

Edward Bond's Play for Children: Education for Sustainable Development and the Need for Theatre in Education

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Abstract: Education for sustainable development is a process that gives much importance to create a better, safer and a just world. It emphasizes the need for a new vision of education system. Learning for sustainable development, critical thinking, and problem solving should be the main concepts of this process and also the main principles of Theatre in Education movement. Edward Bond, one of the most innovative voices of modern British drama and a leading dramatist who writes for Theatre in Education movement, believes that theatre has a social, political and moral purpose. For this reason he writes plays for educational contexts. His greatest aim to write plays for young people is to enable children to understand themselves, the political society around them and to create a just society. His play *The Children* (2001) shows a bleak vision of future for children in an unjust society. This paper examines young people's isolation in a technologised society and shows Bond's concepts of Theatre in Education movement for a sustainable development.

The importance of drama is that it may directly confront radical innocence and the need for humanness...Real events (in war, sickness, triumph) may also confront the relationship between imagination and reason, but reality tends to be subordinated to ideology...Drama is...created to circumvent this.¹

The work of Edward Bond is a crystallization of the major concerns of British theatre during the past forty five years. From his plays in the sixties, to his most recent works, dialectics of violence, politics, revolution, justice, imagination, and children have been continually present on his stage. His early plays echo the ideas of the post-war British left, and his most recent plays, especially after the collapse of socialism, address the fate of children and the world of education.

During the past four decades Bond has developed his own form of theatre which he has termed the 'Rational Theatre'. In his essay 'The Rational Theatre' Bond argues the function of literature and art in society. For him art must include these two features below:

Firstly, rational objectivity, the expression of the need for interpretation, meaning, order...That is for a justice that isn't fulfilled in the existing social order. Doing this it tends to humanize society, make society truly self-conscious instead of self-identified. This is a truly moral function. But, secondly, it also includes a misinterpretation of experience, and this misinterpretation has a historical class origin. It distorts the first function, because it is dictated by the needs of the ruling class and its problems in running the structure it imposes on society.²

In a Bondian sense, art must deal with the conflict between ideal justice and a wrong interpretation of this justice by ruling class. Bond maintains that it is artist's duty to illustrate the need for justice in the world and artist cannot be inactive about this conflict.

Regarding art as a political instrument which must develop a human consciousness, Edward Bond believes that art has also a vital moral function. The playwright claims that:

¹ Edward Bond, *The Hidden Plot: notes on theatre and the state*, Methuen, London, 2000, p. 181.

² Edward Bond, *Plays: Two*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1978, p. xiii.

Art is...not only evidence of the moral autonomy of individuals but also the fact that they can achieve moral sovereignty only under a good government or in struggling to create such a government.

Art, it hardly needs saying, can't create a good society on its own, but it is a necessary part of its creation. It produces its interpretations of experience as technological and scientific development makes them possible; this development is the foundation of human consciousness.¹

For creating this human consciousness Bond has taken a particular interest in dramatizing the hopes and anxieties of children and their isolation from the corrupting culture of adults. There are playwrights-a- plenty who can create powerful images of corrupt and dangerous modernity, inimical to humanity and justice. What Bond presents in addition is a built-in set of tools with which to do more than be shocked or confirmed in our anger and suffering. These are the tools of education and they are present in the plays because the writer has always been fired by the processes by which children learn and fail to learn.² To overcome this negative process, which he thinks is a barrier for change, he offers Theatre in Education as an effective tool.

