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Swain, Elizabeth Anne

DAVID EDGAR: PLAYWRIGHT AND POLITICIAN

City University of New York

Ph.D. 1984

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ELIZABETH SWAIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Theater in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York.

1984

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1984

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theater in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

David Edgar is a socialist, a member of Britain's Labour Party, and a political playwright. His first play, Two Kinds of Angel, was produced at Bradford University in 1970. In October 1983 his most recent play, Maydays, was presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at its London home, the Barbican. This study will cover Edgar's stage plays to this time. Before the production of Maydays Edgar said, "I feel it's going to prove some kind of punctuation in my life, whether negative or positive."¹ The attention that the play has received from both political and theatrical quarters accentuates the positive. In addition, Maydays punctuates Edgar's career by fulfilling his ambition to write a political play specifically for a large theatre.

In February 1984 Edgar celebrated his thirty-sixth birthday, an unusually young age for a writer to become the subject of a dissertation. However, he has already had some forty plays professionally produced on three continents and this seems a suitable moment for reflection on a career that has been an integral part of the "second wave" of Britain's political theater movement, a movement now well into its second decade.² Edgar's plays have encompassed the many forms that

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, New York, April 1983.

²Such writers as Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Doris Lessing, and Edward Bond were writing overtly political plays in the late fifties and the sixties, paving the way for the distinct movement that began around 1968 known as the "second wave."

have characterized the movement, and his plays have been produced in the many different arenas that have nurtured it. An examination of his work, therefore, can contribute to an understanding of the whole phenomenon of British political theater.

Theaters across the United States have produced a number of plays from this movement, evincing an interest in its aims, its subject matter, and its forms, possibly because there is not a comparable political theater movement in America. Journals such as Theater, Theatre Communications, Performing Arts Journal, and The Drama Review frequently include articles on political theater around the world; American critics such as Michael Kirby write on the subject; and newspapers such as the New York Times devote space to articles on political theater, demonstrating further interest in its workings.¹ I therefore believe that a detailed examination of the work of a writer at the heart of the British movement can contribute to some understanding of the sociopolitical environment that necessitates and nurtures such a theater, the different forms this theater may take, and how effective dramaturgy may support a political message.

Political theater tends to arise in times of social stress, particularly in the presence of a strong and active left. Also,

¹Examples of such writing on political theater may be found in: Theater 12/2 (April 1981); Theatre Communications 5/2 (February 1983); Performing Arts Journal 2/1 (Spring 1977); The Drama Review 14/3 (1970). See also Michael Kirby, "On Political Theatre," The Drama Review 19/2 (June 1975); Mel Gussow, "Britain's Political Playwrights," New York Times, 17 August 1980; Henry Popkin, "'Danton's Death' Endures as Political Drama," New York Times, 20 March 1983.

theatrical trends travel. The Russian Blue Blouses brought lessons to the German theater of the twenties; the German experience was of great significance to American political theater in the thirties; and I posit that if the political pendulum in America swings again towards the left, recent British experience may prove valuable to a new American political theater movement. A significant movement already exists in American film, and I believe that a new political theater may well develop, offering its own set of problems for debate.

I will examine Edgar's dramatic form, content, and political points of view. It is impractical to ascribe "phases" to Edgar's work and difficult to perceive a strict chronological evolution in his writing. I have therefore chosen five general but distinct approaches in his dramaturgy. Most of the plays could be discussed under at least one other heading; each categorization indicates a dominant approach, certainly not a definition. Where appropriate, a theoretical and/or historical overview will introduce each chapter.

My opening chapter offers a brief survey of theatrical conditions prior to the political theater movement that grew in Britain during the 1970s, and, in order to place Edgar within it, an overview of the movement itself. I will also include a brief biographical sketch of David Edgar.

Chapter II

BACKGROUND

Social or political issues as subjects for British plays were not simply a phenomenon of the seventies. Nineteenth-century melodrama will attest to that, and before the century was over Shaw, in another vein, had written Widowers' Houses (1892) and Mrs. Warren's Profession (1898). Galsworthy wrote Strife in 1909 and Justice in 1910, and Pinero, Jones, and Granville-Barker treated social problems in their plays. In each decade further examples can be found.

The thirties nurtured many political theater groups, some of whom performed at the First International Workers' Olympiad in Moscow in 1933. Workers' theater groups had sprung up in the twenties but grew in strength and numbers during the thirties with such groups as the Rebel Players, the Group Theatre (which first performed Isherwood and Auden), and, later, the Unity Theatre, which introduced the Living Newspaper to England. Of the Unity Theatre, Malcolm Page writes:

Nevertheless Unity is alive after thirty-five years, a remarkable record for a political theatre, whether or not it can still be correctly described as a people's or a workers' theatre. Political satire has spread far beyond Unity in the sixties, but till recently its documentaries on social and union history were unique. Leonard Peck, Leonard Irwin and others wrote an unnoticed vein of English "proletarian" plays in the forties and fifties. Further, Unity helped to make working class actors and plays widely acceptable, also helping to inspire Theatre Workshop in its early years. And Unity has kept alive the idea

that politics certainly involve art and art can involve politics.¹

Today's movement builds, to some extent, on this continuum. What differentiates it is its dominantly professional status, its extent, the audience for its many arenas, and the recognition achieved by its playwrights. Notwithstanding these trends, postwar theater was typified by a gentility. The plays were, by and large, for and about the middle and upper classes. The first murmurings of something different were embodied in John Whiting's 1951 play, Saints' Day, which ushered in the theme of violence, a theme that has permeated political and social writing ever since. 1956 saw the inauguration of George Devine's English Stage Company at London's Royal Court Theatre and the May opening of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger. While not a political tract, the play examines the protagonist's feelings of anger, despair, and self-destruction under the tyranny of British class structures, and Osborne's play, with its angry young working class hero, encouraged new subject matter, character types, stage settings, and themes.

The fifties brought other influences to bear. In 1956 The Berliner Ensemble made its first visit to England, introducing Brecht's own staging to London audiences.² Then came the first British showings of Ionesco's The Lesson, The Chairs, and Rhinoceros, Genet's The Blacks, and Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Endgame, and

¹Malcolm Page, "The Early Years at Unity," Theatre Quarterly 1/4 (October-December 1971).

²Malcolm Page also points out that Unity introduced the works of Brecht to Britain in the thirties, but to a much more limited audience.

Krapp's Last Tape. The Royal Court continued to launch experimental new British writers, including Wesker, Arden, and Jellicoe, and in the sixties Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, Heathcote Williams, Howard Brenton, and David Storey. Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop introduced Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney, and Littlewood attacked what was by then known as The Establishment with Oh What A Lovely War. The year 1964 brought the World Theatre Festival to the Aldwych Theatre and Charles Marowitz's and Peter Brook's "Theatre of Cruelty" season at LAMDA, which spawned Marat/Sade. From America came The La Mama, the Open Theatre, The Living Theatre, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre, bringing influences which most current practitioners acknowledge.

In the British theater new writers turned more and more to social or political issues and drew fewer characters from the upper classes. Some writers, such as Wesker and Bond in his first two plays, The Pope's Wedding and Saved, favored a brand of social realism, while others turned sharply away from realistic methods. Small theaters, such as Littlewood's Stratford East, The Royal Court, and The Arts, were the innovating venues, and Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook, William Gaskill, and John Dexter were among the early directors rising to the challenges of new subject matter and form. Actors without perfect upper class British accents were the new breed--Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, Joan Plowright, and Alan Bates, for example.

The Arts Council increased the amounts of awards to the theater in this period. Funding had been established in 1946 with an annual budget of £235,000, growing to £3,205,000 by 1964. The

Labour Party came into power the same year, appointing Jennie Lee as Minister for the Arts. She instituted grants to the new fringe companies and community arts programs, and by 1970 she had raised the annual budget to £9,300,000.¹ The existence and growth of subsidy, in particular to new small companies, contributed to the political course that British theater took in the seventies.²

The political companies developed within the fringe, briefly defined as a group of small companies with low budgets, playing in nontraditional theater spaces and doing new plays, often experimenting with form and style. Therefore, the Arts Council funding was important to the early growth of the political theater movement. Both Elsom³ and Itzin⁴ consider the 1963 establishment of the Traverse Theatre, in a former brothel in Edinburgh, as the inaugural event of the fringe movement. Jim Haynes, an American, was the founder. He moved to London in 1968 to found the Arts Lab in Drury Lane, which led to the development of many of the later fringe companies, including the political ones. In 1968 Nancy Mecklin, another American, founded the Freehold

¹John Elsom, Post War British Theatre (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 126.

²In his article, "Ten Years of Political Theatre" in Theatre Quarterly 32 (1979), David Edgar (p. 27) quotes figures for the years 1971-72, 1973-74, and 1976-77 from the Annual Report of the Arts Council of Great Britain, when he writes, "in 1971/72 the Arts Council of Great Britain gave two socialist theatre groups a total of £10,363; by 1973/74 it was paying eleven groups £41,490; and in 1976/77 18 groups were receiving a total of £421,093. This does not include locally-financed groups, or groups in Wales or Scotland."

³Elsom, Post War, p. 141.

⁴Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 9.

Company. David Hare and Howard Brenton founded Portable Theatre the same year, and the American Charles Marowitz formed the Open Space to present new English and American plays and experimental work. Also in 1968, Ed Berman, yet another American, introduced his lunch-time theatre and soon developed Inter-Action, a London-based community arts network. In the 1971-72 season 300 of the 480 new plays on record were presented by fringe companies.¹

CAST (the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre of Roland and Claire Muldoon) was formed in 1965 and is cited as "the first avowedly socialist theatre company of the sixties, setting precedents of style, politics and new audiences amongst the working class--precedents subsequently followed in some form by most of the political companies of the seventies."²

But one obstacle remained--stage censorship. The Lord Chamberlain had been given absolute authority, by the Theatres Acts of 1737 and 1843, over public stages. Despite several attempts at reform, plays were subject to deletions of words, phrases, entire scenes, or were banned in toto. One loophole existed; the Lord Chamberlain did not have jurisdiction over a private "club" theater. Shelley's The Cenci (1886) and Ibsen's Ghosts (J.T. Grein's 1891 English premiere) had been presented this way and provided precedents when the English Stage Company found itself in frequent conflict with the Lord Chamberlain. Ronald Duncan's The Catalyst was banned in toto in 1957 and the

¹Elsom, Post War, p. 142.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 11.

ESC took advantage of the "club" loophole. John Osborne's A Patriot For Me suffered such brutal excisions that the same recourse was followed in 1964. All but one of Osborne's plays presented at the Royal Court had been heavily censored. Edward Bond's Saved provoked a reaction. It was presented in "club" form, but the loophole was challenged, and in 1966 the Lord Chamberlain won his prosecution of the English Stage Company.¹

Alfred Esdaile of the Company said, "The Lord Chamberlain has signed his own death warrant. He has done a stupid thing. The opposition against him will be tougher than ever before."² A committee of enquiry was already at work in the House of Lords, and a bill was introduced into the House of Commons on October 1967. In the meantime Edward Bond's Early Morning, banned by the Lord Chamberlain, was presented as a "club" performance on March 31, 1968.³ "Early Morning was the last play banned by the Lord Chamberlain. On September 28, 1968, George Strauss's bill, The Theatres Act of 1968, became law and pre-censorship of the theatre in Great Britain came to an end."⁴ For the new generation of playwrights the Act opened up immeasurable possibilities for subject matter, language, and dramatic treatment, and helped to create a favorable climate for the new, highly political theater.

Annus Mirabilis is how each of the years 1956 and 1968 is described by various commentators on British theater. 1956 saw the launching of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court; it was also

¹Terry Browne, Playwrights' Theatre (London: Pitman, 1975), pp. 56-57.

²Ibid., p. 65. ³Ibid., pp. 65-68. ⁴Ibid., p. 70.

the year of the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Uprising. 1968 brought the end of stage censorship, as described, and the founding of many experimental new companies; it was also the year of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the student-labor uprising in Paris, student protests in many parts of the world, the fiasco at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and the ensuing peak of antiwar demonstrations in the United States and Europe. Itzin analyzes it as follows:

1968 therefore marked the coming-to-consciousness--to political consciousness--of the war-baby generation, to an awareness of environmental plundering and pollution, to cold-war imperialism, to conspicuous consumption in the first and second worlds and to the struggles of the third world. The response was disillusionment, despair, pessimism and anger. The significant thing was that this response--the rebellion--did not remain random, but became a movement of the political left, appealing (however confusedly) to Marx as a symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society. All of this came to be reflected in the theatre.¹

David Edgar, for the same reasons, describes 1968 as "the starting date for the development of political theatre in Britain."²

The new political theater movement began on a small scale among fringe and touring companies. By the end of the seventies the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, and sometimes the West End presented the work of political writers, most of whom came from the fringe, and none of whom accommodated the political content of their work to the new environment. A brief overview of this period will provide a sense of the milieu in which David Edgar wrote

¹Itzin, Stages, p. 3.

²Edgar, "Ten Years," p. 25.

his early political plays.

CAST, the first socialist fringe group, set a precedent soon to be followed by such companies as Portable Theatre (1968-72), General Will (1971), Hull Truck (1971), John McGrath's 7:84 Theatre Company (1971), Red Ladder (1973) (whose production of Dario Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist had a long West End run), Joint Stock Company (1974), and the feminist Monstrous Regiment (1976). Most of these groups still function. So do many others. Politics, social awareness, and innovative approaches to stage production, acting, and directing were the guiding principles.

Elsom notes four main lines of development in the fringe companies: (1) environmental, (2) multimedia, (3) neo-dadaism, and (4) agitprop.¹ The political companies largely followed the fourth in their early stages, but were susceptible to others, as David Edgar's work will exemplify, though most companies had dispensed with agitprop as a notable force by the mid-seventies.

Improvisation, virtually impossible under the Lord Chamberlain, now became common in the fringe productions, especially those done by Hull Truck. "Hull Truck proved that improvisation--so often the avant-garde euphemism for amateurism--could be first-class professional entertainment."²

Elsom points out that while censorship blanked out language and topics "unfit" for discussion, it had equally ruled over actions and

¹Elsom, Post War, p. 145.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 133.

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behavior that could be given stage life.¹ The new freedom enlarged the content of the new political plays and their presentation.

Other theatrical innovations affected the fringe. Before 1956 an "actors' theater" prevailed, but the English Stage Company then set the example of a "playwrights' theater." By the mid-sixties the influences of Grotowski, Artaud, Brecht, and the American visitors helped to create an identifiable "directors' theater," notably exemplified in Brook's A Midsummer Night's Dream in 1971. There followed, among fringe practitioners, a "theater of collaboration." Playwrights often acted, directed, and hung lights. Scripts arose from rehearsals. Sometimes two or more playwrights co-wrote a script. The collaborative atmosphere was fueled by youthful enthusiasm, the need for invention in the "found spaces," the strictures of low budgets, and, in the political companies, the unifying socialist viewpoint. The informal theater spaces explored fresh performer-audience relationships. Pub theaters became a viable arm of the movement, most notably The King's Head, Islington, and The Bush.

After initially flourishing, touring went into decline, though many companies, 7:84 for example, have persisted with it to this day. Elsom says that the decline was partially due to poor funding of the companies whose main activity was touring.² David Hare offers another explanation, while also giving a sense of the typical touring company:

¹Elsom, Post War, p. 200.

²Ibid., p. 140.

We wanted to produce corrupt, decadent little shows that would produce maximum possible effects on everybody. I spent three years producing these primitive, short, fierce shows--some of them written by Howard Brenton and some by myself--and they were calculated to shock and to go to places where theatre was not usually presented--in halls, villages, army camps, schools, wherever we could get bookings. The idea fell apart when Arts Centres began to spring up all over England, a whole alternative circuit which became as structured a network as the major theatres. You'd go one year and you'd be performing in a kitchen or on a floor and you'd go back the next year and you'd have an Arts Centre. When you went to those places the first time, people reacted to what you had to say--which was mostly about the decadence of English society. After this circuit had grown up, this reaction became aesthetic. They'd say, "You're not as good as the group that was here last week!" The original idea that you could leave the English theatre and produce an alternative to it, fell apart really. So the next stage was to try and do work which was as subversive and politically overt in the conventional theatre. There seemed no point in not working in the largest possible theatres.¹

David Edgar's own comments provide another perspective:

I spent six years of my life writing and making shows which went around English in the backs of vans, which were performed in working men's clubs and upstairs rooms in pubs, and attempted--and in some cases achieved--the creation of a non-theatre-going working-class audience. There is absolutely no question that the play of mine which has had the most effect on the way people think about things is a play which was presented in the West End of London, Destiny. I wasn't asked to talk about the docks when I wrote Wreckers. I hadn't been asked to talk about housing when I'd written Rent. I wasn't asked to talk about industrial relations when I'd written The National Interest and I wasn't asked to talk about the politics of health when I wrote O Fair Jerusalem. But when I wrote Destiny, which went to the West End, within twenty-four hours the editors of three left-wing newspapers had rung me up asking me to write articles.²

Probably for the reasons cited, most of the established political writers such as Edward Bond, David Hare, Steven Poliakoff, Howard Barker,

¹David Hare, interview with the author, New York, November 1982.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, New York, September 1981.

Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Barrie Keeffe, Snoo Wilson, and David Edgar, today have their plays performed in "establishment" theaters (less frequently so in the United States) where a larger audience can be reached. Many of them also write for larger television and film audiences. All acknowledge the system of subsidy that allowed the initial development of the fringe, where they started their careers. All acknowledge the significance of the 1968 Theatres Act. And all of them have committed themselves to theater as a means of evoking political and social awareness.

A considerable number of this generation of socialist playwrights comes from the middle class and Edgar is one of them. David Edgar was born in 1948 in Birmingham, England. He attended Oundle public school and in 1969 completed a degree in drama at Manchester University, where he edited the student newspaper and chaired the university Socialist Society. After dabbling in acting and directing he decided to pursue playwriting, but his early interests still mark his career. Socialism informs the point of view of his plays and he researches them assiduously in the manner of an investigative journalist.

Between 1969 and 1972 Edgar worked as a journalist on the Bradford Telegraph and Argus, for which he reviewed plays while writing his own plays in his spare time. Chris Parr, a fellow in theater at the University, commissioned Edgar to write a play for the students. Two Kinds of Angel resulted, about a fictitious meeting between Rosa Luxemburg and Marilyn Monroe. This is Edgar's first play of record, and after the student production in July 1970 it received later

professional productions, including those in Liège, Paris, and Munich.

Edgar explains the ensuing developments:

I continued to write plays for Bradford and then it gradually started spreading. The student who directed Two Kinds of Angel started a small lunch-time theatre in Edinburgh which then did two of my plays [Still Life: Man in Bed and Tedderella], one of which was then done at The Bush in London [Tedderella]. Then Max Stafford-Clarke was running the Traverse Theatre workshop in Edinburgh and asked me to write a play. Then Howard Brenton asked me to participate in the second Portable Theatre group project.¹

This was in April 1972, and Edgar decided to give up journalism for full-time playwriting and to join the Portable collaborative project in the writing of England's Ireland, about England's dealings in that country. His co-authors were Brenton, Hare, Tony Bicat, Brian Clark, Francis Fuchs, and Snoo Wilson. By 1972 Edgar had had twelve plays produced, two by a fringe touring company, General Will, recently formed by former Bradford students, and for which Edgar became a mainstay writer, often directing his own plays. After England's Ireland and before the end of 1972, Edgar wrote five more plays which received productions by the General Will, The Belgrade Theatre Studio in Coventry, Leeds Polytechnic, where Edgar became a fellow in Creative Writing in 1972, and The Birmingham Repertory Theatre Studio. In London his plays appeared at The Open Space, Soho Poly, and the Unity Theatre. Gangsters was adapted for television as Sanctuary and was shown on Scottish Television in October 1973. Death Story, a version of Romeo and Juliet, implicitly set in contemporary Northern Ireland, had many English productions. At New York's Manhattan Theatre Club in March 1975, it marked Edgar's first American production.

¹Ibid.

In 1973 Edgar wrote six more plays which were produced in similar theaters. In 1974 he was appointed Thames Television Resident playwright at The Birmingham Repertory Theatre. During this and the following year he wrote six plays, including Destiny. The first draft had been written in 1973 and turned down by the Nottingham Playhouse. Birmingham commissioned a new version, but the Board of Directors demurred. Although the Royal Shakespeare Company had officially rejected it, the play was brought to the attention of Trevor Nunn, who asked Ron Daniels to stage it. It was first presented at Stratford's Other Place in September 1976 and moved to London's Aldwych Theatre in May 1977. It received the John Whiting Award and some regional productions ensued. There was also a television version, aired by the BBC on January 31, 1978. The years 1976 and 1977 each brought three plays, including Mary Barnes, written in 1977 and staged in 1978, Edgar's most frequently produced play in the United States. In 1978 the playwright developed his feminist play Teendreams with The Montrous Regiment and adapted The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs, produced by the RSC Warehouse in London, and subsequently at the Manhattan Theatre Club, where he was playwright-in-residence during the 1978-79 season.

While Edgar was in the United States, Trevor Nunn contacted him about adapting a Dickens novel for the stage. Nicholas Nickleby took many months of work before premiering in May 1980. Since then Edgar has had to create a television version and attend American rehearsals, where some script changes were made. He has been researching a film on the American New Left in the sixties and seventies, and he has written two more plays--a television play about the Second

World War and Maydays, which opened in October 1983, again at the RSC.

Since 1981 Edgar has been an active member of the British Labour Party. He describes his political evolution as follows:

In the early seventies I would describe myself as a Marxist and a Leninist as opposed to a Marxist-Leninist, because that implies Maoist, which I'd never been. I might have called myself a Trot, because I was unorganized, in the sense of being in no organization. I wouldn't use any of those descriptions any more. When I was with General Will we had workshops on Marxism which then prompted the plays--but as a writer it was more a matter of communication than discovery.... When I was working with General Will that was my political activity. By the late seventies, largely through the antiracist movement, I had a political activity which was independent of writing plays. It meant that the plays didn't have to be a self-justification. It's very liberating to have a public political activity in addition, because that is my political practice and my plays are something different.¹

Although Edgar's plays have consistently tackled political and social issues, he has employed, and in some cases, parodied many dramatic forms. However, few of his plays can be firmly categorized, and his choices of genre will be one focus of discussion. Recently Edgar has favored social realism for its balance of political viewpoint and telling dramaturgy. Before a discussion of this form or of specific plays, the next chapter will concentrate on another form little used in British theater before the seventies, except in workers' theater groups of the twenties and thirties--namely, agitprop.

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, New York, July 1982.

Chapter III

AGITPROP

David Edgar explains his feelings about agitprop techniques as follows:

Socialist theatre workers in Britain responded to the increased militancy of the early 1970s by rejecting the social realism of writers like Arnold Wesker that had dominated radical theatre for fifteen years. They, like Brecht, sensed that realism was an inadequate form for a radical era; and they were also aware that the rise of mass-populist culture (notably television) had increased rather than decreased the problems of the realist approach.

