

Simon Trussler

Remembering Arnold Wesker: Loose Connections from Left Field

Arnold Wesker, who died in April 2016, denied having been an ‘angry young man’ and, though the cliché clung, he declared, ‘But I am an angry *old* man.’ In this memoir, Simon Trussler, while reflecting on causes for the anger, does not attempt an analysis of the life and works, but recollects the times when their shared interests and intentions brought them into contact, and explores some of the reasons why the youthful climb to a peak of success was followed by a slow decline not in output or activity but in the critical response to a writer perceived as having gone out of fashion. *NTQ*’s former co-editor, the late Clive Barker, was closely involved with Wesker in the early Centre Forty-Two project and its aim to open wider access to the arts, while Trussler helped to initiate Wesker’s later involvement in the International Theatre Institute. Other ‘loose connections’ with Wesker’s life and career here flesh out the facts and received opinions of the formal obituaries. Simon Trussler was one of the founding editors of the old *Theatre Quarterly*, as later of *New Theatre Quarterly*. He conducted two major interviews with Wesker in the original *TQ*, both later reprinted in book form, and with Glenda Leeming co-authored the first full-length study of Wesker’s plays (Gollancz, 1981). Among many other publications, he is author of the award-winning *Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre* (1994).

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A FEW MONTHS AGO, for reasons quite unconnected with the theatre, I was reading the *Journals* of the novelist John Fowles, who in August 1973 was among those present at a birthday party for their editor at Cape, Tom Maschler. Another guest was Arnold Wesker, who, says Fowles (not best known for kindly judgements), was ‘several lengths ahead of the rest of us in warmth and humanity’.

Yet this was the man who many regarded as a *kvetch*, forever grumbling at his ill treatment by a theatre which, as early as *The Friends* in 1970, had become unreceptive to his work. It was the critical dismissal of that play to which he responded in ‘Casual Condemnations’, his first article for the old *Theatre Quarterly* (April 1971). Arnold suffered fools perhaps not gladly but with wry resignation: intelligent people acting like fools felt the force of an anger often politely dissembled as puzzled dissent.

The day after Arnold’s death on 12 April this year, Jeremy Corbyn paid tribute to him at Prime Minister’s Question Time: ‘I am sure the whole House will join me in mourning

the death of the dramatist Arnold Wesker, one of those wonderful angry young men of the 1950s who, like so many angry young men, changed the face of our country.’

Quentin Letts, of all unlikely people – in the *Daily Mail*, of all unlikely places – takes up the story:

Over to Mr Cameron. Gulp. The PM pretty plainly had no clue who Sir Arnold was.

‘First,’ he said – a tiny pause as he waited for divine inspiration – ‘let me join the Rt Hon Gentleman in mourning the loss of . . .’

There was another scintilla of hesitation. Then he completed the sentence: ‘the famous playwright, with all the work that he did.’

Oh dear. ‘The famous playwright.’ Translation: ‘Whatshisname.’

It is understandable that an Old Etonian and erstwhile member of the Bullingdon Club should not have heard of Arnold Wesker – but it is very likely that he would have been an influential figure in Jeremy Corbyn’s radical youth, as he was in mine. We were both too young to have been in the Royal Court audiences for the original productions of *The Kitchen* and the Wesker Trilogy, so it

was between the vaguely vorticist covers of the early 'Penguin Plays' series that I first came across his work. And even as a sixth-former I sensed that it was here that the real anger of the 'angry young men' came through – much more than in the calculated rhetoric of Jimmy Porter in *Look Back*, which seemed like entitled middle-class angst when compared with the voyage to self-discovery of Beatie Bryant in *Roots*.

The obituaries have been written, and all provide a factual account of Arnold Wesker's life, plus a few hand-me-down opinions – that his later work never matched the quality of his early plays, that he tended to quarrel with theatre managements and with actors, that in later life he had greater success abroad than at home. So I don't want to flesh out the facts or the fallacies, just to recall a few of the ways in which his life intersected with the margins of the theatre world I trod.

But inevitably (well, inevitably for me) political connections came first. As a student in London in the early sixties I would often attend the meetings of the New Left Club (every Monday as I recall) in the basement of the Partisan coffee bar in Carlisle Street, and this was where I first saw Arnold in person, debating earnestly with such luminaries as Stuart Hall and Ralph Miliband.

This was also the time when Arnold became a member of the Committee of One Hundred, formed by Bertrand Russell to use passive resistance to bring attention to the threat of nuclear war. 'Direct action' at first only amounted to sitting down in Whitehall, and the first sit-in was allowed to pass without incident; but at a second protest in April 1961 over eight hundred demonstrators were arrested. I am ashamed to say that I got up from the tarmac when told, but Arnold stayed put and refused to be bound over to keep the peace. He was sentenced to a month in jail for 'incitement to disorder'.

