzti* affair' in his own Birmingham 'back garden'.

In his accounts of the postwar history of the British theatre, Edgar has always identified abolition of official stage censorship in 1968 (after 250 years of such control) as a crucial element in the flowering of drama in the last half-century. Recurrently, over the years following, he has found himself writing and joining with others in protests to defend freedom of expression in the theatre and outside, as new challenges have appeared. Indeed, among his signature positions is the championship of freedom of speech. So, in 2004, when the Birmingham Rep cancelled the run of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* after only ten performances due to mob violence,[53] he had – he thought – pretty well mapped out his position on this issue: a Voltaire-style defence of absolutely free expression. However, in the major essay he wrote for *Race & Class* to reconsider the overall issue,[54] he confessed he 'found [him]self unexpectedly, uncomfortably and unusually tempted by the fence [i.e., a position in the middle]'.

The *Behzti* events became a flashpoint for debate concerning not only censorship, but also the criteria for good governance in a

multicultural society. The play had been in rehearsal at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (BRT), and the theatre had recognized that the material would be controversial for the substantial Sikh community that lives in the city. The play depicted rape and murder within a Sikh temple (Gurdwara), and criticized the hypocrisy of Sikh elders and the complicity of some women in their own oppression. It also portrayed a young woman fighting against her own abuse at the hands of her family and friends, and also against the institutional repression of the Gurdwara while maintaining her Sikh faith. In the run up to the premiere, the theatre consulted with members of the Sikh community, and made a number of modifications in the staging and script, supporting, however, the playwright in her judgments about what could be changed and what was essential for the play, as she saw it.[55] Nevertheless, when the play opened there was significant dissent expressed through protests outside the theatre. Over the next ten days these grew, and on 18 December 2004 there was a riot which injured five policemen and damaged the theatre and backstage area considerably.[56] The theatre took the decision to cancel the rest of the play's run on the grounds they could not guarantee the health and safety of patrons, and the playwright received a number of death threats. This situation was immediately seized upon by the press and media, and the debate over 'censorship' went on across most organs of the British public sphere. The difficulty, of course, was that the issues were not clear-cut, and the principles invoked were seemingly contradictory. As Helen Freshwater characterized it, 'The heat generated over the closure of *Behzti* surely indicates that we have to face up to the tension between the liberal ideals of freedom of expression and respect for cultural difference ... Evidently, finding a balance between competing commitments to freedom of expression and respect for cultural difference is difficult to achieve'.[57]

For David Edgar, years of living in a south Asian neighbourhood, deep political involvement in city and community politics, and long-time connections to BRT meant that he was an insider to these issues in a very direct way. When he confessed a divided mind about this issue, he went on to locate his 'unease', primarily in the hypocritical way in which a number of sources were using the argument for free speech basically to put down minority communities (in this case, Sikhs) and argue for the superiority of European culture, religion, and politics. While Edgar rejects absolutely the

belief that to represent is to enact, which he argues is the ground of many contemporary arguments to censor or limit speech, he also realized that the events at BRT were not simple by any means, and that theatres and theatre artists needed to address 'knottier questions about how theatres who want to represent the communities around them should respond when parts of those communities don't like what they hear'. In his essay 'Shouting Fire: Art, Religion and the Right to be Offended', Edgar parsed the relative values at stake within French democratic ideals: 'So, lest we forget: while *liberté* is a necessary condition of social wellbeing and justice, it is not a sufficient condition. Indeed, in the absence of *egalité* and *fraternité*, there are circumstances in which *liberté* can be a tool of rejection and exploitation. While individual free speech is an absolute (though, in its current form, a very recent gain), it does not stand alone.'[58] Collective action is necessary, Edgar said, first of all to protect freedom, but secondly to determine a community's true position on an issue. In the end, it may be right to be offended, but being offended sometimes may be the price of living in society. He challenged the 'smug, self-satisfied and patronizing' attitudes of German and British journalists in response to the Danish cartoon affair, and recognized, especially, a tendency that he had criticized repeatedly in those he considers 'defectors':

> When we read progressive and liberal thinkers condemning young Muslims and Sikhs for attacking free speech, don't we hear echoes of previous generations of progressives who felt betrayed by the people they were standing up for and used that feeling of betrayal as an excuse for abandoning them? In particular, aren't we reminded of the first generation of American neo-conservatives, who used what they saw as the excesses of the late 1960s – particularly the criminalisation of the Black Panthers – as an excuse for abandoning the civil rights struggle?[59]

This line of argument, however, is not the main message of the essay. It is a qualm which Edgar acknowledges and struggles with, but in the end he reasserts the overwhelming need for the principle of freedom of speech to trump these concerns. The early part of the essay lists a number of cases of unofficial censorship or suppression that came about because people confused portrayal (representation) with

enactment and/or approval. His examples range from the Christian campaign against *Jerry Springer: the Opera* to the firing of *Daily Mail* reporter Jane Kelly for painting a picture of Myra Hindley as well as a number of other recent and more historical examples.