The contradiction is put simply: the dominant form of television drama is naturalism, which shows people's behaviour as conditioned, primarily or exclusively, by individual and psychological factors. The socialist, on the other hand, requires a form which demonstrates the social and political character of human behaviour.

However, in the television age the masses are so swamped by naturalism and, therefore by its individualist assumptions, that the superficially similar techniques of realism are incapable of countering individualist ideology....

Faced with this barrage of bourgeois culture, the response of agitprop is precisely to eliminate the surface appearance of the situation it presents, and to portray instead what it regards as the political reality beneath. The capitalist, for obvious example, is shown as a Victorian, top-hatted archetype because the makers of the piece of theatre believe that, despite all the surface changes in the appearance, style, and attitudes of the employing class, the fundamental reality is still that of heartless exploitation.¹

The agitprop form dominated political writing only during the years 1970 to 1974, when the policies of Edward Heath's Conservative government offered many targets for socialist attack. For the socialist movement it was "a radical era." It was in another radical era that agitprop

¹Edgar, "Ten Years," p. 27.

was born.

According to John Willet, "The term agit-prop derives from the Soviet Communist Party's Agitation and Propaganda Department which had performed short agitational sketches to the Red Army during the Revolution."¹ In 1920 Lenin issued the statement, "We must re-educate the masses and only agitation and propaganda is able to re-educate them."² Theater became a vital instrument in this campaign since about seventy percent of the population was illiterate.

In the USSR after the Revolution, agit-trains and agit-ships, brightly painted with illustrations and slogans, toured the country and presented their shows. Trucks carried other groups. Some were professional groups, others amateur. Workers' theatrical clubs had been numerous under the Tsars, but now they grew in number and significance as organs for the dissemination of revolutionary propaganda. Some of the most influential groups were TERESVAT (Theatre of Satire), formed in 1919 and for which Mayakovsky wrote some short agitpron pieces;³ TRAM (Theatre of Working Youth), also formed in 1919, whose many groups played in the streets, in hospitals, barracks, schools, and factories; and The Blue Blouses. The latter group was formed in 1923 by students at the Moscow Institute of Journalism and grew to vast

¹Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 62 (editor's note).

²Lenin, cited by E.H. Carr, Socialism in One Country (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 2:209.

³For a detailed essay on Mayakovsky's agitprop writing, see František Deák, "The Agitprop and Circus Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky," The Drama Review 57 (March 1973): 47-89. This article includes two plays.

proportions. In 1928 it is reported that in Moscow alone Blue Blouse groups presented 13,208 shows to 6,700,000 people.¹ At this point The Blue Blouses had 484 professional companies and about 8,000 amateur groups.² In 1927 a Blue Blouse troupe toured Germany and inspired the formation of similar troupes in many parts of Europe, including England.

A contemporary description of a Blue Blouse production will prove a useful comparison with David Edgar's own use of the agitprop form:

One of their most effective skits is entitled Industrialisation. One after another the actors come out in fantastic costumes, adorned with symbols indicating the factory buildings, installations of electrical stations or other items in the program of industrialisation. Finally, chanting in chorus lively verses, they scramble on each other's backs and shoulders, forming a structure which is supposed to represent the finished industrial system. The theme of one of their satirical pieces is the unfortunate plight of a poor Soviet Citizen whose existence the bureaucrats in various institutions refuse to recognize, because he has somewhere mislaid his indispensable "document" or passport. The familiar types in state institutions with preoccupied faces and the inevitably bulging portfolios are hit off neatly, while a huge red pencil in the hands of the "bureaucrat" adds a further element of the grotesque and the ludicrous.

A piano furnishes a brisk accompaniment, usually jazz, to most of the performances, and snatches of Russian songs and melodies, played on the accordion are interspersed.³

Claudine Amiard Chevrel⁴ breaks down the techniques of Soviet agitprop after making a distinction between the terms amateur and auto-

¹Claudine Amiard Chevrel, "La Blouse bleue," in Le Théâtre d'Agit-Prop de 1919 à 1932 (Lausanne: La Cité-L'Age d'Homme, 1977), 1:99.

²František Deák, "Blue Blouse 1923-1928," The Drama Review 57 (March 1973), p. 46.

³Ibid., p. 36, citing the Moscow correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor, 3 March 1928.

⁴Claudine Amiard Chevrel, "Méthodes et Formes Spécifiques," in Le Théâtre d'Agit-Prop, 1:49-61.

activisme. She prefers the latter since amateur tends to imply an imitation of traditional professional approaches, and the new groups were rejecting such forms in favor of creating something new, even though in some cases they revitalized old popular forms.

Chevrel sees four major and original genres: (1) Agitational tribunal, where a problem of significance to the particular audience would be discussed and the communist point of view given. Audience participation was invited in a tribunal that would be staged and in which both sides of an argument would be given a hearing. The aims were education, community involvement, and the discovery of potential community leaders. (2) Living newspapers. This was the dominant form of the Blue Blouse groups for some years and was an important part of the American Federal Theatre's program in the thirties and England's Unity Theatre of the same period. It developed from the tradition of public reading of newspapers to a largely illiterate population. Short skits covered a selection of topics, with different styles for each skit. Chevrel writes:

The audience of a "living newspaper" depended largely on theatrical liveliness. The "diagrams" executed by the gymnasts, by symbolic objects, the simple placards round the necks of the performers, or the animated posters, the Chinese shadow-shows and all the lighting effects, sound effects, living luboks, clown acts, humorous verses, the return to public entertainers from the fairgrounds... , projections or even film came to illustrate the text spoken by one or several performers.¹

(3) Agitational plays proper. These were short pieces on a particular topic, using character "types" such as "the peasant" or "the merchant." Often in verse, they drew on the fairground traditions of simple

¹Ibid., p. 55 (my translation).

settings and props, especially when done by touring troupes. (4)

Dialectical plays. TRAM used this form which aimed at exposing conflicts in life and work, without offering solutions, and getting the whole community involved in the follow-up discussion. The plays were fast-paced, episodic, nonpsychological; striking juxtaposition of scenes was more important than a chronological line.

In addition, Chevrel sees lesser genres arising during this time: Allegorical plays, which expressed the struggle of the Revolution and the new ideology, without being too agitational; Scenarios, which portrayed great revolutionary events and people, using declamation, choral singing, and music; and Literary montages, which involved the putting together of literature, journalism, and political writings with revolutionary themes, in order to explain and expand on them.

Old forms, revived and revamped, served the new ideology. Revolutionary melodrama used the old forms, but the characters came from the new revolutionary society. Vaudeville and operetta acquired new life as the Communist Party tried to reclaim the traditional theater for itself. Both TRAM and The Blue Blouses adopted these forms, replacing the typical sentimentality with irony. Cabaret turned into the Red Cabaret, employing the traditional short sketches and parody. In the final analysis, it proved difficult to distinguish between this form and the living newspaper. The Red Guignol went back to old oral traditions, using songs, dances, and puppets and reviving the old character of Petrushka, turning him into a class figure who helps the workers. Audience involvement was innate to this form.

Philippe Ivernel points out that agitprop theater drew upon forms of theater that classical genre codification had all but eliminated:

In particular upon the popular circus tradition, pantomime, juggling, tumbling, choral singing or choral speaking; but also upon the innovations of futurism, constructivism or expressionism: in fact it is difficult to say, all things considered, which influenced the other, agit-prop the avant-garde, or the avant-garde agit-prop.¹

The agitprop of many political groups in England in the period under discussion had some features in common with its Soviet precursor: didacticism, socialist ideology, the rousing of the working class to action, solidarity, and unity of purpose. The English experience differed in that it was antigovernment (particularly in the Heath years) and suggestive of revolution, rather than being an instrument of a revolution in process. In this sense it was closer to the experience of Piscator and Brecht in Germany. Hugh Rorrison explains:

Piscator's Proletarisches Theater (founded 1920) was conceived from the start... as an agitprop group with the sole aim of developing class consciousness and proletarian solidarity for the struggle ahead, and Piscator pioneered the material which by 1928 was being used by agitprop troupes in virtually every German town: short sketches in brief, simple scenes with typed characters and dialogue larded with direct appeals to the audience to respond to the communist message. He toured the working-class quarters of Berlin with a small group of actors and helpers doing one night stands in halls and meeting rooms.²

Brecht wrote:

What was known as "agit-prop" art, which a number of second-rate noses were turned up at, was a mine of novel artistic

¹Philippe Ivernel, "Introduction Générale," Le Théâtre d'Agit-Prop, 1:19 (my translation).

²Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, ed. and trans. Hugh Rorrison (New York: Avon, 1978), p. 37 (editor's note).

techniques and ways of expression. Magnificent and long-forgotten elements from periods of truly popular art cropped up there, boldly adapted to the new social ends. Daring cuts and compositions, beautiful simplifications (alongside misconceived ones): in all this there was often an astonishing economy and elegance and a fearless eye for complexity. A lot of it may have been primitive, but it was never primitive with the kind of primitivity that affected the supposedly varied psychological portrayals of bourgeois art. It is very wrong to make a few misconceived stylizations a pretext for rejecting a style of representation which attempts (so often successfully) to bring out the essential and to encourage abstraction.¹

These pioneering agitprop styles were similar in the USSR and in Germany and invite comparison with Edgar's plays.

George H. Szanto, acknowledging his debt to Jacques Ellul's seminal work on propaganda,² makes the distinction between Agitational Propaganda and Integration Propaganda.³ A postrevolutionary society like the Soviet Union relies on Integration Propaganda, which Ellul describes as "a self-producing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behaviour, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behaviour in terms of the permanent social setting."⁴ This description clearly does not apply to the political writing of the seventies in Britain, which belongs more nearly in the agitational category, described as follows:

Agitational Propaganda is found in its highest forms (but not only) in a pre-revolutionary-to-revolutionary state. It attempts

¹Brecht, Brecht, p. 111.

²Jacques Ellul, Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1969).

³George H. Szanto, Theatre and Propaganda (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 9.

⁴Ellul, cited by Szanto, Theatre and Propaganda, p. 24.

to bring citizens to the proper point of radical awareness so that they can afterwards be moved to voluntary action. Ellul stresses this point: propaganda does not move people to action; to suggest as much oversimplifies the effect of propaganda. Instead, propaganda must be seen as a step or series of steps, prerequisite to action, as the preparation of the minds of those who will later carry out the purposes of the propaganda.¹

Szanto includes a third type of propaganda in his discussion and one which also has relevance to the British experience: Dialectical Propaganda. He describes it this way:

It is a theatre which attempts to demystify, by depicting separately, interactively, and always clearly, the basic elements which comprise a confused social or historical situation. This is the science of dialectical materialism, of Ellul's myth of History, brought to dramatic presentation. ... It will demystify relationships between individuals and institutions, individuals and individuals, institutions and institutions, so as to show first, the nature of passions and of economic and social laws, and second, to demonstrate methods by which human beings can control both themselves and their institutions.²

David Edgar's early plays, in varying degrees, have elements of both. His intention is to agitate towards voluntary action, and his technique is to demystify situations in social and public life.

The National Interest is David Edgar's first play performed by the touring company the General Will, although performed earlier under the auspices of Bradford University. Two of the original participants were in the founding group of the General Will and took the play with them to the new company. It was in their repertory for a year. This play uses a variety of stylistic approaches and will therefore serve as a reference for later plays. The manuscript is dated July 1971 and

¹Szanto, Theatre and Propaganda, p. 23.

²Ibid., p. 75.

Edgar describes it as "a documentary on the first year of the Conservative government."¹ He focuses on certain personalities in public office, the Industrial Relations Act, and unemployment. He brings up past Tory policies as well as the idea that Edward Heath might lead Britain into the Common Market before too long. Four actors named Lynne, John, Ken, and Pete assume all the roles, adding emblems or costume pieces to identify the different characters. The basic costumes are black suits for the men and a black shirt and blouse for Lynne. The black suits indicate the "uniform" of the subject under attack--the Conservatives. The blue blouses of the Russian groups suggested the uniform of the Soviet worker. Whether the irony was intentional I do not know.

The play opens to "a bright chord" on the piano as Ken leaps onto the stage:

KEN Ladies and Gentlemen
Heed to our call
Pete leaps onto the stage.
PETE To workers and shirkers
And strikers and all
Lynne leaps onto the stage.
LYNNE List well to our message
You know that it's true
John leaps onto the stage.
JOHN What's good for the bosses
Is good for you too
ALL (sing) It's all in
the National
Int'rest
It's best for
the Nation
we love²

¹Clive Barker and Simon Trussler, "Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities" (an interview with David Edgar), Theatre Quarterly 8/33 (1979): 6.

²David Edgar, The National Interest (manuscript dated 26 July 1971). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

The song continues, listing low wages and unemployment figures, but all is offered with the cheerful irony that,

It's as clear as the sky up above
It's best for the nation we love.

By approaching the Tories and their policies with the irony of high enthusiasm, Edgar keeps a cheerful and comic tone without diminishing the impact of his political point of view, a point of view understood by the audience from the start, true to the traditions of the agitprop style.

The introductory section over, the language changes to prose for the first of eight "sketches." Chevrel's comments on "agitational plays proper," dialectical plays, and the living newspaper apply to these sketches, each of which has a different style, as recommended in the living newspaper form. Some draw on British antecedents, such as the music-hall and pantomime, and their character "types." Music and song punctuate the proceedings.

The first sketch parodies the radio or television street interview. The subject is strikes. The first interviewee is a boss "type" who rails against strikes and supports the Industrial Relations Bill, designed to curb industrial actions. He says, "working to rule involves disruptions and inflicts loss on the employer and inconvenience to outsiders." The tone is comic and ironic, and Edgar gives little space to his own opposing viewpoint, allowing his characters to condemn themselves.

Other interviewees in this sketch are real figures from public life, and Edgar gives them words they have in fact spoken: Lord Beeching says "No union leader nor individual management can afford

to put the common interest first." Richard Crossman of the New Statesman calls the opponents of the bill "mindless militants." The interviewer next seeks "an ordinary member of the public." The man he finds turns out to be an engineer, and the interviewer points out that "the engineers undertook several one day strikes against the Industrial Relations Bill, which were not in the public interest." This disqualifies him from being an ordinary member of the public, so the man proposes a list of jobs that might qualify him, such as teacher, policeman, postman, journalist, railwayman, miner, and many many more. Because of recent industrial action all such jobs disqualify him, and only one seems to be left:

PETE I know what you are sir!
 JOHN Do you?
 PETE You're in the public interest all right!
 JOHN Oh, jolly good!
 PETE You're an employer!
 JOHN That's right. I knew we'd find out eventually.

More chords on the piano introduce the second sketch, as the style of presentation changes. Edgar offers a cartoon-like minihistory of politics in the sixties as seen by the Conservatives. He portrays them as "de Tory Gang" in the guise of old movie style Chicago mobsters led by "Skipper" (Heath). Two of the actors go into the audience and frisk them, brandishing plastic six-shooters. They then climb onto the stage, backing towards the center until they crash into each other--a commedia dell'arte gag rarely omitted from the Christmas pantomime.

Dialect conveys the speech of the cartoon gangster:

You're looking at de biggest big shot of dem all. Dere wasn't no-one who didn't tremble at de very name of de Tory Gang in de old days. Isn't dat right, boys.

"Skipper" reminisces about the sixties and the Tory Betting and Gaming

Act that made gambling legal, then the Profumo scandal.

Dat was bad enough. But den fings got worse. We was paying out more in protection money dan we was getting in. Now no gang can survive on dat basis. And dat's how de Labour Gang took over de town. (Pause) Dem were bad days. Real bad days.

With horror the gang recalls the Labour Party's program:

Dey made it legal to be homosexual ...
 Dey legalised aboytion ...
 Dey brought in de 1968 Betting and Gaming Act ...
 Dey tightened up de rules ...
 And den dey began to hustle de biggest casino in de land ...
 de Stock Exchange.

The "fairy guardian," "on her points, with a wand," saves the day by causing division in the Labour Party, and the Tories are returned in the 1970 election.

The gangster metaphor resumes after a brief interruption by Lynne, who, in an "English voice," announces the Tory victory and then breaks into a blues number in praise of Edward Heath--"He's the Man of the Moment." Edgar then presents a sketch within a sketch to illustrate the evolution of the Tory Industrial Relations Bill. "De Union Gang" is causing trouble, and the Tories introduce this bill to curb all forms of strike activity. Edgar uses the agitprop illustrative method, simplifying the bill to the basics that can easily be grasped by the audience.

The stage direction reads:

Enter Lynne, who helps Pete carry a table to centre. On the table is a model of a factory and the side streets around it. Inside the factory are little models of workers. Also there are little free-standing flags with numbers on them.

The numbers represent the sections of the Industrial Relations Bill and the actors move the flags into the factory, illustrating how that section will hamper the efforts of the workers to make demands or institute

strike actions. When all seems secure the loophole is discovered; at the end of sixty days a strike will still be possible. Ken, as Reggie (Reginald Maudling), introduces his Immigration Bill. "He takes some little black men from his pocket and puts them in the factory." The Immigration Bill gave government control over where immigrants could work, so Reggie proposes putting them into a striking factory as non-union labor, saying, "I got the idea from a pun I made at a dinner somewhere. Blackleg. Get it?"

The section ends with a prolonged blackout: "De power workers mob have gone slow"; and Pete, in an English voice, announces, "As we seem to be having some technical difficulty with the lights, we shall now take a short commercial break." While drawing on television station jargon, Edgar involves the audience in the power strike itself, leaving them in the dark for the beginning of the next sketch.

This third sketch brings on Lynne as a prostitute who is approached by an upper-class "type" who does not want to pay. The prostitute appropriately proves to be the champion of free enterprise and as the lights go on again she sings her song to the open market:

Get your arrow on target
On my open market
And I'll show you for real what big business can be.

The lights go out again, and Pete and Ken curse the strikers, using worn clichés: "It's the damn union who are threatening the lives of poor old folks in hospitals who fought for this country in two world wars."

The strike theme continues in the fourth sketch. The actors form a line, military style, and march to a parody of the children's

nursery song, The Grand Old Duke of York, now reworked as Grand Old Uncle Tom (Tom Jackson, head of the Postal Workers Union). Factual reports on employment figures, pay rates, profits, and the general progress of the strike interrupt the verses. This section draws on the living newspaper tradition; the actors quote newspaper headlines, articles, and speeches by such as Bill Ryland, acting chairman of the Post Office, Sid Greene, chairman of the Trades Union Congress, and Ted Heath himself. The marching and the song illustrate, in a comedic way, that the strike achieved little for the poorly paid workers and mainly because the Trades Union Congress was unable to give full support, financially, and because the Tories showed no concern for the disparities between inflation rates and wage rates. A demystification by analysis is clearly at work here, as in dialectical propaganda. The song finishes, and the style becomes more documentary. "Music, in a steady rhythm," backs the ensuing litany of further strike action by shipyard workers, boilermakers, blast-furnace workers, and many more. The litany is punctuated by the repetition of Heath's statement: "It is the lower paid workers who are always the first to suffer when you have inflation." The sketch ends with the announcement that the first two Tory budgets provided a fifty-six percent gain to Lord Stokes, Chairman of British Leyland.

The tone of the play is at its most serious in this section as Edgar gives the straight facts. The actors serve as narrators, rather than characters, and offer no illustrations. Because the section is brief and sandwiched between comedic scenes, it comes as a surprise and commands attention to the large amount of information that Edgar offers.

The tone returns to the comedic and takes the form of the comic monologue of Ruth Draper, or the more recent Joyce Grenfell. Lynne enters in mortarboard and gown, holding a cane, and turns the audience into a classroom full of naughty schoolchildren. The school is the metaphor for British workers, and the school rules are the Industrial Relations Act. The Headmaster is Ted Heath. Lynne chastises various groups for their infractions. The naughty "girls and boys on runner duty who refused to deliver any messages for forty-four days" are the postal workers. Lynne explains:

As our headmaster says, we in this school fully accept the right to strike. But there's a right way and a naughty way, and it just so happens that under the new school rules most of the ways are the naughty ways.

Section 85 of the Act concerns the issue of incitement to strike. It could be enforced in the loosest of situations and Lynne warns her pupils:

From now on, under rule 85, any child who writes anything that supports any boys or girls who are being naughty should jolly well look out or they'll get their bottoms smacked. That's all.

The sketch culminates in the arrest of the entire audience after two naughty boys bring in a song written on placards. The boys invite the audience to sing along, as is always the tradition in the British pantomime, and cajole them to do better--"sing up at the back!" The song turns into one of strike support, and the passing policeman quickly enforces section 85.

Ken takes over the lecture and introduces the sixth sketch on industrial sabotage, the last line of protest left open to the harassed workers. The stage directions read:

John, Pete and Lynne shuffle in and form a line, army style. They start a production line process mime. All three have a set series of mechanical gestures, forming a process. Throughout the sequence, all three make sounds by stamping, clapping hitting hand upon elbow etc., keeping a permanent rhythm of sound going. While they are not speaking, John and Lynne make vocal noises. Pete makes vocal noises. Pete makes vocal noises throughout. The sounds get louder and the process faster as the sequence goes on.

Edgar again uses the living newspaper technique to deliver the facts, accompanied by this physical and vocal illustration. The actors recite a list of industrial sabotage actions, culminating in loud noises and breakneck speed of action, and then it all grinds to a halt with the deflating comment, "Thank God. The fucking line's broken." They now firmly state the Tory viewpoint:

It is this sort of irresponsible behaviour among the British workers that has led so many firms to re-invest in West Germany and Japan. The government should act now to control this wildcat behaviour to ensure that it is worthwhile for investors to put their money into Britain.

The style changes once more for the eighth sketch. John enters as the typical music-hall comedian. Perhaps more to the point he is of the genre found for generations in working men's clubs' versions of the music-hall. The jokes are dominantly topical, as many of them would be in such a milieu. Political figures are mimicked and quoted, for example, George Brown:

"To be frank, I have never known a time when most of us have found the going as good as it is at the end of 1970." You don't think that's funny? Neither did the 690,000 unemployed!!! Don't clap too hard, it's a very old building.

The second act on the music-hall bill is "the hideous Dolebeast" who leaps the unemployment high-jump pole. Comic physical visualization of a sociopolitical situation is a mainstay of most agitprop forms, and Edgar offers his own ironic twist by turning it into a game with a

cheering section, inviting the audience to incite the beast to jump higher and higher. A parody of the typical sports commentary accompanies it all. The section ends with Heath's own comment that the "national economic situation was 'the culmination of a year's hard work by the government.'"

Pete now sings "a plaintive song" about how good everything is. Mr. Campbell Adamson, Director General of the Confederation of British Industry, and Mr. Tony Barber, Chancellor of the Exchequer, next sing a song in the manner of the many double comedian acts of the British music-hall, calling each other Mr. A. and Mr. B. This comic portrayal of real figures in public life has a long tradition in British popular entertainment and had been significantly revitalized by the television series of the early sixties That Was The Week That Was, where even the Queen was not spared. (Television was not under the censorship jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain at any time.) The song brings about a bargain between the two men to blackmail the unions into submission.

Pete's plaintive song resumes until the comic returns to announce the new Tory policy of reducing taxes on luxuries. Pete's song takes on a new tone as he gives the other side of the story:

But the lads that's in the dole queue
Have a different tale to tell
As the queues go on increasing
And they tell us all is well.