Among those who joined him, at first in Brixton then at Drake Hall open prison, was his fellow playwright Robert Bolt, who, being told by Sam Spiegel that hundreds of technicians were out of work because of the delay in filming *Lawrence of Arabia*, secured his

release by signing a piece of paper that committed him to keeping the peace. Arnold did not sign, but, escaping briefly from his then preoccupation with establishing Centre Forty-Two, caught up with his reading. His wife Dusty – the original of Beatie Bryant – commented: 'The rest will do him good.'

NTQ's former co-editor, the late Clive Barker, was heavily involved with Arnold in the Centre Forty-Two project, but I had not then met either of them personally. When we did meet it was in the top-floor, sloping-ceilinged study of Arnold's long-time home, 27 Bishop's Road, Highgate, for an interview later published in *Theatre at Work* (Methuen, 1967). Arnold sat at a huge oak desk, which I learned he had bought from Mervyn Jones, my predecessor as theatre critic of *Tribune* (and son of Freud's biographer Ernest Jones). And I remember trying to control a not-very-portable tape recorder while juggling the plate of nibbles provided by the ever hospitable Dusty.

Arnold began with a hesitant but characteristic admission:

I don't suppose I've ever really got over the shock of being taken seriously as a playwright. And this, incidentally, is what I suspect is somewhere behind Osborne's play *Inadmissible Evidence* – although it's about a solicitor, it's really about his own fear that one day he's going to be found out, that he couldn't possibly be as talented as his success appears to suggest. And I think this is a fear that I have, that one day I'm going to be found out, it's all going to come tumbling around me.

Confronting that fear perhaps lay behind Arnold's adamant defence of his later work.

Soon afterwards, in a boyhood fantasy come true, I felt proud and a bit humble when Giles Gordon, then drama editor at Penguin, asked me to write the introduction to the fourteenth in the Penguin series of *New English Dramatists* – for it was in the first of those cherished paperbacks that I had read *Chicken Soup with Barley* back in my schooldays. When Giles moved on to Gollancz he hoped to start a drama list, and commissioned me to write studies of four of the then best known of those 'new English dramatists': Osborne, Pinter, Whiting – and Arnold Wesker.

The Plays of Arnold Wesker: an Assessment, co-authored with Glenda Leeming, eventually appeared in 1971, following my 'assessment' of John Osborne, who had refused any involvement in its preparation, and took the opportunity of its publication to lambast in *The Times* not only my book but the whole practice of theatre criticism. Maybe Arnold was right about Osborne sharing the 'fear that one day he's going to be found out'. But he, in contrast, had always been helpful, as also when Glenda amplified the study in her *Wesker the Playwright* (Methuen, 1982).

During the seventies Arnold contributed a number of pieces to the ten volumes of the old *Theatre Quarterly*, including 'A Journal of *The Journalists*' (TQ 26, Summer 1977) and a new interview, 'A Sense of What Should Follow' (TQ 28, Winter 1977–78), which was later reprinted in my *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies* (Methuen, 1981). When I read that interview again, for the first time in thirty years, I remembered that it had taken place in Glenda's and my home in rural Kent, with then TQ co-editor Cathy Itzin participating; and I was pleased that we engaged so fully with Arnold's later plays – not his last plays, for he had a long writing lifetime still ahead, but those that had marked the decline meanwhile in his critical reputation.

Garry O'Connor had written a fascinating rehearsal log for us of *The Friends* (TQ 2, April 1971), which Arnold directed himself at the Roundhouse, and which had been overshadowed by the presence of the now forgotten Victor Henry, an actor whose alcoholism could variously spark brilliance and paranoia. In *The Friends* he became impossible to work with. As Roy Marsden remembers: 'Henry challenged Arnold in rehearsals one day with a gun and said that he was going to shoot Arnold's children.'

The Old Ones, *The Journalists*, and *The Wedding Feast* followed – also *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, which TQ published in a series called, accurately if unimaginatively, 'New Plays', along with the work of Caryl Churchill, Howard Brenton, and others. It's a play for which I have special affection, having typeset every word on an IBM Selectronic.

And then came *The Merchant*. The concept of rewriting Shakespeare's version with Shylock and Antonio best friends, but caught in the grip of contract law, worked well, and Eddie Kulukundis, the Greek shipping magnate who became a theatrical impresario and philanthropist, in 1977 backed the idea of a Broadway opening. But that autumn Zero Mostel, cast as Shylock, died in Philadelphia during try-outs and, lacking a star name, once in town the production quickly expired. (Later, incidentally, Eddie helped to rescue the little typesetting outfit we had established to produce TQ 'in house', when the first round of Thatcher's Arts Council cuts had killed the magazine itself.)