Bond regards Theatre in Education fundamental to young people's development and education for a sustainable development. For him, "Theatre in education is the most valuable cultural institution the country has"³ and "TIE* lets children come to know themselves and their world and their relation to it. That is the only way that they can know who they are and accept responsibility for themselves. TIE is carrying out the injunction of the Greeks, who founded the basis of democracy and theatre: as they said 'know yourself- otherwise you are a mere consumer of time, space, air and fodder' to humans.⁴

Having the responsibility of the artist to his society, Edward Bond doesn't close his eyes, ears and hearts to the social and political events of the world that effect young people. His childhood experience of the Second World War and the weak post-war peace have been transformed into the intense imagery to write brilliant plays for children to defeat injustices which shape the modern societies. For this reason he has constructed a bridge between art and education. With the disappointment of conventional theatres in Britain he only writes for school children, students, and works with Big Brum Theatre in Education Company in Birmingham. His aim with the collaboration of this company is to use theatre as a tool for learning.

In Theatre in Education learning is not instrumental but conceptual, using the power of theatre to resonate with our own lives in order to reach new social understandings about the world we inhabit, to explore the human condition and behavior so that it can be integrated into young people's minds and make them morally more human, as Bond says, allowing them to know themselves.⁵ Like Bond, believing in the indispensability of Theatre in Education as a factor of supreme significance in the social lives and education of children, Gillham thinks:

And, because such things concern the processes of social and human interactions, the domain particularly of drama and theatre in education, real understanding is a process of coming to understand: we cannot 'give' someone our understanding. Real understanding is felt. Only if the understanding is felt can it be integrated into children's minds, or anyone's. Resonance is the starting point of the integration process. The resonance of something engages us powerfully; that is, affectively. But, significantly, it also engages us indirectly with that which it resonates. Resonance is not authoritarian; yet it's an offer you cannot refuse.⁶

¹ *A.g.e.*, p. xiv.

² Tony Coult, "Building the Common Future", in, *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child, Edward Bond's plays for young people*, edited by David Davis, Trentham Books, UK and Sterling, USA, 2005, p. 11.

³ Edward Bond, *Selections from the Notebooks of Edward Bond*, Volume One, Ed. Ian Stuart, Methuen, London, 2000, p. 58.

* Theatre in Education

⁴ Edward Bond, "The Importance of Belgrade TIE", in, *SCYPT Journal*, 27, 1994, pp. 36-38.

⁵ Chris Cooper, "Edward Bond and the Big Brum Plays", in, *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child*, p.50.

⁶ Geoff Gillham, "The Value of Theatre in Education", in, *SCYPT Journal*, 27, 1994, p.5.

Gillham's viewpoint that resonance is not strict but 'an offer you cannot refuse' connects openly with how the plays of Edward Bond work with their spectators.

Bond believes that theatre has a strong communal, political and an ethical function, and he is interested in drama which encourages young people to question the world around them and invites to imagine how it might be different. He explains his understanding of this issue as follows:

*TIE does not cure or punish. It does the only moral-and practically useful- thing that can be done to bewilderment and violence. It turns it to creativity. It does not stop at helping the disaffected to understand themselves and others, vital though that is. It gives them the only reward creativity can give-the ability to change. That is something that cure and punishment could never do.*¹

A fundamental figure in much of Bond's work has been the child, and the correlation between past and present. *The Children*, written for Manor Community College and performed by the students of this college deals with children's feelings of social isolation through a central dramatic question: What would Medea's children say if they were allowed to speak? By using the familiar Bondian tool of exploring contemporary social questions through mythic stories; *The Children* broke the silence of children whose only words were cries for help as they were sent to their deaths. This powerful dramatic symbol presents insights into the politics of childhood, making the division between the worlds of children and adults painfully noticeable to a contemporary audience. In addition to interrogating the ethical seriousness of its content, the act of performing the play would also offer this particular group of young people a very public voice in a city where they felt ignored and undermined.²

In *The Children* Joe, who "marks the difference between self-discovery and self-creativity, and carries with him the experiences and attitudes of his friends into the adult world"³ in the course of the play, is terrorized by his mother to destroy a house by fire. A young boy dies in the fire, and with his friends, Joe and his friends decide to escape. They carry with them an outsider, a hurt man, who is the father of the boy who passed away in the fire. He kills them separately; until lastly, only Joe is left, to face the future lonely saying "I've got everything. I'm the last person in the world. I must find someone".⁴

Dealing with specifically a children's journey which starts from any modern city, and bringing play's central character Joe's journey into a "post-apocalyptic world"⁵, *The Children* is an essential play. It summarizes Bond's views about children, and how adults are behaving them, and not making a warm address for them in the world.