Lynne, John, and Ken now perform the "big production number," dancing and singing "Spend! Spend! Spend!" It comes to a roaring climax, and Pete resumes his song:

They tell us there's no conflict
 And that the class war's dead
 But I see the same old bosses
 And the same kids begging bread.

We're all in it together?
 Bosses and the working class?
 You must be bloody joking
 You can stick that up your arse.

The others say:

Well really! Of all the ungrateful things to say! After
 all we've done for him!

BLACKOUT

Pete's song is the only item in the play in which Edgar dramatizes the other side of the situation, or gives us a view of a normative socialist character. He has allowed the facts recited in the documentary and living newspaper sections to make his points, and by giving full rein to the cartoon possibilities of Tory policy, he allows the Conservatives to condemn themselves. In this sense the no-solution tradition of the Soviet dialectical plays is followed, though not that of the dialectical propaganda play defined by Szanto, who suggests solutions are proffered. The fast-paced, episodic, nonpsychological features are also apparent. Just as the Soviet agitprop plays drew on traditional forms, so Edgar draws on British traditions of the music-hall, pantomime, and stand-up comics and monologists. He uses a variety of linguistic approaches: verse, jargon, straight reporting, pompous prose, normal prose, writing in dialect, and direct quotation. He draws on the living newspaper techniques and the documentary. The props and costume additions are emblematic: the "high jump," the plastic six-shooter, the magic wand of the fairy guardian, the top hat of the aristocrat; and the model of the factory provides a cartoon-

type simplification of a major piece of Tory legislation, making the important points clear to a lay audience.

As is traditional in agitprop performance, the actors often directly address the audience. During the reflections of the Tory Gang, one of them turns to the audience and says, "De boss is reminiscing." The comedian talks to the audience as his friends, and the bridges between sketches are mainly directed at the audience. The blackout involves the audience, as does the song and the resulting "arrest."

Characters are either "types" or cartoon versions of real people. In other cases the actors retain their identity, serving as documentary reporters. Physical acting techniques create the production line--a comparison with the Blue Blouse's industrialization is interesting (see p. 20, above), though less skilled gymnastics are demanded. The Dolebeast, however, is asked to do a very high jump.

Edgar uses music and song to underscore, highlight, and maintain a light entertainment, while putting across a strong political message. Agitprop, as used by Edgar, is perhaps very close to the satirical revue which had similar aims and employed the same large variety of forms.

General Will's audience was largely working class, and the content of The National Interest was of direct relevance to them. Edgar may have preached to the converted, but he offered facts and figures in a palatable form and with a political perspective, fulfilling the didactic functions of agitprop. He carried out his research with care and commitment:

Editing a student newspaper, and being involved in the political life of the union, and then going into journalism gave me a talent, which has had mixed benefits, for getting inside a subject very quickly and quite precisely.¹

The range of Edgar's subject matter is enormous, as will become apparent as more plays are discussed. Each one has evolved from intensive research on a topic that interested him.

I have been a kind of magpie writer. I've flitted about and I've written about most of the important issues at the times I've lived through. I do believe that one of the functions of a playwright is to keep a kind of record of, a dramatic record of, what people were doing.²

A list of the topics of Edgar's plays would, indeed, cover almost every important social or political crisis of the seventies in Britain. The economic crises form the subject matter of the next play for discussion.

The Dunkirk Spirit (1974) is a full-length agitprop play in sixteen scenes, about twice the length of The National Interest. This time Edgar traces Britain's economic decline since the end of World War II, or, in his own words, it is "a history of British capitalism since the war."³ He continues:

We were attempting to explain the currency of capitalism, and I suppose it is the agit-prop play with which I am most pleased, because in two hours you actually get through the most massive amount of extremely complex material.⁴

Indeed, Edgar gives an overview, with supportive statistics, of "sur-

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 4.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, New York, April 1983.

³Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

plus value" theory, nationalization of industry, "stop and go" spending and taxation policies, ruinous technological competition, and international capitalism. He uses a specific industry as a representative image for an era; for example, the fifties are represented by the history of the shipbuilding industry. As in The National Interest, Edgar uses illustrative methods, music-hall style songs, and revue sketches. He packs a considerable number of facts, quotations, and statistics into the play, but feeds in visual scenes throughout, to diminish possible fact fatigue on the part of the audience.

The play opens with two of the five actors (Bob, Noel, Brian, Carole, and Alan in the manuscript) watching the television news, a scene designed to be updated according to current events, as was done during the play's 1974 tour. The miners are the topic of the manuscript version, and the hope offered is

Unity in the nation's hour of need
The Bonhomie of the Blitz
The Spirit of Dunkirk.¹

The irony of the remark is evident in the light of the rest of the play which depicts the lack of national unity in postwar British economics.

Edgar sets up the underlying theme of the play in a visual illustration of the age-old argument about wealth, property, and ownership, using a £1 note:

BOB I own the wealth, therefore I own the product. (He
 pushes Brian and sits on the £1 note.)
BRIAN I make the products, so they're mine. (He pushes
 Bob and sits on the £1 note.)

¹David Edgar, The Dunkirk Spirit (manuscript dated January 1974). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

The argument continues until there is a total stalemate:

BRIAN But I dig the raw materials out of the ground.
 (Pushes Bob.)
 BOB Aha! But you didn't put it there!
 BRIAN Neither did you!

A cartoon-like illustration of the theory of surplus value follows. Bob plays the "overlord" who owns the raw material--balloons--and hires people to blow them up. Then they burst them to indicate consumption. Bob manages to save a few (profit) and buys some labor-saving machinery, causing redundancy:

BRIAN So because we've made more than he needs
 CAROLE We get less than we need
 BRIAN More abundance: more poverty
 CAROLE The logic of capitalism.

The main themes established, Edgar now presents a history of the British economy since World War II through the eyes of two sailors returning from the war. They have the Dunkirk spirit until the economic realities of postwar Britain dampen them.

So far as I'm concerned, you can roll your national unity into a nine-inch Churchillian cigar and smoke it.

The ensuing sketches focus on particular industries and their postwar decline. The coal industry, nationalized in 1945, is the first topic. The sketch begins cheerily, but the tone darkens as hopes are crushed. As in The National Interest, Edgar uses topical quotations to emphasize the problems and the ironies. For example, Maurice Webb, the Minister for Food, is quoted:

The Labour Party has got to understand that it is no longer a street corner mob. It is the governing class of this country. It has got to have the poise and self-control of the ruling class.

This sketch, along with several others, comes close to a documentary

format, with its density of facts and figures, but the connecting dialogue is light, cartoon-like, and often ironic. The characters are "types."

BOB Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!
 ALAN And who are you?
 BOB I'm a governmental expert... And who are you?
 ALAN I'm a coal miner.
 BOB How do you do? And your friend?
 NEIL I'm a coal owner.
 BOB Do sit down.

The sketch tradition of the music-hall and revue used in The National Interest is again apparent, particularly in its revitalized That Was The Week That Was form, with its use of satire and its political content, again very much like the satirical revue. Part of the fun of the multi-sketch format is watching the actors switch from character to character and, along with the comedic approaches, this tempers the documentary sections, keeping them light, while still highlighting the factual information.

The format continues. The ensuing three sketches cover the declines of various British industries. Two include songs, the first of which is about "Thirteen Years of Tory Misrule." However, Edgar then tells us how the Labour Party won the 1964 election, introducing "the white heat of the technological revolution," in which competitive technology became more important than the state of the economy. The Concorde project, a butt in two other plays (The Case of the Workers' Plane and its shorter television version, Concorde Cabaret), is a target here:

You are telling me that spending over 1,000 million quid on an aeroplane to transport less than a hundred businessmen to New York and back in a day is essential to the survival of British industry?

Edgar neatly deflates any arguments with the simple statistic that government aid to the aerospace industry was repeatedly increased, but was consistently accompanied by falling profits. He gives the exact figures. He also refers to the lurking monsters behind international economics, characters that recur in several Edgar plays:

the faceless financial masterminds who forced the Labour government to devalue in 1967. The gnomes of Zurich.

After these three documentary-style sketches Edgar returns to the more visual, illustrative, cartoon form, parodying a television game show to explain productivity, and a police interrogation to explain the electric industry's lost jobs and rising profits. A gnome of Zürich then appears in the guise of Noddy, a familiar children's story-book character. He is trying to get up a capital strike by discouraging investment in ailing British industry.

"The great international currency brag game" takes up most of the second half of the play, with the International Monetary Fund always available to float a loan to the players: America (Sammy), Germany (Gerry), and Britain (Tommy). They all agree on the principle, "I want to keep the game going but I don't want you to win." The final sketch equates the policies of Nixon and Heath with the Tories backing the "captains of British Industry." The "captain" gives a military-type lecture on the wage-price battle. Soon it turns into a court martial in which the accused, Private Tuck (the Trades Union Congress) and Private Power (the electrical workers) are convicted by the Industrial Relations Act, which, as we know from the earlier play, was all in the national interest. Private Post is threatened by a firing squad (both puns intentional), holds out for a strike, but

ends up shooting himself. Private Pit (miners) somehow does hold out, as, indeed, the miners did.

A music-hall type song summarizes the economic approaches and failures and brings up the conspiracies of international capitalism in Guatemala and Chile, ending with the rightist threat, "If necessary we will go further."

On reflection, Edgar thinks the two-hour length of this play was a problem:

Agitprop is something that starts in the street. I think you can do agitprop plays lasting three quarters of an hour even now, but two hours of that kind of intensity just doesn't work.¹

He explains further, referring to his work with the General Will:

We began to realise that our shows had to do two things-- to be entertaining in commenting on events the audience would know about, and to provide a context in which to view events--a political, theoretical context. And because of these factors, the plays worked best with what the jargon calls "advanced workers"--at things like TASS weekend schools, shop stewards, Labour Party and IS socials. They worked badly with fairly apolitical workers.²

This is the basic dilemma of agitprop theater; it does tend to work better when the audience agrees with you from the start. The propaganda informs and educates, the agitation wakes up, but only if the audience is sympathetic from the start. If the actors face an uninformed or prejudiced audience, maintaining interest becomes a severe problem. The material must be presented in a way that can change people's opinions, and the wealth of information must be presented

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 7.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 143, citing her personal interview with Edgar.

in a way that is easily understood. This is particularly true of a David Edgar play, which gives out vast numbers of statistics and documented facts. In the Soviet experience agitprop theater was a branch of a whole network of propaganda efforts in a newly forming society, and expressed the official doctrine. The British experience of the seventies was different. It was the voice of dissension, particularly in the Heath years, so was likely to meet outside opposition rather than support. However, the agitprop work was part, and in some instances still is, of the movement towards returning the theater to its role as a forum for the discussion of contemporary issues. Edgar writes:

The new Theatre must be almost everything the old Theatre is not. It must be serious in content, but accessible in form. It must be popular without being populist. It must be orientated towards a working-class audience. It must be temporary, immediate, specific, functional. It must get out of theatre buildings. It must be ideological, and proud of it. It must be celebratory (try to convince the Catholic Church that there's no function in "preaching to the converted!"). It must not be escapist; it must take our times by the throat... the central artistic problem is portraying people's behaviour as a function of their social nexus rather than individual psychology.¹

Edgar's articulation of his aims for the theater will be interesting to refer to again. His approach to playwriting seems vastly different nowadays, but the guiding spirit that he articulates above has remained constant.

State of Emergency is a third agitprop play which Edgar says is now unobtainable. The play was constantly revised in performance to keep it up to date, so little remains of a performed script. It is notable,

¹James Vinson, ed., Contemporary Dramatists, 2nd ed. (London: St. James Press, 1977), p. 236, quoting Edgar.

however, because it marked Edgar's first real venture into group collaboration on the creation of a script, a practice to which he would return on many future occasions.

I write the words, but the process of deciding what each scene is to say (and, indeed, the way it is to be said) is a collective process. Though it must be said that the writer contributes more to the process than most other people.... With State of Emergency we developed a technique whereby I would bring in a great pile of cuttings, and people would look at different areas and report back. That was quite easy in the sense that it was a chronology play, so we know we had to do Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, we had to do the 1972 miners' strike, we had to do the railwaymen. So we'd talk and we'd range around ways of doing something, and get an idea, then I'd go away and write the scene and bring it back.¹

Of the script he said:

It was Living Newspaper basically, with much less cartoon imagery, a stronger developing style. A lot of it was yesterday's headlines.... There were two ridiculously over-articulate working-to-rule railwaymen, standing on the platform explaining the difficulties of moving off. There was a graphic sequence about the dock strike explaining the complicated issue of containerisation, using cardboard boxes.... And we did Sir John Donaldson, Chairman of the Industrial Relations Court, as a schoolmaster.²

Some of the techniques are already familiar from the earlier discussion, most obviously the schoolmaster concept used in The National Interest.

In an unpublished talk given at Oxford University Edgar articulates some of the thinking behind the subject matter to which he and his like-minded fellow playwrights have turned:

The things that binds together my generation of playwrights is an almost unhealthy obsession with explaining things, and,

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 7.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 142, citing Edgar interview.

particularly, with explaining those big public events which have created our contemporary public life.¹

Social issues may also yield to this treatment. The Rupert Show deals with pornography and sexual politics. Some of its scenes and much of its language might have been censored prior to 1968. It is a parody of an Anglican Church service, complete with choirboys, vicar, lessons, prayers, hymns, responses, creed, and sermon. The lessons are from the "Book of Whitehouse" and the infamous Mary Whitehouse is the messiah of this religion of morality.²

Interwoven among the elements of the service are illustrative scenes of the struggles of purity against vice and immorality, and Edgar's chief devices are familiar characters from children's story-books. The eponymous Rupert has been known to many generations of English children as the virtuous bear hero of a daily newspaper comic strip and countless books. Rupert's stories are told in verse underneath the bubble-dialogued cartoons, and Edgar opens the play with such a verse:

My name is Rupert, hallo there!
I am a happy little bear.
My mummy said that I could come
To introduce this family fun.
.....

¹David Edgar, from the manuscript of a talk given to the Political Studies Association, April 1982, and to the Oxford University English Faculty, May 1982.

²Mary Whitehouse is a self-appointed guardian of British public morals. She has written books and articles and has instituted lawsuits, all in the name of decency and morality. In 1981 she instituted a suit against Michael Bogdanov, the director of Howard Brenton's The Romans in Britain, presented at the National Theatre. He was charged with procuring an indecent act (a homosexual rape was simulated on the stage). After court hearings, great outcry, and the discovery that the letter of the law could support prosecution, Mrs. Whitehouse dropped the case.

These naughty people want to see
 An end to childish fantasy.
 So, chums, please come to my defense.
 Protect my state of innocence.¹

Later, Noddy (see The National Interest) and his friend Big Ears are in danger of mortal sin, but in flies Superprude ("not a bird" or "a plane"), whose Achilles heel is full frontal nudity. Wonder Woman comes to help:

I have come to save you from the deadly rays of HARD-CORE PORN, SUPERPRUDE. With my STEEL BRACELETS, my HIGH-HEELED BOOTS, my All-American KNICKERS and my GOLD-PLATED BRA. Not to mention my GOLD LASSOO!

Biggles, the pilot hero of children's books and films, comes to help the clean-up campaign and receives a list of broken commandments: Goldilocks has been stealing, Jack killed a giant, and so on. The same sort of irony is used to discuss "corrupt" television shows. That Was The Week That Was is described as:

A show which enabled its scriptwriters to disseminate personal abuse and bitter attacks on authority of every kind.²

Till Death Do Us Part (on which the American All In The Family is based) is considered as propaganda:

"Our Alf" was the man we were supposed to hate. He was foul-mouthed and bigoted--he was also a Tory, and a patriot, who believed in God and was devoted to the Queen. If we could be made to hate his offensiveness and prejudice, then we would perhaps also turn against his loyalties.³

A medieval tale in ballad form illustrates the mission of Lord Longford to clean up London prostitution, and a game-show is the format

¹David Edgar, The Rupert Show (manuscript dated December 1971). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished ms.

²David Edgar is quoting from Mary Whitehouse's book, Who Does She Think She Is? (London: New English Library, 1972).

³Ibid.

for an attempt to define pornography. The audience's reactions to "rude things you can hear," "suggestive poses," "perversions," and "nudity" are measured by a "porn-meter." The Oz Trial (an underground magazine tried for obscenity) was a cause célèbre in 1971, and Edgar draws on this in his sermon section:

My text today is taken from the Obscene Publications Act 1949, Section One.

He quotes from the transcripts of the trial to illustrate his points and interjects news bulletins from the political world, for ironic comparisons of obscenity.

Such illustrative techniques are by now familiar agitprop devices, but this play has the unifying feature of the church service parody, bringing with it the point that self-appointed guardians of public morality may be seen as religious fanatics, with their own special religion. The integration of the agitprop techniques within this unifying frame gives the play a compact style and a dramatic flow, though Edgar is less pleased with the results:

It was an attempt to deal with a subject--sex and pornography --and the Mary Whitehouse Oz Trial backlash, in an agitprop way, which I think made it rather less satisfactory than some of my other work at that time. Again because the form wasn't frightfully suitable, though I think it was a good thing to do a journalistic hatchet job on the anti-pornography campaigners. At the end there was a kind of demonstration with riot police and two hippies being beaten up by them, which was meant to suggest the inadequacy of the counterculture, and was an implied criticism of the Oz Three, whose trial was still viewed by some people as being somehow a great and important revolutionary event. That critique, theatrically, was interestingly presented. But of all the plays I did for the General Will, Rupert was the least successful.¹

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 8.

In Not With A Bang But A Whimper Edgar attempts a critique of the state of ecology. It was performed at Leeds Polytechnic in November 1972. Survivors was written at the same time (June 1972) for the Traverse Theatre Workshop, and many of the scenes are identical.

Edgar uses the metaphor of Spaceship Earth to introduce his themes. It is 4000 B.C., and Adam and Eve are receiving radioed instructions from God, with a white beard, earphones, and a microphone. Adam, who is slow on the uptake, asks,

Hey, do you mean instructions as contained in Genesis, section I, subsections 28 and 29, control?¹

Eventually God tells them,

Roger, Earth, and you just go right ahead and do what you want. Over and out.

The time changes to 1970 A.D., and the spaceship is full of debris; Adam is smoking, and the spaceship is overpopulated; there is hunger, fouled water, and air. Adam and Eve decide to check with the MIT computer to find out what is happening. The rest of the play explains environmental problems, using different dramatic techniques.

Certain sections are closer to a documentary format in their concern for facts and figures, using many MIT reports and Paul Ehrlich's writings for population figures and predictions. Slides frequently show this information, often at the end of a scene which has illustrated the problem in a comedic way. Running through the play is the ongoing story of "Little Kenneth and His Struggle With The Internal Combustion

¹David Edgar, Not With A Bang But A Whimper (manuscript dated June 1972). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

Engine." In cartoon-sketch style, Edgar documents the true story of a young man's battles to get pollution restrictions imposed on Detroit's Automobile Industry. A music-hall comedian links many of the sketches (songs do in other places) and makes very bad jokes on the issues. Most of the sketches are in the illustrative agitprop style, and some of Edgar's most imaginative sketches are in this play.

The "detergent" sketch is done as a television commercial. A housewife stands by her cut-out washing machine, proud that even the blue shirt came out whiter than white, but the "scummy foam" soon leads her to a nonphosphate, "new, improved" brand, which has to be improved again because the new ingredient causes deformed baby rats, and so on and on, with the profit motives of the detergent industry leading the way.

The television gardening show is the form of the "pesticide" sketch. Eventually the "pest" learns to love DDT, which makes him very high, so he calls his friends to join him. They moan ("wow" and "far out") and call the gardener the "pusher."

The "resources" sketch has six actors playing Coal, Gold, Nickel, Natural Gas, Iron, and Lead, preparing for and running a race. Two "sports commentators" narrate the race and the fate of the runners, all of whom die before the end of the race. The distance is measured in years and tells how long it will take for these resources to run out at current rates of consumption and assuming no new discoveries.

The "population" sketch shows two girls producing 119 babies in one minute (the current birthrate), while Pope Paul VI is quoted:

You must strive to multiply bread so that it suffices for the tables of mankind and not rather favor an artificial

control of birth, which would be irrational, in order to diminish the number of guests at the Banquet of Life.

A quotation from Paul Ehrlich provides a counterpoint:

An American child will use natural resources at 500 times the rate of an Indian child.

"Pompous music" introduces the "World Natural Resources" game, in which imperialist nations exploit Africa's resources such as gold, copper, tin, lead, and silver and then fight among themselves. America joins the game and sets the new rules:

Each developed player starts off with so much money. Each underdeveloped player starts off with so many natural resources. And the idea is to see how much the developed players can get out of the undeveloped players without starting a war. Clear? Right! Off you go!

Slides document the facts and figures on resources, developments, trade, tariffs, loans, and so on, and Africa comments: "Two-thirds of our foreign aid received goes in repayments." A slide then reads: "Between 1950 and 1967 Latin America received \$3,900 million in investment and repaid \$12,800 million."

Edgar's concerns in this play are the dangerous depletion of resources, overpopulation (abortion and birth control are the topics of another sketch), and most issues that concern the ecologist. What makes the play more than an ecological treatise is Edgar's analysis of these problems as being economically and politically based. The play ends with the disastrous "green revolution" in Vietnam, with the fertilizers poisoning the waters for humans, and the pests adjusting happily to the pesticides. The United States ironically suggests that they stop breeding so that there will be enough food to go around.

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Survivors, however, is really another version of the same play with most of the major sketches appearing in both, including the story of little Kenneth. The significant difference is that the music-hall comic appears as Mephistopheles. He introduces us to his friend, Faustus, who is blamed for the ills that befall the world. Midway Edgar turns to a parody of a morality play in which Avarice, Sloth, Gluttony, Pride, Envy, and Lechery end up in a brawl over money, food, waste, etc. Wrath steps in to stop the fight, but with the promise of mankind's destruction as punishment. The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse--Famine, Pestilence, and War--then set the destruction in motion. Faustus' end coincides with the MIT computer's prediction of world collapse. The MIT scientist rambles on with economic policy suggestions for reprieve, while Faustus gives his final speech from Marlowe's version. The end of the play shows a waiting-room full of miserable survivors after a final "catastrophe." A "madman" says, "Everything was solved. Didn't ya know?"¹

In his environmental extravaganza and history of pop culture, The All-Singing All-Talking Golden Oldie Book Revival Ho Chi Minh Peace Love and Revolution Show (hereafter referred to The ... Show), Edgar reuses some of the sketches and songs from these two plays. The opening song sets a political context with its recounting of the progress of A- and H-bomb tests from 1944 to 1953, when the Soviet Union joined the race. The final scene shows members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament mingling with anti-Vietnam War demonstrators. These scenes

¹David Edgar, Survivors (manuscript dated June 1972). All subsequent quotations from this play are from this unpublished manuscript.

frame an account of the sociological phenomena of the fifties, sixties, and seventies with their "teds, mods, rockers, hippies, yippies, hell's angels, skinheads, and teenyboppers, taking in sex, drugs, politics, mysticism, and violence along the way."¹ Pop music from the periods punctuates the proceedings in which the audience is asked to move between two locations. Spectacular effects are called for, and the production is hosted by Superman as a sort of master of ceremonies.