It was with Clive Barker, who had joined TQ as Associate Editor in 1978, that I went to the English premiere of *The Merchant* at Birmingham Rep. It was a good production (by Peter Farago, with Frank Middlemass, Timothy Spall, and Roger Allam), but also a reminder of what might have been. If Joan Plowright's Beatie Bryant had been iconic of Arnold's early success, so the death of Zero Mostel became emblematic of its decline.

Another of the hubristic projects of the old *Theatre Quarterly* was the creation of a new British Centre of the International Theatre Institute. When the first chairman, Martin Esslin, retired, we persuaded Arnold to take over. He was Chairman of the British Centre between 1978 and 1982, and President of the International Playwrights' Committee of the parent ITI from 1979 to 1983. His association with the ITI survived the death of the old TQ, and he later became the only British playwright to be distinguished as a 'World Theatre Ambassador'.

The opportunities this gave him for travel were perhaps some slight recompense for the dimming of recognition in his own country. The knighthood he accepted in 2006 may also have helped to remind him that he still had friends at home, as did the revivals by Stephen Daldry of *The Kitchen* at the Royal Court in 1994 and by the National Theatre of *Chips with Everything* in 1997. Later, in 2011, the National Theatre produced *The Kitchen* and the Royal Court *Chicken Soup with Barley*;

then two year later *Roots* was revived at the Donmar Warehouse. Yet mixed with appreciation of this return to the live stage in his own country – he never lacked productions and audiences abroad – was the frustration of a man who felt still trapped in amber by those very plays.

When Cambridge University Press brought *TQ* back to (new) life in 1985, Arnold wrote for an early issue on 'The Nature of Dramatic Dialogue' (*NTQ* 8, 1986), but by then our connection with the ITI had been lost, and I had little contact with him in his later years.

In 1994 Century published an often moving autobiography, *As Much as I Dare* (1995), but this took his life only down to 1959, and was for me spoiled by an opening diatribe against all the directors and theatres who had let him down – a throat-clearance he clearly needed to get off his chest, but that seemed out of a place in a memoir which ended at his peak of success. Maybe it is significant that a second volume never appeared. The personal archive on which he drew heavily for the first volume had gone to Texas – no doubt owing to the same economic pressures that had led to the sale of the Highgate house and the Weskers' move to Crouch End.

While directing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in Oslo, Arnold had begun an affair with a Norwegian woman. Though, as he puts it, he 'didn't fall out of love with Dusty, our thirty-five-year-old marriage went reeling'. It also caused a break with his eldest son Lindsay Joe, who for years refused to speak to Arnold or allow him access to his grandson. Dusty at first continued in Crouch End, before moving to a seaside flat in Hove, while Arnold retreated to what had been their holiday home, an isolated cottage at the edge of the Brecon Beacons in Wales. Here he led a hermit-like existence – not spurning company, but evidently able to live quite happily without it.

When he became ill with Parkinson's, Arnold went back to live with Dusty, who cared for him at her seaside home. They were

separated, but had never divorced. He and Lindsay Joe were reconciled, and at Arnold's seventieth birthday party his illegitimate daughter met the family. But in 2012 his eldest daughter Tanya was found dead at her work desk with a pulmonary embolism. In *The Friends* there is a good deal that anticipates the mix of tragi-comedy and romance in Arnold's own complex life.

In 2006, on *Desert Island Discs* (available from the BBC archive of the programme) Arnold chose pens and paper as his one permitted luxury – more a necessity, I'd have thought. And on that programme he reflected on his 'almost clinical' problem with forgetfulness. Some might have assumed this was a sign of his age, but it had been among the opening points he made in the *Theatre at Work* interview long before:

I know that I forget . . . In fact, one forgets all the books that one reads, and I have got a terrible memory, anyway. So that sometimes I express an opinion and forget the justification for it, and the reason why it's part of me: but it didn't form entirely out of the air, it formed because of so many things that have happened, and books that I have read. But I forget. So in trying to answer questions there's a danger that I'll just reach out for the simple things. And then there is the tendency to romanticize things. I have never quite got over a sense of surprise that the world makes any sense, or that I make any sense.

At that birthday party of Tom Maschler's, John Fowles records Arnold as saying: 'I start with a hundred-per-cent regard for anyone I meet. That puts me in a situation where I can only lose.' As a cause of misplaced faith he was probably right. But in reflecting an open and ever-generous attitude to his fellow creatures it could scarcely be bettered.

Later still, in *As Much as I Dare*, he reflected, 'How confusing, dream-like, sometimes nightmarish, sometimes shaming, sometimes gorgeous [is] the landscape of our past life.' Whether or not that was Arnold's perception of his own past, it is certainly evocative of the palette of human experience and emotion from which he drew for his plays.