Edgar is here building an argument that the disappearance of *official* censorship is being supplanted by numerous forms of *unofficial* censorship – including self-censorship – or that limits to expression are now coming from other, perhaps well-intentioned quarters (e.g., banning hate speech). Some of these unofficial forms are particularly threatening to theatre, because, among other things, well-made plays represent evil skilfully on stage: 'Without the comforting authority of the [novelist's] voice, playwrights find themselves in even more difficult territory . . . not only is it hard to draw the line between presenting, defending, and promoting a character (or a relationship) but often that ambiguity is at the very heart of the dramatic project.'[60] That 'life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing', may or may not have been Shakespeare's own view. We only encounter it as the speech of one of his characters and have to understand it with all the particularities of its location in the play, and, indeed, in the world.

In the end, although perhaps far from Voltaire, Edgar finds he must still opt to defend as broad a freedom of expression as possible, because it is essential to story-telling, especially dramatized stories. Humans, he claims, need such freedom for at least four major reasons: (1) to imagine other worlds and other times than our own; (2) to be able to plan future lives by being able to see what the consequences of different courses of action might be; (3) to be able to empathize, even with those called evil or monstrous – being good is not possible without knowing what evil is possible; (4) to be able to imagine what the world looks like through another's eyes – to escape in limited ways from the imprisonment of our own subjectivities. In this way, freedom of expression and story-telling are vital to our lives together as humans, because they develop the skills necessary for interaction in society, especially the ability to see things from another's point of view. Freedom of expression is even more important for the listener than the speaker, and therefore for the entire society.[61]

We have certainly not attempted to survey all of Edgar's performances as a public intellectual here, but rather to give some useful sense of the range, calibre, and purpose of his endeavours in this regard. Like many of the Left, he seems committed to the idea that much that is harmful in human public life is the result of ignorance (partial or full), and so the primary thing needed for improvement is solid knowledge and deep understanding, both leading to the possibility of genuine empathy and solidarity. The extent and the nature of his activities as a commentator and as an advocate strongly embrace this orientation, reflecting an optimism about socio-political improvement perhaps not fully supported by much recent history. His preoccupation with disillusionment comes from just such impossible-to-resolve dilemmas and conflicting values. If the anti-Nazi struggle of the 1970s was unambiguous and unassailable in its goals and aims, the complexities of the politics of difference as they have unfolded during the past three decades have made simple positions impossible, but principled interventions no less important.

Following 9/11 and 7/7, the upsurge of anger and discrimination against Muslims has turned Edgar once again towards activism, and although the debates are complex and fraught, he has spoken and written a good deal in an attempt to persuade left and liberal members of the public to maintain what he considers their historic alliance with the poor and oppressed. His criticism of defectors in 2008 – that they were giving up on the poor through their Muslim-bashing disregard for the most oppressed members of their society – is the core of Edgar's attack on Islamophobia. It involves him in some matters such as the *Behzti* affair that strain against clear partisanship, and push against his ability to champion both freedom and equality in the same breath. In this case, he does not satisfactorily resolve the contradictions, and we cannot agree with the weight he affords the principle of free speech, believing that the relative values of any particular speech act are held in tension with the values of context and moment. We do share Helen Freshwater's conclusion that 'The debate over *Behzti* indicates that the application of the abstract principle of freedom of expression is fraught with provisionality and conditioned by context'.[62] Nonetheless, it is

overwhelmingly clear that David Edgar has made – and continues to make – an extensive and intensive impact on public understanding and public dialogue on an impressively wide range of matters over the last four decades. The persistence with which he argues his case(s) and challenges the blind spots of dominant hegemony establish him as a formidable presence in British public life. The study of his plays, to which we now turn in detail, needs to be viewed continuously together with his other contributions to popular discourse, if a full portrait of the artist is to emerge.