The plays discussed in this and the following section played frequently to audiences who were in total agreement with the political viewpoint of the plays. What Edgar offers in addition to political reaffirmation is the result of his detailed research into the given topic--the facts and figures of the issues, and information the audience is unlikely to have. By his methods of selection and organization he also provides perspectives, comparisons, and analyses. By presenting this in an entertaining and theatrical way, Edgar does exactly what Szanto describes as the raison d'être of agitprop theater:

It attempts to bring citizens to the proper point of radical awareness so that they can afterwards be moved to voluntary action.²

In the final analysis that is all theater can do, though the initial impulses and hopes of the political writers had been to do more in terms of revolutionary activism. With maturity and hindsight Edgar writes in a 1978 article:

¹Theatre Checklist, no. 20, ed. Simon Trussler (London: Theatre Quarterly Publications, 1979), p. 13.

²Szanto, Theatre and Propaganda, p. 23.

the realisation that socialist playmakers cannot themselves change the world may yet help them to discover ways of contributing, and in no small measure, to the work of those who can.¹

¹Edgar, "Ten Years," p. 33.

Chapter IV

DOCUMENTARY DRAMA

Any theatrical piece which recounts and reenacts actual events may, in the loosest sense, be termed a documentary drama. On this basis some Greek tragedies and Shakespeare's history plays might qualify (from the medieval church's viewpoint, the cycle plays, too), but David Edgar, in his essay "On Drama Documentary,"¹ points out that such a drama "relies on its facts being correct," which is certainly not true of the cited works. He notes that it is a public drama and adds:

What sets drama-documentary apart from the mass of public plays is not the employment of facts but the theatrical use to which those facts are put.²

Shakespeare and Aeschylus in The Persians did not strive for historical accuracy, but rather for universal truths. The stories were also known to the audience. Documentary drama tends to provide information unknown, certainly in its details, to the audience, thereby fulfilling a didactic function. Edgar draws attention to a further documentary feature:

I think that the theatre of fact, the documentary theatre, was created to give credibility to the playwright's analysis of the incredible happenings of our time.³

Peter Weiss's The Investigation and Rolf Hochhuth's The Deputy are two

¹David Edgar, "On Drama Documentary," a rewritten and extended version of a talk, Acting Out Facts, broadcast on Britain's Radio Three, 28 December 1980.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Ibid., p. 18.

examples of how this credibility can work. The points made by the plays are so much more powerful because the evidence exists, is fact. We are then more likely to give ear to the analysis or conclusions the author may draw, than if we are dealing with fiction. Therefore, for public issues of importance it is clearly a sound approach, for it is the analysis that the audience ultimately wants, not just the history. Edgar comments on this:

The dramatic power of drama documentary lies in its capacity to show us not that certain events occurred... or even why they occurred..., but how they occurred: how recognizable human beings rule, fight, judge, meet, negotiate, suppress and overthrow.¹

Peter Weiss has also attempted an analysis of what he calls documentary theater and describes it as follows:

Documentary Theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films and other contemporary documents are the basis of performance. ... It is not at the centre of events, it is in the position of spectator and analyst. It emphasizes through montage, significant details in the chaos of external reality. Through the confrontation of contradictory details, it shows up existing conflicts. According to the underlying material, it then makes a suggestion for a solution, or an appeal, or asks basic questions.... Documentary Theatre leads to attention, consciousness, reflection.²

Weiss's phrase "it emphasizes through montage" is important, since the word "documentary" can mislead one to feel that total objectivity is at work. The playwright-reporter's own process of selecting, editing, arrangement, and ultimate method of presentation makes this form of

¹Ibid., p. 23.

²Peter Weiss, "The Material and the Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre," Theatre Quarterly 1/1 (1971): 41.

theater as subjective as any other. The writer shapes his source material to suit certain ends. Because the "credibility factor," noted by Edgar, gives support, the political writer has a powerful form with which to work if his aim is propaganda, or simply Weiss's "attention, consciousness and reflection." Yet there is a built-in danger, and Weiss warns:

A Documentary Theatre which is to be a political forum first of all, and which renounces aesthetic considerations, calls its right to exist into question. It would be more effective for its members to take part in practical political activity outside the theatre. Only when it has transmuted the reality it has laid bare by its own probing and criticizing into an artistic form can it achieve true validity in dealing with that reality. On such a stage the drama can become an instrument for forming political opinion.¹

John Grierson supports this argument when he states that documentary is "the creative treatment of actuality,"² and Rolf Hochhuth adds that "the writer must hold fast to his freedom, which alone empowers him to give form to the matter."³

Gregory Mason, in his article, "Documentary Drama from Revue to Tribunal," dates modern documentary drama from Piscator's 1927 production of In Spite of Everything, of which Piscator wrote,

The whole performance was one huge montage of authentic speeches, articles, newspaper clippings, slogans, leaflets, photographs and films of the War and the Revolution.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 42.

²John Grierson, Grierson on Documentary, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London, 1946), quoted by Gregory Mason in "From the Revue to the Tribunal," Modern Drama 20/3 (1977): 266.

³Rolf Hochhuth, "Sidelights on History," The Deputy (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 288, quoted by Mason, "Revue to Tribunal," p. 268.

⁴Piscator, Political Theatre, quoted and translated by Mason, "Revue to Tribunal," p. 263.

Mason writes that "the goal was to make of documentary drama a direct political forum" where the subject matter becomes the hero of the piece.¹

The preceding comments are applicable to the plays of Edgar that I will discuss in this chapter. They are also applicable to the more documentary sections of the plays discussed in the previous chapter. Documentary drama has also been frequently allied with agitprop theater, particularly in the political theater movement in Britain in the seventies. Separating Edgar's documentary and agitprop plays is akin to the splitting of hairs, but useful because of the numbers of plays involved. I have used the term documentary to denote sections of plays mostly concerned with the straight delivery of facts, or plays where this feature dominates over parody, cartoon illustrations, songs, and other agitprop methods.

Although documentary drama has proved a useful tool for political playwrights, a nonpartisan form developed elsewhere in the sixties. The Victoria Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent opened in 1962-- Britain's only permanent theater-in-the-round at the time--and it was here that Peter Cheeseman developed a group-created documentary theater based on local issues and history. His aim was "to bind the theatre to the community through the presentation of local subject matter."²

Since 1964 Cheeseman and the Victoria company have produced a musical documentary each year, dealing with such subjects as the potteries industry, the history of North Staffordshire

¹Mason, "Revue to Tribunal," p. 264.

²Gillete A. Elvgren Jr., "Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent," Educational Theatre Journal 26/1 (March 1974): 90.

during the Civil War, and the growth and decline of the now defunct Stoke rail system.¹

Although committed to the cause of art as food for the people rather than as culture for the elite, Cheeseman is opposed to the use of documentary drama as propaganda for political or social ends:

The important part of the artist's credentials is that he should be completely independent. He must be free from any association with a formal political alignment, otherwise he has lost his credence. Who will believe him? Year in and year out we learn that politicians tell lies. For the sake of a long-term relationship to a community the artist must keep himself free.... We have to find a way of asking disturbing questions which do not take a single viewpoint or single political alignment.²

This basic disagreement notwithstanding, similarities are evident. Both the political writers and Cheeseman use primary source material, manipulated artistically, to inform an audience on an issue. Group creation was a common production method for the political groups and still is for such as Joint Stock Company. Both aim at an intellectual response from the audience, as Elvgren describes:

The use of period songs and music, various types of narration, dialogue which is expressed in the past tense, sound effects, mime and the theatrical techniques used to link the various short scenes are all means whereby the audience's empathy for a character is constrained.³

Both aim to maintain a sense of reportage.

The form is ideally suited to film and television, where Edgar sees it as having reached maturity, and Mason comments,

¹Ibid.

²Peter Cheeseman, quoted by Elvgren, "Documentary Theatre," p. 91.

³Elvgren, "Documentary Theatre," p. 94.

Documentary drama is ... limited to hindsight and the past whereas documentary film can also record the present in its unfolding.¹

The increased use of the documentary form on television has brought about a debate in England over the validity of the form, the challenge coming mainly from the right. Edgar quoted the former Lord Privy Seal, Sir Ian Gilmour, who said that "the so-called dramatization or fictionalization of alleged history is extremely dangerous and misleading, and is something to which the broadcasting authorities must give close attention."² Richard Gott in the Guardian suggested limits on the spheres of writers as Edgar notes:

Gott then went on to accuse television producers and writers of usurping the function of historians, claiming to explain "what actually happened" in history, a role for which they are neither qualified nor competent, rather than pursuing their proper role of "illuminating the human condition" through the creation of imaginary characters in invented situations.³

The debate continues and will so long as writers address themselves to the public issues of the time, particularly if they are approached from a political perspective or partisan stance.

The plays that I will discuss in this chapter all deal with public issues of importance: The End, which discusses the nuclear disarmament movement; The Case of the Workers' Plane, about the aerospace industry; and Events Following the Closure of a Motor Cycle Factory, in which workers take over the means of production when threatened with the loss of their livelihood. All three plays document actual

¹Mason, "Revue to Tribunal," p. 275.

²Edgar, "On Drama Documentary," p. 14.

³Ibid., p. 15.

events but include "faction."¹ Our Own People should perhaps be disqualified from the chapter on the grounds that it is not theater of fact. Edgar, however, follows the format of the tribunal, a popular and successful documentary format since classical Greek times, and all the events and situations have a counterpart in fact. Its ring of truth therefore makes this the logical place to include it.

The End was performed at Bradford University in March 1972. The script requires "a large open area, surrounded by chairs and cushions for the audience,"² and the feeling of being in a school hall. The audience is asked to become part of a group of marchers who will spend the night in the hall, creating a "You Are There" documentary feeling. At various points in the play the actors invite the audience to participate in the action, but they are never pressured to do so. Edgar many times refers to Mary Barnes as his sixties play, but certainly The End is imbued with the sensibilities and emotions of that period, and the form of his play also reflects the artistic currents of that time, particularly since it is an environmental piece.

Edgar presents four plays in one. The frame play is a "happening," and all who attend are participants on this basic level and must transport themselves back to the night of April 13, 1963 and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's historic Aldermaston march. The marchers are spending the night in a school hall spreading out sleeping

¹In his article "On Drama Documentary," Edgar refers to "the form known variously as faction, dramatic reconstruction, documentary drama or drama documentary" (p. 14). Edgar uses the term to imply a combination of fact and fiction.

²David Edgar, The End (manuscript dated 28 January 1972). All other quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

bags, eating (which the audience is also invited to do), tending bruised feet, and so on. Banners and placards are strewn everywhere while folksingers entertain. A "marshall" announces that a play will be performed for the tired marchers. This is the main play within a play, which documents the history of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and is performed in the main playing area. Edgar specifies two subsidiary areas for the two other "plays" whose scenes are woven between the more numerous scenes of "the Marchers' Play." The first is "the Polaris Play," in which the commander of a Polaris submarine in the control of that submarine debates the arms race with a British physicist, who speaks for Edgar's disarmament point of view. Edgar suggests in the script that these sequences would be effective if they were videotaped and played back on a screen for the performance. This, to me, would give a documentary flavor to these sections more strongly than a live performance does, particularly since Edgar dramatizes events that bring us to the brink of nuclear disaster. The "distance" of videotape would add to the feeling of helplessness. The other subsidiary "play" is called "The Cold War Game," in which audience members choose a strategic response to specific crises of 1963. A computer is the set piece for this section, and the operator feeds the responses into the computer. The crisis flashes onto the computer screen each time. The computer is programmed to evaluate whether the responses cumulatively will lead to a nuclear devastation or to a continuing precarious cold war, and the actors accordingly perform one of two "ends" to the entire piece. "The Cold War Game" sections, while having the flavor of a television game show, with the fate of the world

as the grand prize, also have documentary qualities in the listing of the crises of 1963:

1 January 1963 Russian spy plane shot down over U.S.

26 February 1963 Leak to New York Times that Kennedy's administration is considering the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

8 March 1963 U.S. troops cross Vietnam-Cambodia border in skirmish.

The twist is that members of the audience can play politician and decide the outcome--a living documentary, or television game fever taken to its ultimate horror.

The juxtaposition of the three plays within the framework of a fourth provides constant reinforcement of the disarmament theme from different standpoints. Edgar demands a nontheater environment. The hall makes it easier to create a sense of community and spontaneity, and this seems to me to be essential to the play. "The Cold War Game" involves the community in deciding its fate, using headlines and documented history that bring the action up to the time of the play--April 13, 1963. "The Polaris Play," in contrast, is out of the audience's control. (Edgar's idea of a videotape would therefore be effective.) It begins by using the follow-up discussion format of many a television documentary. Two seemingly sane, intelligent, and informed men discuss the arms race. They are in the control room of the missile submarine. They leave, and the "button-pushers," who get "stoned" to relieve the boredom of their nonjob, take their places. The consequences are nearly disastrous, and Edgar's message is clear. Juxtaposing this totally

distanced section with the apparent, but artificial, control and involvement of the "Cold War Game" points up that the only true involvement and hope for our future can come from the community of people, such as those assembled in the audience. And that is a difficult road to travel, as the main "Marchers' Play" illustrates.

This play uses the more straightforward documentary techniques, setting forth a chronological development of the CND movement, using transcripts of speeches, trials, legislation, journalism, and other sources of documentation. The actors impersonate the leading figures in the struggles or sometimes give direct narrative accounts. Edgar's political stance is clear in his selection and editing. Not only is he on the side of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but also on the side of the Committee of 100, the more radical branch led by Bertrand Russell and responsible for the campaign of civil disobedience. Complaints from the proponents of law and order at all costs would be justified in saying that this was a biased documentary account, because the playwright uses the documentary style for his purposes. It does not bring along with it a set of rules beyond fidelity to facts.

Edgar uses some of the cartoon agitprop methods to break up the intensity of extended historical accounts. For example, Bertrand Russell's argument with CND leader Canon Lester John Collins over non-violent civil disobedience versus the democratic parliamentary method takes the form of a boxing match with a typical sports commentary accompaniment.¹ The "blows" are quotations from their documented

¹Mayakovsky used a similar device in his 1920 play, The

[cont'd]

statements, and they call Russell "the pugilistic peer."

Edgar describes Brecht as "part of the air we breathe,"¹ and influences are discernible in many of the plays. In The End Edgar uses scene slogans, for example, "The Founding of the CND," each scene is an entity unto itself, making its own point, and the interweaving of the different plays keeps our emotional responses at a lower tide than our intellectual responses. Eventually we see the three plays merge in time with the fourth frame play. This play maintains the feeling of a "happening," with the food sales, the folksingers, and particularly the interruption of a local farmer who stops the entire proceedings because he has found a "copulating couple" in his fields. He is also a military colonel, so has little sympathy for the marchers, calling them "puppets." The actors then simulate puppets and string pullers and illustrate the parent generation's general reaction to the CND. The comic conclusion is "the shadow of the apocalypse is a great promoter of shagging." The other times when Edgar creates the feeling of a "happening" occur when the actors simulate the early marches and sit-ins in the CND play. Edgar has a core of principal actors, but also asks for several extras and then the actors invite the audience to join the sit-ins, even to experience an arrest by going limp when the police try to move them. After the intermission the central acting area is cordoned off just as Trafalgar Square was on September 17, 1961, for the famous "sit-down." Cut-outs

Championship of the Universal Class Struggle, in which the class struggle is shown as a wrestling match. See also Brecht's In the Jungle of Cities for a similar device.

¹Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

of policemen reinforce the acting company, and a cut-out of a black maria waits at the side for the arrests. The demonstrators have banners and chant while the police warn that it is an illegal demonstration. People make speeches (at one point four at the same time) to create the impression of a mass demonstration. The police become more belligerent as things get out of hand.

Edgar effectively takes us through the history of this peace movement and its public demonstrations, private difficulties, and inner battles. The Polaris and Cold War sections remind us of just how high the stakes are, lest we become too fascinated with the "story," and the ending emphasizes the necessity for personal involvement with the issues. Very close to the end Edgar writes a scene about the Cuban Missile Crisis. John Kennedy lies in bed trying to write his speech on the crisis, while Jackie distracts him with requests for exotic Christmas presents, including the Mona Lisa, then with sex. The scene suddenly includes Russell making his speech, Krushchev likewise, and demonstrators chanting "Hands off Cuba!" The four scenes play simultaneously, until some of the actors create a police cordon. Silence reigns but for the ticking that has underscored the entire scene. Then the folksinger announces, "On 28th October, Krushchev agreed to withdraw missiles from Cuba." Edgar stresses that public concern and outcry had contributed to this development. The play then moves to its conclusion. An announcer reports on conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union over missile bases in Turkey, warning that if they do not reach an agreement, "action will be taken." The date of the computer now reads 13th April 1963, the time of the frame play about the

Aldermaston march. The aggressiveness of the responses to the Cold War Game throughout the evening now conditions the final stages of the conflict in Turkey, and the developments flash onto the computer screen like a countdown. If the audience responses add up to survival, the final scene will show the arrival of the Aldermaston marchers in London and Lyndon Johnson and Harold Wilson shaking hands over Vietnam, saying, "Isn't it nice to have friends!" If the responses add up to apocalypse, a countdown will start, with prayers, speeches, a blackout, and silence.

The End exemplifies a technique of which Edgar is a master, namely, counterpoint. He uses it, as in music, to balance point against point and to add "voices," but he extends the technique to add and combine "voices" in tone, style, character, language, and subject matter. What sometimes appears, more simply, as effective juxtaposition, is often part of a larger vision of a whole counterpointed texture in a play.

Erika Munk singled out The End for her article on political theater in the Village Voice on June 15, 1982, the day of nationwide peace rallies. After describing the play she writes,

What's odd is not that this is an English play... but that it is, in the present state of American theater on the issue of nuclear disarmament, completely inconceivable as an American play... because this play is about politics and history, about choices which aren't unequivocal, spiritual life-style decisions, but, instead, are precise, historical, ethical, and practical. Decisions, that is, which are part of a political process. An enormous number of performances are taking place around the present antinuclear movement in New York, reflecting it and supporting it in an equally enormous variety of styles and stances. None that I know of, however, is political in the way that Edgar's play is political.

The liveness of theater and the fact that it can combine emotion, sensuousness, ideas and information--not to mention

music, movement, words, and images--in almost any conceivable way, make it potentially the most flexible and effective political art.... Theater's also at heart a form of dialogue, both on stage and between stage and audience, so perfectly suited not merely to agitprop, but to expressing the difficulties, the unendingly troublesome decisions which are the stuff of trying to change power. Theater really can analyze politics as well as make statements about it.¹

In The End Edgar places his play in the recent past, drawing a parallel with the seventies when he was writing it. The issue has become more charged in the eighties, to which the television film, The Day After, shown worldwide, will attest.

Typically, however, a documentary play will debate issues more limited by time and place, larger implications notwithstanding. The Case of the Workers' Plane is such a play.

In The Dunkirk Spirit Edgar gives one sketch to the aerospace industry. In The Case of the Workers' Plane the entire play documents and analyzes the history of that industry, leading up to the folly of the Concorde project. The "hero" and narrator of the play is a former air force group captain, now working for the Concorde developers to study its "various implications, political, economic and diplomatic."² When the job depresses him he escapes to the local cabaret, the "Filton Follies," but there the floor show presents an ongoing history of the aerospace industry. The cabaret sections present a density of facts and figures, but the form, with its showgirls (who prove to be far

¹Erika Munk, "A Theater in Search of a Politics," Village Voice, 15 June 1982, p. 46.

²David Edgar, The Case of the Workers' Plane (manuscript dated 11 May 1973). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

from dumb), an emcee who leaps through a hoop, comedy skits, and songs, balances the content, avoiding what I call fact fatigue on the part of the audience. Again the influence of the satirical revue is apparent. Edgar also calls upon the agitprop technique of cartoon-type illustration. The actors mime Maurice Tétard's historic flight to a song accompaniment. They push an actress off a chair to show the destruction of a village in order to build a runway. Duncan Sandys, the Secretary of State for War in 1957, appears as a melodrama villain, trying to cut funds for military projects. American competition arrives in the guise of Richard Nixon as a mafioso godfather, with Superman as his sidekick. A toy gun shooting match illustrates German competition, and children's building blocks suggest the relationships between such items as costs, prices, and profits. The underpinnings of the entire play are facts, facts, facts, but facts put to theatrical use, which Edgar sees as the lynchpin of documentary drama.¹

The main action, which frames the cabaret sections, is in the form of a thriller in which our hero becomes a private eye on the trail of any resistance to the Concorde project. He links the individual scenes with narration and then participates in the action. In one scene he visits an environmentalist, who admits,

I am a professional troublemaker, in the pay of Moscow, Washington, the Boeing Co., William Rodgers M.P. Hawker-Siddeley Ltd. and Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club. I am also of course in the CART [Consensus against Rampant Technology].

A boxing match (cf. The End) illustrates the ultimate fight between

¹See p. 54, above.

our hero and the environmentalists, whose final blow against rampant technology is: "Growth for growth's sake is the ideology of the cancer cell." Our hero comments, "I was foxed right then."

As in The National Interest, Edgar uses the irony of making the protagonist the representative of all that he opposes. This inversion becomes a recurrent source of comedy. Edgar extends the idea by having the hero visit a sitting of the House of Commons Estimates Committee and then making him play all the pro-Concorde personnel. When he plays Sir Robert Marshall, the Secretary for Industry at the Department of Trade and Industry, he refuses to reveal details of aerospace industry expenditure and is beaten up by a figure dressed as a KGB officer. Bandaged and on crutches, our hero stumbles in to meet Sir Arnold Weinstock of the General Electric Company, also half-owner of the British Aircraft Corporation, whose main interest is arranging foreign licenses for ailing British companies. Our hero finally recognizes the villainy he has been facing all along and calls in the police.

Edgar closes the play with a board showing aerospace industry figures. While the government had financed many projects such as the Concorde, profits still fell and unemployment rose, often because of sudden project cancellation. An actor announces:

You can scrub the whole thing. They've decided to drop
the whole system.

Another replies:

There's 12,000 people working on Concorde in Bristol.

The play fully illustrates the dilemma of trying to make clear distinctions between Edgar's documentary and his agitprop plays. He presents industrial data, direct quotations from key figures in the

debate, including parliamentary statements, technical information (some delivered in French when in Scene ii Peter and Pierre explain the two-nation project to their fellow nationals), and an overview of flying history. The source material and wealth of factual data indicate a documentary play, but the variety of comic presentations and illustrative methods suggest agitprop.

In fact Edgar is not concerned about such distinctions. His interest is in presenting information, particularly that which concerns the public sector. The facts and figures are his weapons, but he takes an ironic, comedic, and sometimes farcical stance; he parodies, caricatures, and turns the driest of material into a theatrical entertainment. Because he is adept at a variety of forms he avoids the trap of which Peter Weiss warns, that of using theater as "a political forum first of all," renouncing aesthetic considerations. In the plays so far discussed there is a fair balance of both.