The division between self discovery and self-creativity is a vital issue to understand the message of *The Children*. By the closing stages of the play Joe is the only one alive and he leaves the stage purposefully, as if to begin a new phase of his journey. The young people's journey, for Bond, is "like the map of ancient rite of passage-the very ancient journey that all humans have had to go on since we first wanted to understand ourselves and take responsibility for our world."⁶ In this sense:

The play does not describe the journey in an abstract way, but creates the experience of the journey through the intense concentration, which is the secret of drama...The young people who go on the journey in *The Children*, are the only ones who can save themselves-helped perhaps by adults who have also made journey and learnt to replace revenge with justice, anger with care.⁷

¹ Edward Bond, in Ian Stuart, *Edward Bond .Letters 4*, Amsteldijk, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998, p. 118.

² Helen Nicholson, "Acting, Creativity and Social Justice: Edward Bond's *The Children*", *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.8, No.1, 2003, p. 11.

³ *A.g.e.*, p.17.

⁴ Edward Bond, *The Children*, Methuen, London, 2000, p. 52.

⁵ David Allen, "The Children", in, *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child*, *Edward Bond's plays for young people*, p. 149.

⁶ Edward Bond, "Words about *The Children*", In. *Programme for the Classworks Theatre production*, 2000.

⁷ *A.g.y.*.

The extreme situations in which the children are placed in the play lead them to ask fundamental questions about who they are and what they would like to become. Although the situations are inherited from the adult world, the young people have to find ways of living without losing the sense of justice, their radical innocence, which they had taken for granted in their own world.¹ Living among the grim realities of the world such as violence, social isolation and abuse, children would learn and experience this process by playing themselves, acting their stories, and understanding of themselves in relation to the world. This crucial point is what Bond wants to do with Theatre in Education, as he points out as such, "Education should enable children to search for meaning so that they may bear witness to life. The psyche is a dramatizing structure and cultures are in a wide sense theatres."²

In this sense, by exploring the imaginative world of the children, and drawing attention to the moral corruption and their search for meaning through the Theatre in Education movement, the play reflects a profound discussion to educators: How to live morally in an amoral world? How to be human? How can we create a humane society? To consume or not to consume! In the light of these vital questions it is possible to find reasonable and rational answers from Edward Bond's Big Brum 25th birthday-speech and message:

*Drama is self creativity. It teaches nothing. Instead it confronts human creativity with its own needs. It does not prepare children to enter society; it prepares them to enter more fully into their humanness. It is not interested in citizenship but in the Promethean self, in the rightful discontent of being human. It is not involved in self-expression, which is a flabby cliché, but in the creation of shared humanness. How else can young people survive even the memory of what many of their elders did in the last century? Or leave a world more innocent than the one they entered? Perhaps those elders learnt to accept injustices and contradictions. Drama confronts young people with situations in which that injustice has seeped down into their own lives, or which they can easily foresee in the future. At that age such things are unacceptable. And if at that age drama ignites the self's creativity by respecting it and trusting its strength, then society will be less able to destroy it later. We will have given it for ever the indomitable power of youth. In time it may make civilization young again.*³

In Bond's evaluation of contemporary world, everyone must be aware of where and in which circumstances he is living and what possible facilities he gains. Not only adults but also children are included in this critical process. Children have a right to know the world they're in, and who they are. The writer points out that handling the case of children must be the first and primary step towards achieving this essential purpose. The most significant deduction one could possibly make out from *The Children* is that, there is always a positive hope for creating a good future and the search for justice because each human infant starts life with radical innocence.

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¹ Nicholson, "Acting, Creativity and Social Justice: Edward Bond's The Children, p. 20.

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