In Events Following the Closure of a Motorcycle Factory the balance is less successful. Edgar uses fewer illustrative or cartoon methods, preferring a narrative, straightforward documentary presentation for the most part. He tells the story of the Meriden Motorcycle Co-operative, formed by a group of workers about to be made redundant by the closing of their workplace. Not only did they take over the running of the Norton-Villiers-Triumph factory, but they also obtained government backing to do so. It is a story to warm the heart of any socialist, but it is juxtaposed against the less inspiring story of the ailing motorcycle industry, told without the humorous treatment of the Concorde play. Sometimes the stories get convoluted, bringing fact

fatigue dangerously close, which may account for Edgar's reflection that it is not his best work "for its level of aspiration."¹

The few agitprop scenes insert moments of lightness as do some director-challenging stage directions. The announcement, "Workers in illegal occupation of factory submit an application for government aid," is followed by the direction:

The Ode To Joy bursts forth from the Orchestra. Lights. Streamers. Tickertape. Fireworks and Monocyclists. Enter a Chorus of 500 singers.²

Later Edgar directs:

Enter briskly a commercial bank, the Export Credit Guarantee Department and the 1972 Industry Act.

And, "Enter Britain and Japan holding the Boston Report."

Overall, however, the tone is serious, and Edgar uses considerable straight reportage and direct quotation. Tension builds as the struggles are recounted, broken only by the few cartooned scenes and the nine songs that Edgar includes. The truly remarkable story, and certainly a useful political tale, is that of the workers' cooperative. This alone would have stood up to the more serious treatment.

Edgar himself felt that there was a problem of focus, and Clive Barker and Simon Trussler experienced my confusion about what is agitprop and what is documentary as the following quotation from their interview with Edgar demonstrates.

¹David Edgar in an informal interview with the author, Stratford, England, January 1983.

²David Edgar, Events Following the Closure of a Motorcycle Factory (manuscript dated 14 January 1976). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

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I did two large-scale agitprop pieces, one before Dunkirk, one after. The one before was The Case of the Workers' Plane, about Concorde, and the one after was Events Following the Closure of a Motorcycle Factory, at Birmingham. Workers' Plane was a very unhappy show and I felt after it that you just couldn't do committed shows with rep actors. Then I thought, well, perhaps it was just the circumstances, and I tried to do it again with Events, and found that it was an endemic problem.

I do like agitprop, and I'm fond of my agitprop plays. I'm fond of that period. There may again be a period when agitprop will have more relevance than I believe it does now. But I don't think I'll ever go back to it, because the sort of subjects that I want to deal with now won't take it. With both Events and The Case of the Workers' Plane, there were plays weaving through which the form couldn't take. There was a play about people who loved making expensive, sophisticated aeroplanes, but realized that it was a social disaster to do so. And there was a much better play in Events about the conflicts between different sets of workers--the actual way, aside from the slogans, in which sets of workers allow themselves to be divided, and indeed want to be divided one from another. And both those plays weren't the plays that eventually hit the stage.

[Question:] Partly because of the complexity of what's implied in the subtext--but partly also because of the very demanding nature of the attention that has to be paid, in Events in particular, simply to follow the detail of what's going on. Isn't it really more documentary than agitprop?

Yes. I suppose that's right. And the great problem was the historical problem with documentaries: who are you aiming at? Because if you're aiming it at the people who are involved, they will naturally be annoyed if you over-simplify. But if you're aiming at people who aren't involved, they're going to get lost. So the aerospace workers who saw Workers' Plane and the motorcycle workers who saw Events (in small numbers in both cases) had a whale of a time: but the general public, in both cases, got lost.¹

Our Own People has relevance to a much wider audience. The manuscript is dated September 1977, and shortly thereafter the Pirate Jenny company took it on tour. One of the themes of this play is British neo-fascism, the dominant theme of Edgar's 1975 play, Destiny (performed 1976). In both plays the characters and the events are

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 13.

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fictitious. As in Destiny, the characters and the events, however, ring only too true. The play, according to Edgar, "is based very much on a real story,"¹ and at the end of the play the actors come out and cite examples of real incidents that parallel those that occur in the play.

Edgar calls this fact-in-fiction, faction, and comments on its usefulness as a form of theater:

It can, at the same time, present a political analysis and the real problems of living people; it can at once present the facts of a situation in an entertaining way and link those facts to the real aspirations and fears of flesh and blood characters.²

My reason for including a play of "faction" in this chapter is twofold: the use of fact, of course, qualifies it on one level, and the format Edgar uses is a particularly effective documentary style--the courtroom drama. He adheres closely to the format, taking us outside the courtroom for only a few less formal scenes in the canteen or the pub. These scenes provide background information on the characters and their attitudes.

The court is a court of inquiry set up "to inquire into the causes and circumstances of the present dispute between employees of the Darley Park Mills Co. Ltd. and their employer."³ Before the court gets under way, the characters introduce themselves and the issues.

¹Ibid., p. 20.

²"Exit Fascism, Stage Right," interview with David Edgar, The Leveller, June 1977, p. 22.

³David Edgar, Our Own People (manuscript dated September 1977). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

The Asian chairman of the strike committee tells us,

What made this strike special [however] was that all the strikers were Asians, and nearly all the people who stayed at work were white.

The court is chaired by "Baroness Cockburn, a former junior Minister elevated to the peerage after Labour's defeat in 1970." A lady barrister, Jill Watts, "who has been involved in a variety of radical causes," according to the stage directions, represents the workers.

The first act presents the evidence given by Asian workers, the strike committee, the union general secretary, the senior steward, and the managing director of the mill. We learn of the difficulties of the Asians: forced overtime, permanent nightshifts, language problems, lack of promotion, and unfriendly attitudes. The difficulties of issuing formal complaints in writing, as company policy requires, deters many Asians from doing so. Management has been facing the personnel problems caused by new efficient machinery calling for fewer workers. Progress seems to be the main villain, and the suggestions of racism are not at first stressed, since we learn that the Race Relations Board had investigated and found no faults. As in his factual documentary drama, Edgar cites dates, numbers, facts, and figures, and he has drawn the key statistics from current industrial data.

While he provides superficial answers during the first act, Edgar has, at the same time, created probabilities that much more is really going on beneath the surface. For example, when language problems are given as reasons for nonpromotion of Asians, Mrs. Bhandari, a member of the strike committee, comments:

But a time-weaver's job is to attend machines. It is true that Dobcross looms speak neither Urdu nor Gujarati. Nor do they speak English.

Another Asian has stated that he has been unable to attend English classes because of forced overtime on his permanent nightshift; a fired striker is inexplicably unavailable to give evidence; and the canteen scenes suggest the personal tensions in this interracial working community. The shop steward, Mrs. Dawson, is clearly not fond of her Asian fellow-workers and the extent of her prejudice becomes an important issue. The first act ends with Mrs. Dawson and a visitor drinking tea at her home. They speak in racist clichés: "They come in and a place just drops apart," "Blame the people that let them in," and the scene ends as Mrs. Dawson says good-bye to her visitor, telling her, "I've got a purpose, since I joined the party. Something to be for." And she picks up her paper, "The National Front"--the name of Britain's neo-fascist party.

In the second act she acknowledges her affiliation and becomes impassioned:

You know, they say. Free enterprise and Communism, locked in struggle for the world. Well, fine. Until you see the money that free enterprise is giving to the Communists. See how it's them encourages this lot to come here. Live here. Breed. And inter-breed. It's a conspiracy. No doubt in my mind. It's a conspiracy, to undermine our race. By bringing them. By other things. Inflation. Unemployment. Common Market. Mucky magazines and filthy television. Rot. Pollute our nation from within. It's all connected. Seems quite clear to me. Destroy the nation. Then take over. Everything.

When Mrs. Bhanderi approaches her with kindness and civility, she is hostile and rude. Other undercurrents from the first act rise to the surface in this act, and we learn of a "gentleman's agreement" between

the company and the union leadership to prevent promotions of nonwhite workers. The imminent Equal Pay Act has set in motion another plan to oust all female workers, white and nonwhite. Sexism proves to be as rampant as racism. The missing witness is being deported under the harsh limitations of the recent Immigration Act, and the threat from this legislation has prevented the union involvement of many Asian workers. Hussein, the chairman of the strike committee, tells the court:

Mr. Jowett said earlier that a worker is a worker. White or black or brown or green with yellow stripes.

Mrs. Ridley said earlier that we should be the same as other workers. Don't be a tribe and they won't be a tribe.

(Slight pause.)

But we are not the same as other workers. Because white workers do not have to take their passports when they go to work. That is the point.

We are not like whites because they are not working side by side with people who desire to put them all on boats to go back where they did or didn't come from. That's the point.

(Pause.)

We are not over here because of some great conspiracy. We are over here because you wanted us to come here. We are over here because, dear Mr. Kitchen, you were over there.

[Sandhu:] And we are here to stay.

The characters in Our Own People, while not psychologically complex, are detailed enough for them to appear prototypical rather than stereotypical as in Edgar's agitprop work. Mrs. Dawson is the recognizable sort who is easy prey for an organization like the National Front, someone drawn in because of ignorance, fear, and the need to belong. Her outburst smacks more of brainwashing than inner conviction. The eight Asian characters represent different levels of assimilation--some were born in the United Kingdom, some are recent arrivals; different abilities with the English language--some need interpreters; others are articulate. We witness a spectrum of the backgrounds and

circumstances of any group of Asians in such a workplace. Edgar draws the less sympathetic characters with similar strokes and offers the same sort of analysis of their motives as he does for the Asians. The scenes set outside the courtroom provide most of the insights into behavior. Technically these scenes cannot be considered as part of the documentary style of the play, since they are scenes of invented naturalistic dialogue, but they add a human validity to the documentary sections, making the characters recognizable human beings.

The sharp difference between this and the other plays discussed in this chapter, apart from its being "faction," is this creation of character which is typically found in the social realist plays. The scope of the play and the treatment of time also set this play apart from the other documentary or agitprop work. In those plays Edgar's aim was to provide a history, sometimes covering many years, and the scope was usually national, if not global. In Our Own People, the time is limited to the duration of the court hearing, though it encompasses retrospective evidence; and the last scene outlines the eventual conclusions of the commission. The scope of the play is limited and specific, although the issue of racism is national. Edgar, therefore, wants the audience to view the situation as typical, offering them a vision of how the events came about. The use of the courtroom documentary format gives the credibility that he sees as a benefit of the form.¹ In its subject matter Our Own People is closely allied with Destiny, produced a year earlier, but it includes more focus on the victims of racism, concentrating on one area where racism appears in

¹See p. 54, above.

contemporary Britain--the workplace.

Edgar's documentary plays do what Weiss prescribes. They "emphasize through montage, significant details in the chaos of external reality." They include implicit suggestions for solutions, but mainly lead to "attention, consciousness and reflection," as any political play must.¹

¹See p. 55, above.

Chapter V

INTERLUDES

Edgar has written several short plays, some of which he calls interludes. I am adopting the term for those plays that are short and do not obviously fall into other categories. I see one main difference between these and the agitprop and documentary plays: the issues are essentially ones that call more upon social awareness and conscience than political commitment and knowledge. The evidence of facts and figures is therefore of less value. Consequently, the vast bibliography of sources that could accompany the agitprop and documentary plays is here absent. A socialist viewpoint, however, informs the plays just as strongly.

To cope or not to cope is the issue of Still Life: Man in Bed, suggested by Goncharov's character, Oblomov. The last straw for the hero, in a list of exasperating Tory policies, is decimalization. Unable to cope with more, Jake retires to his bed which is now bug-infested and filthy; and he is not much better. Tongue-in-cheek, Edgar acknowledges his story source:

FATHER: Where did you get this stupid idea?

KATIE: He read it in a Russian play?¹

[It was, in fact, a novel.]

As in The Dunkirk Spirit and State of Emergency, sections of the play demand updating according to the performance date of the play.

¹David Edgar, Still Life: Man In Bed (manuscript dated 13 March 1971). Subsequent quotations are from this unpublished manuscript.

The number of days Jake has spent in bed have to be counted from Britain's adoption of decimalization, and later Tory policies are to be added. Realistically, the play's performance potential as a topical piece died with the Heath government, but it still holds interest as a period piece.

Jake's former girlfriend, Katie, provides the minimal help he will accept, but Jake resists the efforts of his father, a newspaper reporter, and a social worker, to get him back to the land of the living. The treatment is exaggerated and sketch-like. The father, for instance, yells,

You can't! Not do nothing! You've got to do something!
Anything! For God's sake, I mean you can't do nothing all
the time, not nothing. It isn't right, it isn't Christian,
it isn't bloody decent, for God's sake. (Almost crying)
It's perverted, doing nothing, white men don't do nothing,
they build empires, they don't lie about in the midday sun
which has never set for a thousand years.

Edgar was still a working journalist at the time of writing Still Life, and he provides a wonderful caricature of the reporter determined to get a story. The truth is far too dull, so he makes up the details himself. A good story isn't enough; it must be a sensational one:

Do you smoke pot?
Are you a revolutionary?
Did your mother die recently?

And the report he writes is rife with journalistic clichés.

Similarly, when the social worker arrives she uses all the jargon of her profession, though taken to caricatural extremes:

You are obviously suffering from a deep-seated subliminal
conflict between your conditional role orientation and
your personal quasi-concomitant achievement-expectation
psychofactoral sub-structure.

She encourages him to tell her his sexual fantasies, which makes him

suddenly desire Kate. The "very ugly" social worker offers herself. Rejected, she leaves, and Katie, in turn, rejects Jake, who, unable to cope with anything, settles once and for all for bed and the cop-out.

Each scene begins as an exaggerated sketch, but progresses to a fantasy section, reflecting the fuzziness of Jake's mind. The newspaper reporter sketch suddenly evolves into a fantasy in which Jake is "emulating the life and work of the cynic philosopher, Crates of Thebes," and everyone on stage plays a part in his fantasy.

In The Dunkirk Spirit Edgar summed up the sixties in the aerospace industry sketch, with its emphasis on figures and documentation. Here he provides another perspective on the sixties as Jake looks over his memorabilia:

I can't cope with the changes.... Look round the room. There it is. The scattered debris of a decade of keeping up with the times. My old leather jacket from Margate Sands, '63 wasn't it? Then there's one of those collarless jackets somewhere from the early Beatles' days. There's some beads on the floor--summer in '67. Flowers in the California sun. And then there was '68--there's some of the placards in the corner. I went through a lot. I was the only skinhead in the Isle of Wight. I just got over the Conservatives winning the election then it all started. I got these headaches. I was just getting uptight about pollution when it was the end of European Conservation Year and then it was the Common Market and the Industrial Relations Bill and expansionism vs. inversion and on top of that all this funny money came in.

Conversation in Paradise brings together two of western mythology's most famous women: Eve and the Virgin Mary. Edgar portrays Eve as "a bright little cockney sparrow of a girl" and Mary as "a middle-aged woman [who] sits in a rocking-chair knitting."¹ The setting is heaven, and Eve has arrived after four million years of red tape and waiting

¹David Edgar, Conversation in Paradise (manuscript dated 16 September 1971). Subsequent quotations are from this unpublished ms.

around to get a transfer from the other place. When they discover each other's identity the arguments start. They hold opposite views on everything, particularly sex, love, how to lead one's life, and God. To Eve He was a nag who was never satisfied with her gardening, while Mary's piety is unwavering. Eve challenges Mary on the immaculate conception and her sex life:

EVE I've done my homework. You're known as the Blessed Virgin Mary and yet Matthew states quite categorically that you had four other sons. How did you get them eh? Eh? Another bit of divine intervention?

MARY There are two versions of that. Matthew, it is true, suggests that I was corrupted by the sins of the flesh and bore further children. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, believes that I remained a virgin until my assumption to the right hand of the Son of God. I prefer to take the latter view.

Mary adds, "I was spared the terrible agonies of fleshly passion." Eve enlightens her on this and other worldly matters, including her own fall from grace:

That Garden of Eden wasn't a playground, you know. For a kickoff, you couldn't get away from Him.... But the worst thing was that it was so infernally boring.... Paradise, nothing! It was hell on earth being cooped up in that conservatory.... I didn't find any joy till we'd escaped from our hothouse. When the serpent gave me the lowdown I could have wept for joy.

Mary acknowledges that her own experiences of gardens have not always been good, especially Gethsemane, and they commiserate on the loss of their sons. But soon they are at odds again and back on the subject of passion and sex:

MARY I'm afraid I cannot argue with you because I have never experienced that thing. But I am glad, because it turned you into a monster.

EVE It turned me into a human being, ducks. You would have been a better person for it.

Eve tries to liberate Mary from the shackles of old beliefs and intolerance, particularly as handed down by the church towards its women. Mary resorts to dogma and is unresponsive to Eve, who emerges as a free and independent soul. The play is funny because Edgar aims at exploding myths, while offering a feminist statement. The responses of the two women to each other become predictable in a Bergsonian way and are therefore comic. Added to the myth explosions, such as the absolute misery of the Garden of Eden, they are even funnier.

Edgar explodes one final myth as he introduces his third character. An angel arrives to welcome Eve, and she recognizes him as the serpent from Eden. Mary also knows him as the angel from the Annunciation. He explains:

It's a bit embarrassing really. An unfortunate coincidence. I'd been working on the John the Baptist birth job. Making his old mother fertile. You'll recall she was barren. A difficult job and I did it well. So when the archangel Gabriel got a touch of rheumatism and couldn't do the annunciation.... I mean, I was down there anyway and it seemed simplest if I... We were very short staffed at the time. Mission Nativity took a small army to organize. The star, the angels, the visions, they don't just happen you know. Everybody was working their wings off.

The women resume their quarrel, over the angel now, until Eve gets down to the real issue:

You think I'm the ancestor of all evil, right? And I think you've bugged up men's chances of enjoying themselves on earth. So let the serpent decide.

The serpent-angel says:

You have no need of me, pretty little Eve, mother of all women. It is to Mary Mother of God that I need now to whisper my temptations.

Eve laughs wildly as Mary becomes hysterical, caught in the angel's grip.

Edgar's first play of record, Two Kinds of Angel, also juxtaposes the stories of two contrasting women, Marilyn Monroe and Rosa Luxemburg. They are the idols of two similarly opposite young 1970s roommates: Norma, an actress-model, blonde and sexy, and Rosa, a student revolutionary, unconcerned with her appearance. Two huge posters of their respective "idols" dominate the set. The women bicker over their personal concerns of show business and student activism, with Rosa calling Norma's agent a "little pimp" and Norma calling Rosa's group "the politburo." The tone is light as they argue and make up:

ROSA Don't worry, you'll be a star tomorrow.

NORMA And your revolution will come.

ROSA And your name will be in six-foot high letters.

NORMA And you'll lead the workers through the streets carrying the red flag.

ROSA And you'll print your palms in the cement on Hollywood Boulevard.

(Pause.)

NORMA And you'll destroy us Rosa, won't you, every one?¹

The women freeze, stand by their posters, and summarize the lives of their idols. From this point on Edgar breaks up the 1970s scenes with episodes from Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary career, as Norma plays her secretary, and with episodes from the last days of Marilyn Monroe's life, as Rosa plays her press assistant. He finds as many similarities as he does oppositions in their lives in both their personal needs and their pain. Rosa spends time in jail, Marilyn in a mental hospital, both want babies, but Rosa says,

¹David Edgar, Two Kinds of Angel (manuscript dated 1 June 1970). Subsequent quotations are from this same unpublished manuscript.

ROSA I was a midwife to a different kind of birth....
The birth of socialism from the womb of history.
NORMA My womb was softer than history. It only produced
dead embryos.

For most of the play these scenes are much darker in tone than the 1970s scenes. Then everything merges. As the lives of the historical characters reach a crisis, so does the relationship of the 1970s women. Violence erupts; they kick and fight. Norma raises a frying pan to Rosa as the scene switches to the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and back again to the unconscious and bleeding Rosa, then to Marilyn taking pills and phoning vainly for help.

The main issue of the play seems to be that art and politics need similar and total commitments, with personal needs as secondary items. Though presented somewhat melodramatically in this first play, the ideas were to recur in many more plays where Edgar would examine the balance of public and private behavior. The combination of factual --in this case biographical--information with dramatic imagination has been a consistent feature of Edgar's work. The cross-cutting and freezes were to be refined into the cinematic techniques of the social realist plays in particular, as was the free treatment of time and location.

The play was first performed at Bradford University in July 1970 and later received professional productions in London, Birmingham, Munich, Paris, and Liège. Bradford University also gave Edgar's second play, A Truer Shade of Blue, its first production the same year. It received a professional production two years later at the Ipswich Theatre. Theatre Quarterly's Theatre Checklist calls it "a short

interlude in dubious taste."¹ It shows the duping of two true-blue British city gents by a stripper in a blue Soho Club. Her name is Luscious Lola, the Lovely from Lewisham. Lola, of course, was the name of Dietrich's nightclub singer character in The Blue Angel. Grimes and Gruntgirdle with the Financial Times and "the uniform of the city gent" visit the club in their lunch hour and behave like cartoon caricatures of city gents:

GRUNTGIRDLE Early bird catches the worm, what?
 GRIMES What?
 GRUNTGIRDLE The early bird doesn't miss the boat.
 GRIMES Well it wouldn't need to, would it?
 GRUNTGIRDLE I beg your pardon.
 GRIMES They migrate, fly. Don't take a boat.²

Grimes always misses the point and is always the one to be stuck with the bill. Faced with a woman, the conversation is equally ludicrous:

GRIMES What a pair of swingers.
 GRUNTGIRDLE Like ripe South African melons.
 GRIMES Strong, muscular thighs.
 GRUNTGIRDLE Rippling.

The men represent sexism at its vilest. Ironically they are beaten at their own game. Lola tells them she was really Mawky Maureen, the Moron from Morden, and recounts the most preposterous tale of woe about her seductions and treatment at the hands of evil men who thought of her as a sex object, all of which has brought her to her job in this club. But, she asks,

Hath not a stripper senses, affections, passions, dimensions,
 organs.... If you prick us do we not bleed, if you tickle us

¹Theatre Checklist, no. 20, p. 4.

²David Edgar, A Truer Shade of Blue (manuscript dated July 1970). Subsequent quotations are from this same unpublished manuscript.

do we not laugh.... I just want to be thought of as a real person. That's all. Is it too much to ask? I must go and put on my tassles.

The two men are so appalled that they can get no pleasure from her strip act and beg her to stop. Edgar has made his point about sexist attitudes.

The National Theatre takes us backstage to the dressing-room of a Soho strip club. Here we meet three of the strippers, the club owner, and his assistant. The woman of the earlier and more farcical play made herself out to be the helpless victim of a male-dominated world. These three women take responsibility for their lives and Edgar makes no sentimental statements. If what they do is unacceptable, society must take some of the blame, a society that nourishes a sell-out lunch-time strip act in the name of art. Randall Craig interpreted Edgar's statement to imply that:

The louche voyeurism the place caters for is characteristic of the impotent consumerism rife in Harold Wilson's Britain.¹

Edgar gives a sensitive study of the three women. Ella is middle class and had aspirations towards a career in the theater. Pathetically, she still does her RADA-learned vocal exercises before she goes on stage for her silent strip act. Marie and Eileen are working class. Marie is having an affair with Alex, known as the Colonel, the owner of the club, and seems more inured to the job than her co-workers. Eileen works at the club to support her husband's upwardly mobile and debt-inducing ostentation. He also beats and rapes her. She arrives cut and bruised after such an incident. Craig's review noted,

¹Randall Craig, "Experimental," Drama 118 (Winter 1975): 76.

a rich mixture of rivalry and sympathy between the three of them and there is a solidarity when Alex or the factotum invade their territory.¹

Edgar does not draw psychologically complex characters with detailed backgrounds, but he creates portraits of the typical and recognizable, which becomes an important characteristic of his social realist plays. He does not ask for emotional involvement, but intellectual response.

There are tensions between the women, because of their backgrounds and aspirations, but only Ella has the courage to say,

Your life, our life, is utterly degrading, tawdry, hypocritical. Admit that at least. Live with it.²

Yet Ella cannot escape her own fantasy of being an actress. The play opens with her going over her lines for The Three Sisters, and the audience believes that she is preparing for a performance of that play until her two "sisters" arrive, and the nature of the performance becomes obvious. The hopes of these three women, however, prove as realistic as the dreams of getting to Moscow are in the Chekhov play. There is also a slight resonance of the Masha-Vershinin relationship in the hopeless affair of Marie and her "Colonel."

Edgar portrays Alex as the tough capitalist out to make money from his "artists." He lectures his performers before their act as a producer might. The effect, however, is tawdry. Two of the women are in their costumes; Eileen has run to the chemist's for something to disguise her bruises; he and Marie are fondling each other before he

¹Ibid.

²David Edgar, The National Theatre (manuscript dated August 1975). Subsequent quotations are from this same unpublished manuscript.

finishes his speech. He justifies his work:

I often wonder if I could have made a career in the legitimate theatre. Sometimes I'm disgusted by my work, but when I find myself working with such charming people, and, in addition, helping my country, then I feel quite proud. And what we are doing in a very simple, unpretentious, unhypocritical way, is giving people what they want, escape from all the rotten news, a little yard of sun in all the gloom.

He considers entertainment to be Britain's major national asset and one on which he intends to capitalize. He has a house full of Japanese tourists, come to sample some of Britain's "national theatre."

At the end of the play, Chub, Alex's assistant, reads a speech. Edgar tells us in a stage direction,

The speech at the end of the play was delivered by Harold Wilson in the summer of 1975. It could be any speech, by any Government politician, at more or less any time.

It is an appeal to the nation for restraint and unity, "not a year for yourself, but a year for Britain." While he reads, the women do their strip act. Edgar notes, "It is a very good act." The rest of the play has been punctuated by live reports from the BBC's The World at One on Eileen's radio, as though to remind us the play has implications beyond the personal story of the three women.

The idea of art as a bourgeois commodity is reinforced when Alex fires Marie and Eileen, but keeps on the better-spoken Ella, even though the act is silent. Marie will be replaced with the woman Alex is now living with.

The National Theatre is more realistic than the other plays in this section and has many features of Edgar's social realist work. The tone is also more serious. The language is not self-consciously witty as it often is, and effectively so, in the sketch-style work, but rather

flows from character in an honest and direct way.

Blood Sports, also known as Summer Sports, was written three months before The National Theatre and has been produced more than any other play so far discussed. Ball Boys, the longest of the five pieces which make up the full-length work, has been produced many times as a separate one-act play. The Royal Shakespeare Company, for example, performed it at their Newcastle Theatre in April 1977.

The sports of the title are grouse-hunting, cricket, shotputting and running, horse-riding, and tennis. In The Times, Irving Wardle wrote:

The style offers Mr. Edgar's accustomed blend of factual research and snarling hatred. But hatred of what precisely? By turns his target changes from the capitalist organization of sport to the practice of sport itself and the mob impulse it arouses. Blood Sports, in that sense, is a very English entertainment.¹

While Edgar avoids the obvious blood sport, fox-hunting, the metaphor suits his purpose well, since he selects other class-ridden sports to make his points. Irving Wardle's reviews, almost without exception, refer to Edgar's "hatred" of what he criticizes. Edgar does have a strong socialist point of view which presupposes some categories of villains, and this is more blatant in the agitprop and sketch work than in the later plays. On the basis of the evidence, if there is a basic hatred motivating Edgar's work, it is a hatred of injustice and inhumanity.

Wardle, however, does give Edgar credit for "fertile, comic

¹Irving Wardle, review of Blood Sports, The Times (London), 30 June 1976.

ideas."¹ Edgar's ways of presenting the sports illustrate this. In the first playlet, we see young Ralph who waves his Scottish flag, and his guardian Oliver who "beats about the bushes." The grouse fly from the bushes to be frightened by the flag and then sent in the direction of the off-stage gunmen. Oliver explains:

It bin the twelfth on the eighth month on the year, young Ralph, an the grouse biddies fat an greasy, an the Rich Folks all come for to pepper 'em; here, on the land on our liege lord and lief, the Bane on Froth.²

Edgar invents this archaic-sounding regional dialect to good comic purpose and contrasts it with the "strange and confused language" he gives to Mad Malcolm, the Bane on Froth, who accidentally, it seems, shoots young Ralph. Ralph has become suddenly converted to Marxism after reading the Socialist Worker that is wrapped around his lunch. He storms off in a class revolutionary fervor and unfortunately meets the Bane. He then stumbles in, dying, and his last eloquence is "oh, bugger." The next stage direction reads:

A BUSH slides on.... The BANE stands up in the BUSH. He has a gun and a glass of sherry, wears a kilt, carpet slippers, and talks with an upper-class English accent.

The Bane's language is a spoof of the cockney rhyming slang.³ On seeing the body he mutters many versions of "My God!"--"Sky Shod," "Why Nod," "Buy Cod," "Wry Bod," and "Try Tod"--and tells Oliver, "Wits call bright, bold roy. Tits ball shite. Fly sod. Over." Edgar provides the trans-

¹Ibid.

²David Edgar, "Beaters," Blood Sports (manuscript dated May 1975). Subsequent quotations are from this unpublished manuscript.

³For example: "Go upstairs to bed" would read, in the slang, "Go up the apples and pears to your old Uncle Ted."

lation: "It's all right, old boy, it's all right. Rover." The Bane leaves, unharmed, to sell his land to the Natural Gas Company, for a big profit, putting Oliver out of work.

In Cricket Edgar uses two striking game metaphors simultaneously: cricket and chess. A "High Tory" and a "Soggy Liberal" play on the same cricket team, but never meet because they field on opposite sides of the pitch--literally and politically. In cricket there are two batting positions, which are used alternately. The fielders accordingly change fielding positions. We therefore meet the two cricketers in alternating scenes, as these fielding positions change. They chat to the "spectator," who registers the moves they suggest in an ongoing game of chess. The "spectator" also serves as a conversational go-between. The "discussion" turns to politics. Jack, the Tory, is for capital punishment, sending back the immigrants (except the excellent Jamaican cricketer on the team), and keeping women "prone." He thinks that England has become "seedy, threadbare... Quite unlovable."¹ Ron's attitude is the total opposite. Ron always plays sports for the love of the game. Jack only plays to win. Ron misses an almost impossible catch, and the two men finally meet as the irate Jack storms in to accuse Ron of losing the match for the team:

JACK You stupid fucker. Missing that.

RON I tried.

JACK We would have won.

RON I did my best.

JACK Your best was not sufficient. Silly fucker.

(Spectator proffers the board to Jack, who moves.) King takes castle.

SPEC Mate.

RON I tried. I tried.

¹David Edgar, "Cricket," Blood Sports manuscript.

The spectator rallies the fighting mob instinct with a closing verse:

The sand on the desert is sodden red,
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;
The gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the Regiment blind with the dust and smoke.

The river of death has brimmed its banks,
And England's far and honour's a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

Through the sports metaphor and the game of chess, Edgar gets across points about noncommunication, class separation, party-line politics, and the possible manipulation of the mob, all in a humorous way. The sportsmen mime their fielding activity, providing a visual interest.

Edgar develops this visual thrust further in the next playlet, Shotputter. A runner crosses the stage at frequent intervals as though the stage were part of the track. On stage, a shotputter warms up for the one big throw. The play is about class and power and winning. The shotputter has little respect for other athletes, particularly runners who run round in circles to get back where they started and are usually "toffee-nosed." He feels rejected by the sports world, because it sees him as a big dumb brute. He plans revenge. His one throw will wipe out the runner just as he approaches the tape to set a new world record. He miscalculates, and the runner again wins the cheers and accolades. Tension rises as the runner's "crosses" are woven in between the sport's commentary, which ignores the shotputter, and the shotputter's telling of his life story and feelings, which no one much heeds either. After his intended act of sabotage fails, the commentator leads the shotputter off saying, "You're out of step with history." The theme of this playlet is summed up in the shotputter's first speech:

The Olympic Movement. The ideal. That from all lands and from all walks of life, young men and women, best of their breed, shall come together to compete. No, not to win. Working to win. Straining and sweating in the hope of winning. But, ultimately, not to win. But to have taken part. (Pause.)

A contradiction. And a paradox. It matters not, who's won or lost. A contradiction. For it matters mightily.¹

This theme unites all five plays, since the need to win or wield power is the destructive force in each play, and a force that destroys socialist possibilities.

Cross Country portrays the loser as a horse, shot by its owner after a fall. Here Edgar chooses the comic techniques of the pantomime, with the lady rider being played by a man and the horse being played by two men, Front and Back. The lady, "the beautiful, rich, foul-mouthed daughter of the Shadow Leader of the House of Lords,"² shoots her beloved Forelock and, to Mozart's Requiem, the two parts of the horse cry out:

From the Horses of Diomeded that Heracles did slay
To the mounts of the six hundred that perished in a day
From apocalyptic palfreys winging death, disease and rage
To those who get their eyes put out upon the West End stage
From Red Rum to the primal steeds that galloped round Stonehenge
All with a single, strangled neigh, cry out the word: REVENGE.

The theme of violence has run through the four plays of Blood Sports so far discussed. The violence has been class-rooted and the underdog (or horse) has taken the beating: Ralph is carelessly killed by the Bane, the shotputter is led out, a failure; Ron loses the cricket match and the chess game; and the horse is shot. The fifth play picks up on the idea of revenge, articulated by Forelock in Cross Country. In

¹David Edgar, "Shotputter," Blood Sports manuscript.

²David Edgar, "Cross Country," Blood Sports manuscript.

Ballboys the underdog actively pursues revenge.

Two ballboys, also orphans, murder the Swedish tennis idol, Sven Svenson, after he humiliates one of them during a Centre Court match at Wimbledon. The humiliation had provoked One-Eye, the ballboy in question, to snatch Sven's good-luck racket and break it across his knee. One-Eye, dismissed from the Centre Court, plans revenge. He sees his public humiliation by the tennis star as a typical piece of capitalist worker oppression in a valueless, class-ridden society. One-Eye has a dream that he articulates after the murder, and it is as wrong-headed as Sven's treatment of ballboys. He says:

It is not classes that divide the world. But beauty.

Ugliness.

(Pause.)

AND ONE DAY. ONE DAY. WE'LL RISE.

And, up and down the land, the boiled and warted wreak a horrible revenge. Then shall unlovely losers liquidate the latest faces, then shall the balding massacre the hirsute, and the weaklings, roving in wild mobs, kick sand in every eye.¹

In Operation Iskra Edgar deals in more detail with terrorism, which I believe is the larger implication of Sven's murder. Edgar displays sensitivity to the systematic erosion of personal liberties that can bring about a state of mind that leads to acts of violence and terrorism. What Edgar warns against is the erosion of liberty. He in no way justifies violence, but explains it, just as in Destiny he explains what makes people fascists. Perhaps this is the crux of my disagreement with Wardle's suggestion that Edgar's motivation arises from hatred. Wardle has failed to understand Edgar's most significant modus operandi

¹David Edgar, "Ballboys," Blood Sports manuscript. Also published separately (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

which is to get inside the skins of his people and analyze why they behave certain ways, even if their behavior is ultimately deemed despicable, and to do this through an examination of public, not private, behavior.

One-Eye has been driven to the edge and reacts with violence. The name One-Eye perhaps means he has a warped perspective. Unfortunately, he pulls his friend, Rupert, in with him. Rupert has displayed some intelligence earlier in the play with his discussion of Marx and Feuerbach, but the crafty One-Eye twists the argument about change to his own benefit. Edgar adds a mischievous note by explaining Rupert's weakness with the possibility that he could be Mad Malcolm, the Bane on Froth's illegitimate son.

Edgar uses a heightened language making his ballboys highly articulate--certainly the conversation rises above what could be expected in a locker room at Wimbledon from a boy in disgrace. Since Edgar is aiming at the typical, the language helps to avoid too specific a characterization. The audience should recognize the social patterns, not the individual characters in isolation.

The play is grimmer than the other four in the grouping, and the overall tone is one of black comedy. When One-Eye recounts the scene on the Centre Court, he acts it out and gets Rupert to join in, and they swap parts back and forth. It is very funny, but the opening scene has shown "the mangled body of a blonde tennis player" on the floor. We know what happens, and that darkens the comedy. This opening scene precedes the other four plays in the manuscript version, setting the tone and theme of the entire evening. The rest of Ballboys

then makes up the second act.

The audience sees the mangled body, while a voice-over is heard. It is clearly Sven, the Swede, since Edgar gives him a pronounced dialect. He has a stream-of-consciousness-type speech, as though we hear his last ghostly thoughts. He talks of his women, romping with them, naked in the snow, but has recurrent visions of blood and ice. He meets a mysterious man, "vid a dark cloak and a vite face." He plays contract bridge with him, and he seems to be "du pale ferryman," and finally he sees all his women dancing on the ice:

Und dey are dancink vid du man vid du dark cloak.

Und I am owink him many, many krona.

Und du blud.

Du blud.

Und I revoke.

Und it ist du end.

The long opening speech is of a poetic quality, despite the strange dialect, that Edgar gives rein to infrequently. The death images of the naked bodies in the snow, and then the death figure trapping Sven and taking his all, are compelling and provide a theatrical way to set the tone for an evening of macabre blood sports.

Edgar's other plays that might be categorized as interludes are: Gangsters (July 1972), Road to Hanoi (July 1972), Liberated Zone (June 1973), and Man Only Dines (December 1973). Gangsters, which was presented on Scottish television as Sanctuary, is about two inept and petty thieves who trap themselves in a highway cafeteria and are tormented by broken vending machines, plastic food, a garrulous police constable, and a con man. Road to Hanoi is a ten-minute black comedy send-up of the Bob Hope/Bing Crosby "road" movies. It "is based on the

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true incident of Bob Hope's 1971 visit to Vientiane in Laos, to try and secure a visa to visit Hanoi, and his attempts to buy American prisoners of war back from the North Vietnamese."¹

Liberated Zone uses some of the familiar agitprop techniques to chronicle a history of women's oppression, including statistics on female employment and pay scales in Britain. Edgar cites some historic cases of women who have managed to get the better of men, such as Helen of Troy, Boadicea, St. Joan, and Clytemnestra. He includes a mock investigation of Agamemnon's death and a beauty pageant of Henry VIII's wives. (Katherine of Aragon wins by virtue of longevity as a wife.) A double sex-education class--the boys' version and the girls'--culminates in Freud giving his theory of sex roles and penis envy. The final scene includes a cacaphony of sexist male jargon, with the inversion that it is spoken by women to men. Two warders then come out to return the "crazy" women to their cells.

Man Only Dines was written for the one hundredth anniversary of the Yorkshire Training School of Cookery. It is in two acts but in spirit belongs with the interludes. It is a spoof of a Victorian family play, with feminism and the kitchen the dominant themes. It discusses marriage, etiquette, sex, and running a house, and the characters spend most of their time either eating or playing croquet. Edgar gives mouth-watering details of cooking recipes, and the climax of the play is the on-stage preparation of a plum pudding according to Mrs. Beeton's extravagant recipe, which includes thirty-six eggs.²

¹Theatre Checklist, no. 20, p. 9.

²Mrs. Beeton was a famous English cook whose cookbook graced all genteel English homes in the early part of the century. She has become infamous in times of more austerity.

This group of plays was produced in university theaters and various professional spaces in London, Birmingham, Edinburgh, and Ipswich. They were not written with the specific propaganda aims of a political touring company in mind, and consequently the plays have a generally less polemic tone. Rather than giving the results of detailed research as in the agitprop and documentary plays, Edgar explores situation, allowing a more general analysis of a social condition to emerge. In this sense he is portraying the "typical," which becomes a clearly stated aim in the social realist plays. His targets in these plays are social organization and attitudes rather than matters of political policy to which there is a clear socialist answer. The answer, in these plays, lies in public awareness as much as anything, and the purpose of the plays seems to me to be consciousness raising, often quite gentle as in Conversation in Paradise, strong as in The National Theatre, and close to violent in Blood Sports. In none of these plays is the focus personal, as Edgar explained in one of our interviews:

I much prefer plays with words like public and social. I haven't, and I think it's doubtful that I ever would write purely about domestic life. I suspect that I will never write a play that is entirely set in somebody's living room, or even more in somebody's bedroom, so I continue to believe that the theatre is a legitimate, and indeed in many ways a uniquely satisfactory forum for a certain type of discussion of public life, in that it can, at one and the same time, present an analysis. It is an intellectual medium, an analytical medium and you demonstrate how that analysis expresses itself in terms of human behaviour.¹

There is no easily traceable line of development in Edgar's style of writing. Agitprop and documentary plays dominated the early years, but in 1977 in Wreckers he returned to some of those techniques,

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

providing complicated factual information in quite large doses, and in the 1973 Baby Love certain scenes exemplify social realism long before his commitment to that form. The interludes are spaced throughout his career. He seems to have been constantly experimenting with different forms and styles. One discernible development is his own growing awareness of the balance between the dramaturgy and the politics. He comments:

The paradox is that I've become, in a sense, much more politically active in the second half of the seventies when my plays have been less directly politically functional. But then, in a way, it isn't a paradox because in the early seventies the plays were the politics. The plays were my political activism and they were my ways of making political statements, and indeed, attempting to encourage other people to do things.¹

¹Ibid.

Chapter VI

PLAYING WITH THEATER

The styles of David Edgar's plays are as varied as his subject matter. The frequent use of the music-hall, sports forms, and television game shows serves well in the agitprop and documentary pieces, as do the private-eye format in Workers' Plane and the church service in Rupert. Edgar also plays with literary allusions: The Three Sisters in The National Theatre, Oblomov in Still Life, Agamemnon in Man Only Dines, not to mention the Bible in Conversation and the many children's story-book characters that turn up in several of the plays. Such references and usage of recognizable forms bring a wealth of associations with them and are therefore quick devices to set mood and theme.

Sometimes Edgar uses these devices in short and pointed scenes or sections of plays. At other times Edgar applies the technique to an entire play, by either parodying a specific play, or a specific dramatic form, or both. The issues and scope of these plays tend to be large: Death Story deals with the British presence in Northern Ireland; Dick Deterred is about Watergate and American politics; and Tedderella analyzes Britain's relationship with Europe and the Common Market. Rent has the narrowest scope, since its topic is a particular piece of Tory legislation and the opposition it engendered. Rent is also the play which most explicitly posits a course of action, perhaps because of its theatrical form, which makes it especially useful for agitational theater.

In Rent or Caught in the Act, Edgar plays with the melodrama form. He describes the circumstances:

During 1971, the Conservative government was passing a bill which would substantially change the balance of power between tenants and landlords. There was a big campaign against the bill and I wrote a play called Rent or Caught in the Act... which was intended to be part of that campaign. It was intended to be played in nontheatre environments to groups of tenants who were meeting to discuss what to do about this act of Parliament, and to be presented as part of an evening which would also include the normal business of public meetings. And it in fact did play to thirty tenants' groups. It is now completely dead as a work, a deliberately self-combustible piece. That really was the paradigm of what I was trying to do at that point.¹

The suitability of the melodrama form for political theater is discussed by Robin Estill in his essay on John Walker's 1815 play, The Factory Lad. He concludes:

We should hesitate before we attribute the popularity of the melodrama to presumed escapist tensions: as a theatrical form melodrama is capable of making social comment with the precision and clarity of the political cartoon.²

Jonathan Hammond's review would bear that out:

Rent or Caught in the Act is an aggressive and imaginative exposé of the effects of the Government's Fair Rents Act, written by David Edgar and performed by the General Will.... It parodies the Act's aims and likely effects.... It succeeded in showing how the shortage of housing related to the whole capitalist premise of concentrating wealth in as few hands as possible.³

Melodrama streamlines good and evil in much the same way that agitprop does. Daniel Gerould explains:

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, October 1981.

²Robin Estill, "The Factory Lad: Melodrama as Propaganda," Theatre Quarterly 1/4 (1971): 26.

³Jonathan Hammond, "Fringe," Plays and Players 19 (August 1972): 55.

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The melodrama perceives the world as an arena of intense ethical struggle, polarized into moral and material extremes, where the poor but virtuous are persecuted by the rich and corrupt.¹

The poor but virtuous family in Rent are Joshua and Mrs. Harddoneby and their daughter Lydia. There is a "prodigal and profligate" son, Perce, who has inherited the family fortune and disappeared, leaving his family destitute and about to be evicted. We follow them from home to seedy home, through their increasing poverty and misery, as different provisions of the 1971 Rent Act catch up with them. Edgar does not provide just one villain but a host, making his innocent victims appear even more trapped. There is Devious, from the law firm of Devious, Devious, Devious, and Downright Dishonest; Squeezem, a landlord; Sir Jasper Pricestroke, the capitalist mastermind; and his cronies, Paynorm, Hiveoff, and their moll, Lucy Lameduck. Others in Sir Jasper's pay are Lady Penny Pinch, Grabbit, and Grasper, the rebate assessors, and the two bailiffs, Quartermaine and Bootin, and Julian Aimless, a government minister.

Essentially, the play is an agitprop piece that Edgar extends in length to include numerous examples of villainy that the Rent Act could bring about. Edgar does not use the longer playing time to make the characters or the situation more complex, but to take the characters through the many situations covered by the act, clarifying the effects for his audience, showing the act's injustices, and suggesting some possible fighting tactics. Gerould also notes that melodrama is

¹Daniel Gerould, "Uncle Tom's Cabin and Melodrama," in Showcasing American Drama: Uncle Tom's Cabin, ed. Vera Jiji (New York: Humanities Institute, Brooklyn College, 1983), p. 10.

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"appealing to politically committed writers for its propaganda values,"¹ which perhaps accounts for this play's being the most agitational piece in this section. Heilman, in his book on tragedy and melodrama, also observes that "Melodrama has affinities with politics, Tragedy with religion."² He adds that "Tragedy is drawn towards the permanent and the transcendental whereas Melodrama gravitates towards the typical." That gravitation to the typical is the crux of most political writing, particularly if Marxist concepts are an influence, and in melodrama, as we have found in agitprop writing, the audience is presented with, and asked to accept, the part for the whole.

In playing with this politically effective form, Edgar toys with the melodrama hero type. Honest Tom is Lydia's fiancé and as good as gold. But beyond his total virtue he deflates all notions of the hero. His studies, then his political aspirations, make him postpone marriage, and poor Lydia grows desperate. He is inactive for most of the play, occasionally coming up with an honest idea that sends the Harddonebys off on their next miserable episode. Finally he becomes "chairman of the Housing Committee for this borough, newly now controlled by a Labour majority,"³ and even dares to invade the villains' lair. He is defeated, as no true hero would be, and can suggest only a four-year wait for a change of government. He has sold out, and Lydia's

¹Ibid.

²Robert Bechtold Heilman, Tragedy and Melodrama (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 91.

³David Edgar, Rent or Caught in the Act (manuscript dated April 1972). Subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

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father finally throws him out, but the faithful Lydia follows, telling her father,

We cannot choose down what path love may lead us. I must
go, to spend my days estranged from you, but with the man
I love.

Lydia has all the traits of the virtuous heroine, including the obligatory fainting spell. Her mother, the silent sufferer, says nothing, a case of true dramatic reduction, and alternates between weeping and embroidery, according to the depths of her despair. Tom speaks all too much in clichés and platitudes, a comic device that deflates his heroic role even more. Some of his pearls of borrowed and boring wisdom are:

The darkest hour is just before the dawn, sir.

Sir, but seize that tide in the affairs of men which taken
at the flood leads on to fortune.

I have always tried to lend all men my ear, but few my voice.

When Lydia tries to get him to marry her she can only get through by adopting his mode of speech:

LYDIA Have you not so often said, the bird that rises
earliest catches the worm?

TOM Tis true, but--

LYDIA And that old bees no honey yield?

TOM Aha! But have I not oft-times also said...

She cannot win. Tom appears to have not a spark of originality or adventure in him, and Edgar contrasts him with the surprise hero of the play, Joshua's prodigal son, Perce, who arrives to almost save the day at the very end, when the bailiff, Bootin, is taking Joshua from his final home:

Enter PRODIGAL PERCE. Holds a banner.
 PERCE Hold! Hold! You bailiff, loose him.
 FATHER Do my ears deceive me? Can it be my long-lost son
 Prodigal Perce who comes to save me?
 BOOTIN Prodigal Perce! Tis so. Leader of rent strikes and
 tenants' agitation from Lands End to John O'Groats.
 But now you've gone too far! (Takes foil.)
 PERCE Aye, Father, I've returned. But not as that wastrel
 you once knew--but leader of five million tenants and
 the scourge of government! (Grabs foil.)
 BOOTIN Now have at you, Perce.
 (They fight.)

Perce tells how he has "fought the corruption of landlords" and how "Sir Jasper Pricestroke and his evil crew--frighted for their profits and their lives--sail Morning Cloud to France to 'scape our rage," and Julian Aimless has vanished completely. The lesson is that "solid action by the great oppressed can o'erthrow governments and render all their scheming quick to dust." Since Perce's actions are revolutionary in nature, he too deflates concepts of the melodrama hero.

Edgar keeps the plot moving rapidly with the melodramatic pattern of "confrontation, escape, pursuit"¹ and the resultant series of reversals and climaxes. He uses the language of the Victorian melodrama, taking it to extremes, using every catch-phrase that comes to mind:

Curses, we are discovered!
 Oh, Tom, pray come back safely, my hero.
 I'll go to London to seek my fortune there.
 And ne'er you'll darken my door from this day.

And several scenes end with one or other of the villains' evil laugh: "Ha! Ha! Ha!" True to his format, Edgar intersperses songs and recitations between the scenes of the main plot. He sets the songs to the music of well-known music-hall songs, parodying the lyrics of "The Man

¹Gerould, "UTC and Melodrama," p. 10.

Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo," "Oh Mr. Porter, What Shall I Do?" and "She Was Poor but She Was Honest." The recitations also spoof familiar old verses: "Twas in a back street bar-room that one night it did perchance..." The whole proceedings are introduced by the ever-cheerful chairman, who has a knack of alliteration: "another riveting rallentando recitation," "a piece of perfectly proportioned paradigmatic perspicacity," "that bustling baritone with the blistering bravato," for example.

Since the villains put the Rent Act into effect, use it, and abuse it, Edgar allows them to deliver the facts and applications of it. Since melodrama characterization is simplified (and in this case funny), the villains' scenes maintain a comic tone while getting the facts across. Edgar also poses the possibilities of resistance through squatting and rent strikes, and Perce's arrival is a rousing invitation to action as he talks of his campaigns, swishing his sword at Bootin. Eric Bentley talks of melodrama as "the poor man's catharsis--pity for the hero and heroine and fear of the villain."¹ This would apply here, as the audience of tenants would have great pity for the Harddonebys and were, indeed, in fear of the villainous act and those who enforced it. Melodrama is a popular form and accessible to meetings of tenants, who would certainly know the songs and understand the message. The anachronism of putting the modern housing dilemma in Victorian clothes, language, and form would serve as a distancing device to allow them to enjoy the entertainment while receiving the political message.

¹Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 198.

The political message would be at odds with the happy ending of the typical melodrama, so Edgar deflates that as well. Lydia will spend an unrewarding life with boring, spineless Tom. The bailiff carries off the weeping Mrs. Harddoneby, along with the furniture, to who knows what fate, and the dying bailiff Bootin kills Johsua as his son, Perce, mourns, "Dead, dead, and never bought his council house." Only Perce remains and he will keep up the fights and the agitation. However, for Edgar, virtue alone does not save people in the latter half of the twentieth century, as it may have done in Victorian literature, and Perce will continue to face numerous villains, who may be very powerful and devious.

Rent, a "self-combustible" because topical political drama, retains interest as a dramatic reference back to an act of Parliament that was eventually repealed, perhaps because of such agitation as this play represents, but a revival is now unlikely--of this or most of Edgar's agitprop and documentary work. Only The End and some sections of Not With a Bang But a Whimper remain pertinent.

Tedderella, similarly, only retains interest as a reference to the origins of Britain's membership in the Common Market. Ted Heath is the eponymous character. The play takes the form of a pantomime. Since it is a British genre, not generally known in America, I will outline the main features of its current form. A well-known fairy tale is the basis of the plot. The characters are polarized into good and evil in much the same way as in the melodrama, but the evil is rarely serious. The virtuous young hero is played by a long-legged woman, known as the "principal boy" in the tradition of breeches roles. The young heroine

is a more fragile and equally attractive woman, usually an excellent singer. Both hero and heroine sing and dance. A popular male comedian, in drag, plays the character woman, known as "the dame." His helpers might be other well-known performers. Frequently a good fairy helps things along for the hero and heroine, who will inevitably marry and live happily ever after. The plot is not of great importance and loosely holds together a series of "acts" or songs. There is a section where the dame and other comic acts will bring on a huge song sheet and the audience will sing along, often divided into sections who try to outsing each other. Above all it is popular family entertainment and plays during the Christmas holidays. Any town that has a theater will have a Christmas pantomime.

Shortly after Christmas, in January 1973, Tedderella played at the Bush Theatre in London,¹ slightly deflating the celebratory atmosphere that accompanied Britain's official entry into the Common Market.

Edgar takes the traditional Cinderella pantomime and finds parallel characters and events in the Common Market story. He begins during Harold Wilson's Labour Government of the late sixties. Ted Heath, the leader of the Opposition, appears as Tedderella who "languishes in a suite at the Savoy, remembering the days when she was amongst the noblest in the land."² Prime Minister Harold Wilson and

¹It had previously been performed at the Pool Theatre, Edinburgh, Bradford University, and the National Student Drama Festival, Durham.

²David Edgar, Tedderella (manuscript dated November 1971). All subsequent quotations are from this unpublished manuscript.

his Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, are the ugly sisters, Harriet and Rowena. Harriet is smitten with Prince Charmant, Lord of all Euroland, but Tedders, courtesy of the Fairy Rippon (Geoffrey Rippon, future Minister for Technology), goes to the Common Market Ball, "gorgeously attired in her ball gown" and wins his heart:

TEDDERS Oh, Prince, vous n'est pas half un travailleur vite.

PRINCE I will even allow English to be one of the official languages at our court when we are wed, ma chérie.

They burst into song with the romantic duet, "Let's Build a Europe."

Also at the ball is Brandini (Chancellor Brandt of Germany), whom the Prince keeps mistaking for his butler, and Pierre, "a trusty farmer from Provence," who demands compensation for the threat that British farmers may bring to his livelihood. Tedders pays him off, and then flees from the ball--losing her slipper, "a large wading boot"--in order to be home in time for the General Election, which, of course, she wins.¹

The trying-on-of-the-slipper scene takes place in the House of Commons. Brandini tells the struggling Harriet,

Your Michael Foot is too big. The slipper will not accommodate your left wing,

referring to the future left-wing leader of the Labour Party. This sort of topical joke, abundant in the typical pantomime, is guaranteed a big laugh and an even bigger groan.

In the traditional pantomime, Cinderella has a loyal friend, Buttons, whose heart she unintentionally breaks. In the Edgar version the character is J. Enoch Buttons (Enoch Powell, a notorious right-

¹This refers to the General Election of 1970, which returned a Conservative government under Edward Heath's leadership.

winger with some unacceptable views). He has a rousing song: "Blame It on the Blacks," and Tedders tearfully says she will be leaving him out of her future (i.e., no Cabinet post) but promises some policies that will make him happy, such as an Immigration Act and the Industrial Relations Act.

Edgar stays so close to the pantomime format that Tedderella could read as an excellent example of the form. It is, however, the content and the substitution of the political situation for the romantic one that make the play a parody, as do the characters. All are modeled on men, resulting in four "drag" roles, two of whom, Tedderella and the fairy, should be not only women, but very feminine ones. Prince Charmant is modeled on Charles de Gaulle, playing a woman (the principal boy) playing a man. Edgar's direction for his entrance at the ball reads, "She is in full principal boy drag," indicating a ruffled shirt, tight-fitting velvet jacket (all vaguely eighteenth-century male), but only to the waist where there should be tiny shorts followed by long legs in fishnet stockings and high heels.

Harriet and Rowena fall into the dame tradition and function correctly. They get the audience to participate. Every time they enter they shout, "Hallo, boys and girls!" and the audience has to shout back a greeting or be scolded and told to try again. They also introduce the audience song. Harriet and her section of the audience sing "It's a long way to full employment" to the tune of "Tipperary," and Rowena's group sings "Pack up your troubles in the Europe Bag." Harold Hobson wrote of this scene, noting an interesting irony:

The ugly sisters divided the house, one quarter to sing in favor of the Common Market, and three-quarters against

it. The numerically inferior Common Marketeers were unexpectedly stimulated to such enormous strength of lungs that the noise they made fairly drowned out the opposition.¹

However, Hobson also acknowledged that Tedderella, along with A Fart For Europe, was "the only production which had been mounted independently to show that not everyone is delighted with this extraordinary parade of the Establishment."²

True to the panto tradition Edgar provides several pieces of physical comedy. The most extended such section is also the one scene that he crams with quotations and factual data. Harriet and Rowena, having lost the election, make up their "Opposition Trifle":

HARRIET The first thing you need for a really good opposition trifle is lots of thick, heavy, starchy rhetoric.

And the sponge cake goes in, followed by "lovely lashings of socialist jam," fruit for unemployment, and so on, until,

ROWENA Here's some kind of sticky, lumpy yellow substance.
HARRIET Ah! That's some lovely internal wrangling over a prices and incomes policy. And now, the piece de resistance! Rowena, pass the anti-Common Market cream!

Edgar documents the rising division of the Labour Party with factual data and physicalizes it with a fight over the cream, which leads to a riotous slapstick trifle-throwing scene, also a traditional panto ingredient.

Robert Brustein, in The Observer, seems to have missed the point when he writes, "the panto structure seems to make everything predictable."³ That was why Edgar chose the structure. Since he was retelling

¹Harold Hobson, The Sunday Times (London), 14 January 1973, p. 27.

²Edgar believes there is no extant copy of Fart. He co-authored this second anti-Common Market play with Howard Brenton.

³Robert Brustein, The Observer, 14 January 1973, p. 32.

very recent history, there were no surprises anyway. Edgar's aim was to show some of the party politics and thinking behind the negotiations and to cast doubt on the wisdom of the move. His method was to adhere to a known format with its music, songs, verses, gags, and light tones. He depended on the audience's familiarity. The audience's interest therefore lay in watching how Edgar would make the Common Market story fit the Cinderella story.

Edgar does offer one unexpected twist--the sudden appearance of the "real" Cinderella, representing British labor:

CINDERS I used to work with the men who were making ships on the Clyde who you sold out, madam. I used to work at Plessey's in Alexandra, but they wanted to take all the machines away. I used to work for you down a nationalised pit in South Wales. I used to work for you in British Steel. But now I'm on the dole. And there's nearly a million like me waiting at the door to ask what advantage we're going to get if you go to the Ball.

TEDDERS Well, this is all very touching, I'm sure, and we are the party of compassion, but I can't waste time with that now. I've got to take Britain into Europe. I've got to make a great and historic decision for my people. (Pause.) So you can just piss off out of it.

The reviewer in Plays and Players was impressed with Tedderella as a piece of political theater:

It exposed very clearly and entertainingly the various bourgeois political attitudes for or against the market; the classical free-enterprise capitalism of Heath (now overtaken by more recent events); Powell's additional overtones of a mystical nationalism to this basic position, and Wilson and Jenkin's different concepts of social democracy.¹

The review finished by noting that Tedderella and A Fart for Europe "gave a reality to the much maligned concept of politics in theatre." I think

¹Jonathan Hammond, Plays and Players 20 (March 1973): 50.

that Edgar achieved this by a careful balance of information, socialist message, and able dramaturgy. The traditional popular form made the political analysis basic, uncomplicated, and therefore more accessible; it is a form particularly suited to the lampooning of political leaders. The fact quotient was helpfully low for the general audiences of the Bush Theatre. Edgar did not fully acknowledge fact fatigue as a problem until later, but noticed the results of such fatigue on his audience as he described when discussing Workers' Plane and Motor-cycle Factory.¹ The agitation quotient is also significantly lower in Tedderella than in the political plays so far discussed. Rent's chief purpose was to rouse to action, but in this play Edgar is not foolish enough to think he can get Britain to withdraw from the Common Market. He offers an analysis of what happened and warns of some of the potential political and economic consequences. Before the betrothal, this scene takes place:

PRINCE You have rejected all your other boyfriends?
 TEDDERS Oh, yes, mon Prince. After all, as I said in my White Paper, the commonwealth countries are "widely scattered in their political ideas and economic development." In other words, most of them are wogs or commies and I wouldn't touch them with a barge-pole.
 PRINCE But what about the Americans?
 TEDDERS I've gone right off them since the import surcharge. And besides, I could never have a special relationship with President Nixon--he's got such a prickly chin.

The final song is:

Europe's our goal
 Forget men on the dole
 The jobless are all idle jerks
 If you jump on the pillion

¹See p. 72.

We'll get to a million
Cos Tory Government works.

In Dick Deterred, a spoof of Richard III, Edgar crosses the Atlantic, and American politics becomes his target. Edgar explains the genesis of the play:

What happened with Dick Deterred was that the Bush had done a revival of Tedderella, and asked me to do a sort of Return of Tedderella. I wasn't frightfully interested in that, but they'd obviously commissioned something like it, and I happened to see a paragraph in The Times diary about The Society of the White Boar, which was preceded by an item about Nixon, and the connecting link was another Richard who was vilified in his time. And I rang up the Bush and said Watergate Richard the Third. And they said wonderful, and I went back to whatever I was doing. I didn't, in fact, check whether it was going to fit, until the statutory five weeks before the play was due. In fact, it does fit, and it was mainly a mathematical task of fitting the two components together. So essentially form preceded content there.¹

Barker and Trussler commented that Dick Deterred could be considered as "one of the very few examples of a full-length burlesque play in the contemporary theatre."² The Encyclopedia of World Theatre defines burlesque as "a theatrical entertainment, mostly a full-length satirical play, aiming to caricature or parody contemporary literary and dramatic conventions."³

Edgar satirizes contemporary American politics by parodying a late sixteenth-century play. He adapts the slightly edited Shakespear-ean plot to the essentials of the Watergate story and the significant characters, amazingly, seem to have their Watergate counterparts.

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 12.

²Ibid.

³The Encyclopedia of World Theatre (New York: Charles Scribner, 1977), p. 52.

Victoria Radin wrote:

The plot fits so closely that it hurts. The waffling other-worldly Clarence becomes a priestly, prevaricating Eugene McCarthy; Buckingham becomes the ill-fated Haldeman; Catesby, a greasy Ron Ziegler.... The wittiest translations of all are Elizabeth and Anne as two cheerleaders: Anne, a simple-minded turncoat Democratic, and Elizabeth, a betrayed Republican whose sexy torch song "I'm Leaving" is one of the most striking of the show's fourteen numbers.¹

The songs keep the tone light and funny, as does such trickery as Richard delivering Nixon's "Checkers Speech" verbatim to a pop Sha-Na-Na-type musical background. The essentials of the plot run thus: It is 1968 and convention time. Richard (Nixon) arranges for Clarence's demise (McCarthy's defeat), using Shakespeare's "G" trick (EuGene) with the King (the President). Richard and his crony Hastings (John Mitchell) hasten to Florida and their own convention where they must outwit Lord Nelson of New York and Lord Ronald of California. On the way, Richard woos Anne (an ailing Republican Party--Ms. Radin had it wrong), who is crying over Eisenhower's corpse. Richard Daly is to murder Clarence in Chicago and Buckingham (Haldeman) is taken on as the loyal slave. After a terrible dream about events in Chicago, Clarence is murdered. His children are yippies and lead the antiwar demonstrators as the entry into Cambodia is announced. The sick "Edward IV Part Two" (Humphrey) is carried on, and the Duchess of York (a radical Democrat) pleads for the party's overhaul, but too late. Richard is elected King.

As time passes, his tenure is insecure, so his forces, which now include Lord Lovel (Ehrlichman), muster to keep the Democrats at bay, in particular the young Prince of Wales (McGovern) and the Duke of York (Muskie). "To bug or not to bug" is the question. G. Gordon

¹Victoria Radin, The Observer, 3 March 1974, p. 38.

Tyrrell (Liddy) is brought in to remove the threat from these two young princes. Richard remains King after this crisis, but trouble comes from poor Hastings's loud-mouthed wife, Martha (who is the Margaret character in her function as prophetess of doom), and he is dismissed. The Oval Office with throne is the setting for the strawberry scene with the Bishop of Ely (transposed as the gooseberry scene with John Dean) and full bugging equipment arrives. The London citizens scene with the holy men becomes Richard with two monks, Brezhnev and Mao, giving a press conference, all guided by Catesby (Ron Ziegler). Camp David is the scene of Richard's sleepless ghost-haunted night. Richmond (Sam Ervin) prepares to defeat him.¹

The plot and the characters fit remarkably well with only a few omissions and changes. Edgar also plays with Shakespeare's language, using iambic pentameter, mingling Elizabethan-sounding language with modern slang, and sometimes using Shakespeare's actual words. As in Still Life Edgar includes a blatant comment on his borrowing:

BUCKINGHAM Beware my lord, the charge of plagiarism.
 RICHARD The man is dead and therefore cannot sue.²

Just how Edgar blends Shakespeare and Watergate is perhaps best exemplified by a lengthy quotation from the opening of the play:

Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious summer by this Texan bum
 And all the crowds that didn't duck the draft
 Vacating are the bosoms of Saigon

¹Death in Shakespeare's version tends to mean political defeat in the Edgar version.

²David Edgar, Dick Deterred (manuscript dated November 1973). All subsequent quotations from this play are from this unpublished manuscript.

Our brows now bound with wreaths of compromise,
 Our bruised armies are demobiliz'd,
 Our napalm bombs are changed to Paris meetings,
 Our My Lai massacres to diplomatic measures.
 Grim visag'd Edward thus hath chang'd his tune,
 And now instead of martial melody,
 He capers nimbly on peak-time TV
 And, spurning office, sings the hymns of peace.
 But I that am not shaped for gestures grand,
 Nor made to court an am'rous CBS,
 I that am rudely stamp'd and want capacity
 To strut before a mewling East Coast Liberal,
 I that was spurn'd by the electorate,
 Cheated eight years ago by wanton fortune,
 Held as a has-been, spent before my time,
 A huckster, upstart, unsophisticate
 Whose dream is seen as so unfashionable
 That e'en the dogs laugh as I halt by them.
 Why I, now partner in a Wall Street legal firm,
 Have no delight in handling Pepsi-Cola
 And mourn the days I strutted in the sun
 Before I lost the California governorship
 And told the gloating press, with quiv'ring jaw,
 They'd not have Dick to kick around no more.
 And therefore, since I'll never prove a lover
 Of media-buffs, the Washington elite,
 My brows for vict'ry once more I'll anoint
 And show those jerks who really runs this joint.

SONG: "I was the rightful heir to the throne."

Thus have I watched the tenor of the vote
 In Oregon, Wisconsin, Indiana,
 Setting the goodly Clarence and the King
 In deadly hate the one against the other.
 And if King Edward be as blunt and brusque
 As I am subtle, false and treacherous,
 This month shall Clarence closely be mewed up
 About a primary which said that "G"
 The Democratic candidate shall be.
 Dive thoughts, down to my soul; here Clarence comes.
 Clarence, good day, what means this armed guard
 That waits upon your grace?

CLARENCE: His majesty
 Tendering my person's safety, hath appointed
 The National Guard to take me to Chicago.

Edgar has a decidedly mischievous sense of humor, examples of which appear in several plays--his comments on plagiarism for example and many of the topical jokes that have been noted. In Dick Deterred

(Dick De Turd) Edgar not only parodies Richard III but blatantly throws in sections from other plays as well. Richard asks Clarence's murderer:

And you'll be sudden in the execution,
Not letting dare not wait upon I would?
(cf. Macbeth, I.vi)

On his election Richard's speech begins:

Friends, Fellow Americans, lend me your ears.
I come not to increase but end thy jeers.
Mistakes men make oft live in history,
Their honorable acts remain a mystery.
(cf. Julius Caesar, III.ii)

and so on, paralleling Mark Antony's speech. The same play is parodied with Richard's request:

Let me have men about me who are thin,
Crew-cutted yes men, Christian Scientists.
That Hoover has an independent bent,
He thinks too much, such men are non-productive.
(cf. Julius Caesar, I.i)

After Richard, Buckingham, and Hastings have set their anti-Democrat plot in motion, Richard asks:

RICHARD When shall we three meet again
 At San Clemente or Key Biscayne?
HASTINGS When the hurley-burley's done
BUCKINGHAM When our foes have been outrun
RICHARD And the next election's won.

The parody continues on the rest of the opening scene of Macbeth.

Richard's fear of Democrats brings about:

To bug or not to bug, that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of the New York Times,
Or to take arms against a sea of liberals
And by surveillance, end them.
(cf. Hamlet, III.i)

Richard justifies his payoffs with:

The quality of clemency's not strained
It droppeth from within the Oval Office.
(cf. The Merchant of Venice, IV.i)

The effect is totally disruptive and highly comedic. It jolts the audience to an awareness that the subject of the parody must not be lost in the enjoyment of the play itself. Like Tedderella it is not an agitational play, but rather an analysis of recent history through analogy. Michael Billington wrote:

[It is] buoyant proof that the art of extended political cabaret is alive and kicking. It may not have the shock value of the notorious MacBird but it is a much spikier piece of parody, and factually much more honest.... The strength of the piece is that it sticks to its source like a bloodhound trailing a scent, even down to the dispatching of slandered princes [Muskie and McGovern] and the PR presentation of the hero as a holy anchorite far removed from political chicanery.¹

The only possible weakness that Billington noted was that the play makes Nixon far too engaging a character!

A planned New York production was cancelled because of Nixon's resignation. In early 1983, however, the Manhattan Punch Line staged it at an Off Off Broadway theater where it had a successful run and was revived that fall. Acknowledging it as a "clever political satire," Richard Shepard noted:

It is savage comedy that met its moment of history, but today it seems somewhat of an overkill for viewers who have lived through the intervening ten years.²

I did not react that way. It is valid as historical drama, moreso because its ending makes a modern point. After Richmond's victory and Richard's cry "A goat! A goat! My kingdom for another scapegoat," the stage direction reads:

¹Michael Billington, The Guardian, 26 February 1974, p. 10.

²Richard Shepard, New York Times, 24 January 1983, p. C17.

SONG: RICHARD ET OMNES

(During the song, RICHARD is placed in a coffin/on a bier, by two GUARDS. At the end of the song Edward (the new heir apparent who had really been disguised as Richmond) is mobbed; carnival atmosphere. Suddenly Richard sits up.... He reaches for the crown, and slowly puts it on as all turn to him. Silence.)

RICH Hmm.

(At an instant, simultaneously, the company freeze, the tableau snaps into silhouette, and a SPOT at the side finds MARGARET PLANTAGENET, strangely dressed in modern clothes.)

MARG Pray, gentles all, if you would kill a king,
Make sure the venom's drawn, not just the sting:
Because we'll only expurgate the leech
When Ford and Chase Manhattan are impeached;
The Tyrant dies, the Tyranny's the same.
The King departs, the King-Makers remain.

A voice lists amounts of contributions to political campaigns from individuals who hold high office in major industrial corporations and banks, as the curtain goes down. And Edgar makes his contemporary point.

In Death Story Edgar makes points about another contemporary political issue--the situation in Northern Ireland--by playing with the Romeo and Juliet story. He keeps Shakespeare's Italian setting and most of the main characters: Romeo, Juliet, Benvolio, Mercutio, Tybalt, Juliet's parents, and a "priest." In Brechtian fashion, Edgar distances us from his real target to achieve his end of political analysis.

The Montags were the original inhabitants of Verona and very good craftsmen--"clever hands but empty heads." The Capels were the immigrant invaders--"people who were good with money."¹ The Capels got richer while the Montags became oppressed workers. Outbreaks of violence became a way of life and troops arrived to keep the status

¹David Edgar, Death Story (manuscript dated October 1972). All subsequent quotations from this play are from this unpublished manuscript.

quo. The current Prince of Verona is from Padua, which "gives a kind of credence to having Paduan soldiers all over the shop."

Romeo and Juliet meet under similar circumstances to those in the Shakespearean version, but Edgar deflates the emotional values of their love story. Romeo becomes impotent on their night together, and Shakespeare's tender parting scene turns into a quarrel over sex. Romeo is politicized by Mercutio's murder. We see the results of Juliet's association with the enemy when her kinsmen trap her in the street and sexually humiliate and beat her. Juliet and the priest become pawns in a political ruse when she takes a potion to feign a failed suicide attempt in order to bring Romeo back to Verona. The Army Colonel traps him in Juliet's hospital room, surrounded by troops. Edgar deflates the ending by having Romeo escape while Juliet tries unsuccessfully to slit her wrists. He gives no vision of death as unifier, no symbol of political union and hope. The only pathos is in the sense of the young people as victims of their society. Romeo confronts the reality of the Montag plight in the death of his friend and his own killing of Tybalt. Circumstances force a political response. Juliet, sheltered from the harshest of political reality, tries desperately to believe in love, until politics defeats it. They will both go on living in the cruel violent world that Edgar portrays, a world where there is little place for the private concerns of love.

Edgar is seemingly on the side of the Montags who become victims of a Capel rampage of violence after Tybalt's death, but more clearly he asks for reason to prevail. Benvolio says,

There does come a point when you have to say, yes, our people have got very real grievances. They are oppressed.

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They are attacked. But at some stage vengeance must stop leading on to more vengeance. Is there any point in tearing down the house when there is only one house in which we all have to live?

Yet the violence continues and, in Edgar's analysis, will continue so long as there are economic and class divisions, so long as the Capels maintain capitalistic control over the society.

Edgar differentiates the two groups by their speech as a reinforcement of his class statement. The refined Capels mainly talk about the niceties of life and manners. Rosalind is very "county," though Edgar culls her comments at the ball from popular song titles or lyrics. The Montags use more earthy language, epitomized by a running dirty joke competition between Benvolio and Mercutio.

Theatre Checklist summarizes Edgar's inventive approach to the Mercutio-Tybalt-Romeo plot:

Mercutio... helps to engineer a confrontation between Tybalt and Romeo, ostensibly over Romeo's gate-crashing of the Capel party where he has fallen in love with Juliet--but in reality to enable Mercutio himself to kill Tybalt, whom the military regard as a troublemaker. In the event, Tybalt kills Mercutio and it is Romeo who shoots Tybalt dead--precipitating widespread Capel violence against the Montag areas, which enables the politicians to declare martial law.¹

Edgar adds an unexpected twist at the very end of his play, providing a double deflation. Realizing they are both going to survive, probably apart, Juliet says, "I wish I were dead." The lights change as the priest steps forward noting that the "public hates a sad conclusion" and offers a happy ending instead--a burlesqued version of Shakespeare's, and for good measure, the suicides are repeated, and

¹Theatre Checklist, no. 20, p. 10.

repeated, and repeated, as the light fade and the priest says,
 "Better that everyone should die for love."

In Acid Edgar toys in a more general way with elements of Greek tragedy, adding scope to what could have been a semirealistic gruesome murder story. It is less related to a preexisting model than the three plays just discussed. Edgar homes in on the futility of individual terrorism, as in Ballboys and Operation Iskra. Three tough, working-class "hippies" burst in on the quiet gentility of a middle-class vacation home on the Isle of Wight and, Charles Manson-style, murder a man, his wife, and their pregnant daughter, Jill.

The murderous trio serve as a chorus. They are outside the action at first, but introduce us to the family, describe their trip on the ferry and their approach to the house, building tension and fear. About a quarter of the way through, with their arrival at the house, Edgar integrates them with the scenes of modern realistic dialogue as they threaten, take over, and terrorize the family. They step outside the action for the ten choral odes that separate the ten scenes. Edgar suggests a bongo drum accompaniment, as they inform on past events, predict future ones, and analyze what is happening, directly addressing the audience. Jill, a college student, has become involved in left-wing politics and is pregnant by her Trotskyite lover. The chorus comments:

Misery and Woe!
 Destruction and Darkness!
 Better to be plugged by a blood in a boater
 To untangle your thighs to the tinkle of teacups
 To unstop your cunt in the back of a punt
 Than to drop your drawers on uncarpeted floors
 Surrounded by pictures of Lenin and Che
 To slip into bed under Ho Chi Minh's head

And be tutored in Marx having gone all the way.
 Darkness, Destruction!
 Misery, Woe!¹

The chorus operates out of class hatred, another of Edgar's themes, as it also was in Blood Sports. But Edgar aims to provide insights into the functioning and thinking of such hoodlums, laying partial blame on a society that creates such rifts between people. He quotes from Manson's statement at his trial:

Most of the people at the ranch that you called the Family were just people that you did not want, people that were alongside the road. I took them up on my garbage dump and told them this, that in love there is no wrong. I have done my best to get along in your world, and now you want to kill me. I say to myself, Ha, I'm already dead, have been all of my life.

The quotation may be viewed not as an expression of Edgar's sympathy but as an informative statement that should not be ignored when removing the Mansons of society to the prison cell and probable later release. Hatred and hopelessness have taken over.

Edgar has written a violent and horrific play, but shows levels of compassion for all of his characters. The middle-class parents, trapped by the habits of their background, have made every effort to liberalize their thinking and understand their revolutionary daughter. They even try to understand the intruders. In laying partial blame for this pointless violence on society, Edgar takes a heavy shot at American influence:

What sort of a country
 makes the killing of pigs a national hobby?
 What sort of mind

¹David Edgar, Acid (manuscript dated January 1971). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

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leads a murdering posse
into the homes of the innocent rich?
What sort of people murdered a nation
Taking their land and killing their children?
What sort of people
imported another
and set them to grow cotton and sugar?
What sort of people invaded a third
trying to make it a starred and striped world?
attacking a land that committed no sin
whose people are poor and are going to win?
So is it a wonder that Sharon Tate died
in a country so drunken on sweet genocide?

Jill is the heroine of the play whose tragic flaw is her belief that her compassion and intellect will get her through. She dies, heroically defending her beliefs and pleading for sanity, telling her murderers:

You talk about anarchy. You talk about a society of ultimate choice, where everything's possible. But you cut off your choices when you first came in. You haven't any choice.

You're trying to build your new world within the walls of the old. You can't do it.

You don't even have any conscious politics. You've said as much. But what you're doing is political, in spite of yourselves. It's the politics of the individual act.

As she dies, the trio of murderers resume their chorus function in a lament over her body, and the girl killer, who had met Jill at a pop festival, sings:

Gentle Saviour meek and mild
Thou hast taken this little child
From her pain and tears and weeping
Now the little lamb is sleeping
Clothed in robes of spotless white
Soon she dwells with Thee in light.

Acid might have worked as a realistic play, but the addition of the Greek-style chorus widens the scope, facilitates an analysis of the issues, and provides the political perspective. Edgar analyzes the drug-hippie-drifter culture, notes the confusions and puts forward

some possible explanations for the "birth of Hatred." Through the chorus, Edgar also investigates the class hatred that traps both the parents, despite their efforts, and the hippies; the hatred that Jill hopes to break down with her dream of a socialist revolution. He also touches upon the generation gap.

The choral odes break up the action and force reflection, and the very adoption of a classical Greek form implies that Edgar is demanding an investigation of more than a private incident. The ending, however, inverts the Greek model. There is no triumph in the deaths and no suggestion that the murderers will repent. Jill dies, carrying her unborn child. The outlook is bleak. It is a disturbing and depressing ending, but one which Edgar seems to have designed as a shock tactic, to bring about awareness in his audience.

An even greater shock tactic is used in Excuses Excuses, which plays with the documentary form. It also has terrorism, of the Luddite variety, as its theme. A young man sets fire to and destroys the factory where he works because he was infuriated at the lay-off of almost half the workers. He had not been laid off himself, but had been made redundant for a year on another occasion and felt strongly about the situation. Edgar presents his story in the form of actors putting together and rehearsing a documentary play on the subject. In his essay on drama-documentary Edgar writes.

The basic impulse behind the drama documentary form is, I suggest, simply to tell to a mass audience a real and relevant story involving real people. The basic problem is how to get it right after the event.¹

¹Edgar, "Drama Documentary," p. 24.

Edgar's actors, identified as One, Two, Three or Four, try to do just that, to get the young man, Geoff's, story right. They stop the action when it does not ring true, and they reconsider. The twist is that Geoff plays himself in the play. Because of this there is a sense of a psychodrama as well, as the actors take the parts of people in Geoff's past in order to help him understand himself. Edgar uses both the documentary form and psychodrama to satirize institutional attitudes. At the end of the psychodrama session and the play rehearsal, the four actors leave the stage. Geoff does not follow, and Edgar's stage direction reads:

He leaves it as long as he can [i.e., he remains on stage, very still] before the AUDIENCE actually leaves. Then he stands and starts to speak. Now very cool, very articulate, full of hate.¹

He tells of some of his real feelings, free of the psychological jargon, and the reason he set fire to the factory, at the same time pouring paraffin over the stage:

I did it to get back at the bosses. I wanted to show them what they had done. I had to do it to get through to them. They wouldn't listen any other way.

He takes out matches and strikes one as the lights go out. Harold Hobson wrote of these last moments:

Just when the play seems to have finished and the actors have already taken their bows, it provides the audience with a coup de théâtre as sensational as any seen in the London theatre since Agatha Christie reversed the whole course of her Witness For the Prosecution in the last ten sizzling minutes of the performance.²

¹David Edgar, Excuses Excuses (manuscript dated 16 March 1972). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished ms.

²Harold Hobson, Sunday Times (London), 22 July 1973, p. 38.

His review was not totally favorable, as he was championing Aristotelian writing to which Excuses Excuses does not conform. He noted that:

For nine-tenths of Excuses Excuses David Edgar does not write like Aristotle and is rather dull. Then for a few stupendous minutes he comes into line with the doctrine of peripeteia, the sudden and unexpected reversal of all that has gone before--and the result is electrifying.¹

Peter Ansorge, rarely a supporter of Edgar's work, provided a negative review,² but Billington called it

a headlong satire on the whole army of psychiatrists, social workers, media men, lawyers and long-winded theatre folk who hunt for elaborate explanations for basically simple actions.³

As the actors try to investigate and recreate Geoff's past, the social worker guides us through scenes with his schoolteacher, his family, his middle-class girlfriend, at his work, then through his loss of job, his application for unemployment benefits, and finally his interview with his defense counsel, prior to his trial. The play opens with the reenactment of the trial and Geoff's guilty plea and subsequent sentencing to four years imprisonment. Many of these scenes, particularly with Geoff's family and the party scene with his girlfriend, are strongly realistic, but Edgar allows them to continue only briefly and shatters any emotional involvement with the "actor" interruptions, such as:

(Suddenly GEOFF kisses her. After a second she recoils,
and then breaks out of character.)
FOUR No, that was wrong. He didn't do it hard enough.
(FOUR stands. ONE to centre.)
ONE What?

¹Ibid.

²Peter Ansorge, Plays and Players 20 (September 1973): 58.

³Michael Billington, The Guardian, 17 July 1973, p. 12.

FOUR He's supposed to do it harder. It shocks me, and I recoil. I can't do that if he does it like he did it.
 ONE Geoff, you did kiss her hard, didn't you?
 (Pause.)
 Geoff, we just want you to do it the way you told us.

In trying to understand what made Geoff resort to a Luddite action, Edgar's targets become the sterility of institutionalized approaches--first the social workers and their jargon:

One sees the social controls imposed to anonymize the reality of the person. Surface rituals of etiquette replace real experience of creativity. Any rejection of those norms is seen as deviation, paranoia, madness.

Later targets are teachers, lawyers, civil servants, and all those that went to dehumanize Geoff. Barker and Trussler capsulize the effect of the play as follows:

Geoff comes alive as an inarticulate but caring person, slowly being driven to simple hatred of those capable of condemning others to the dole queue. This successful presentational device, which self-correctively halts the outer play when it threatens to become oversimplified or clichéd, is complicated towards the end of the action, when the characters of Geoff and the actor Geoff begin to merge in an almost Pirandellian manner.¹

By playing with concepts of theatrical forms and of character, producing two plays within a play and a character within a character, Edgar has presented a multilayered portrait of how institutionalized attitudes can dehumanize and contribute to acts of violence.

Edgar uses some similar techniques in Bloody Rosa, written in 1970 three months after his first play, Two Kinds of Angel. The latter play is about Marilyn Monroe and Rosa Luxemburg. Bloody Rosa is an extended and factual account of Rosa's life, political battles, imprisonment, and murder. As in Excuses Excuses, the main story is

¹Theatre Checklist, no. 20, p. 8.

presented as a play within a play. The inner play is presented by university students with the help of a lecturer, who repeatedly stops the performance to clarify facts or to argue with the performers. Edgar uses "signs" and slides, essentially Brechtian slogans, to reinforce points and locations. They also add to the lecture-hall frame of the play. The last scene summarizes the history of international socialism since Rosa's death in 1919, a theme to be explored more fully thirteen years later in Maydays.

In O Fair Jerusalem Edgar uses another complex dramatic structure. A group of actors are rehearsing a play about the Black Death to mark the six hundredth anniversary of the plague's arrival in England in 1348. The frame play is therefore set in 1948. The inner play includes a plot about a group of strolling players who perform a play (several, in fact) within a play, within a play. Church services, music, and song provide further stylistic variety. The three "plays" all have their own linguistic style ranging from pseudo-Chaucerian verse to modern prose. The characters include earthy peasants, strolling players, knights and ladies, monks and bishops, lords and corpses, and the modern actors of the frame play, in which a modern priest and doctor also appear.

The first five scenes are from the plague play, and the audience has no idea that the entire play will not be set in medieval times. The sixth scene, however, is set in 1948 in a country church, and we learn that we have just seen a rehearsal of a play. Edgar asks that the theater be set up to resemble a country church where the plague play is to be performed. The church setting helps to mislead

the audience as to the nature of the play they are seeing. After the sixth scene Edgar switches back and forth in time freely.

The modern frame play revolves around the author of the medieval play, his own believed terminal illness, and his attempt to draw a modern parallel to the bubonic plague. One of his actors who had served as a bomber pilot in a recent war confronts the author, despising his pacifism. The author refutes Malthus' theories of population control by war, famine, and other disasters and defends his pacifism:

Because it grew quite clear that we weren't fighting Nazis,
we were fighting Germans. Once again.
Fighting for influence, for markets, economic stamping grounds,
glossed with imagery of Empire, as we'd done in 1916, as I'd
done, a sewer-rat, knee-deep in Europe's slops...
This war would make all useless sacrifices of the past seem
puny. This was waste upon a cosmic scale. The only hope was
that the world would learn, and change. Resolve to end the
rule of monsters--poverty and warfare and disease--create the
new Jerusalem.

(Pause.)

What do we see now. Poverty again as in the thirties, now
they call it wage restraint, austerity, but still it means
that English men and women live on five pounds a week. On
war. A million bearing arms. And Greece. And Palestine.
Berlin. Disease...

(Pause. WOLFE seems in pain.)

Jerusalem's not coming. Not on the agenda. Because there
cannot be another lesson like this lesson, and if men won't
learn from this they'll never learn.¹

Edgar finally draws the parallel he has been aiming at all along
--the atomic bomb. He views the bomb as the modern plague, with the
difference that no cure can be found for this disease. A society that
has found cures for every pandemic disease will self-destruct on this
one, and Edgar cites the report of the British mission to Hiroshima

¹David Edgar, O Fair Jerusalem (manuscript dated 25 February 1975). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

and Nagasaki, published in July 1946, to make his point.

He does not draw this parallel until the play is almost over. Most of the play shows how the plague destroyed people, including those who didn't contract it. They lost their compassion, opting for self-protection, and barbarism flourished. A modern doctor presents scientific information on the plague, touching upon other issues of public health through the centuries. He includes hopes for the new National Health Service instituted in Britain in 1948, the year of the frame play. At the same time Edgar creates the atmosphere of the medieval age through the variety of characters and language and the many plot threads of the inner play: the story of the troupe of players themselves--all but one die of the plague, and he goes mad; of the Lady who hunts for her beloved knight after the death of her unloved lord; of William, who wanders the country; of Diccon, a mercenary in the wars; and of John who cries out for freedom from the tyrannies performed in the name of God and goodness (there is even a flagellation scene).

The inner play is an allegory. Edgar, however, plays with the idea of an allegory by providing the frame play set in a more recent time, and putting in some mini-allegories for the medieval players of the inner play. The complexity can sometimes be confusing, but the idea of the bubonic plague as an allegorical treatment of modern warfare is politically powerful, as Camus also knew when he wrote The Plague. Equally powerful is the story of public health care systems told with images of death carts, centuries apart, but essentially the same.

Lest we forget the warning about destruction, Edgar adds one more element. He sets the inner play's scenes on major Christian holidays, leading from Easter to Easter, and the outer play is set to be performed on the day in July 1948 that "Britain will have these monstrous weapons, on her soil, in readiness, prepared to strike." Edgar is referring to the arrival of American atomic bombs on bases in the United Kingdom. The idea prefigures Maydays, whose final scene shows a demonstration against the arrival of American nuclear missiles on bases in Britain.

In O Fair Jerusalem, Excuses, Excuses, and Operation Iskra, which I am about to discuss, Edgar moves much more into the realm of the imagination, dispensing with large amounts of data, selecting only specific items to support a point. He has done the research, and his subject matter is as serious as in any of the strongly political plays, but he has shifted from direct agitation, experimenting with dramatic structure in a more daring way than he did in the agitprop and documentary plays.

In his article on political theater, Edgar comments on the use of familiar forms by other contemporary British writers as well as himself:

These writers are employing given forms and structures but they are not using them as a bridge into people's familiar dramatic experience; they are deliberately disturbing and disorienting the audience by destroying the form and denying expectations.¹

He specifically refers to Trevor Griffiths's Comedians, in which the long-awaited stand-up comic routine is unfunny, denying expectations

¹Edgar, "Ten Years," p. 31.

and shocking the audience into a consideration of the reasons. In Rent Edgar deflates concepts of melodramatic heroism and denies us the happy ending. In Tedderella he again presents a basic story and a structure familiar to any British audience. The audience's dramatic experience tells them that it is all harmless fun, but Edgar disturbs and disorients that audience by denying expectations of trivial issues and presenting them with a disturbing look at the policies of the Common Market, even though presented in a highly comic way. Edgar's parodies of Richard III and Romeo and Juliet make their strongest points when expectations are denied or inverted, as in the nondeath of the young lovers.

Edgar continues:

This upending of received forms reveals the cultural heritage of these works, and, further, goes some way to explaining their revolutionary potency.¹

It also reveals something about the cultural changes which inspire the upending of the old form. Although Shakespeare didn't entirely agree, his age venerated idealized love. Today's Northern Ireland has little time for that. The audience of a Victorian melodrama wanted neat solutions with virtue rewarded and evil punished. The audience for today's political theater will accept harsh reality, ambiguity, and the prospect of a never-ending struggle.

There is a certain shock value inherent in the upending of something familiar. Edgar sees this as a neo-Brechtian technique to force analytical thinking, rather than emotional response, from the audience. Brecht's aim was to do this through a distancing of the audience. Edgar's technique is somewhat different. Much is familiar,

¹Ibid., p. 32.

so the interest lies in seeing how the contrasts and parallels will function. Rather than create distance, Edgar draws the audience in, then shocks it with denied expectations and upended forms. If this disorientation results in an analytical response and new perceptions of the political issues, then the result is agitational, but much more subtly so than in a traditional agitprop play.

In Operation Iskra Edgar upends the familiar thriller format.

There is no expected normative figure of law and order, the spy sent in to crush the terrorists is the most hardened terrorist of them all, and the terrorists are the most sympathetic characters. Their opposition is the police's Tactical Operations Force, run by an Army Brigadier who does some special recruiting in the guise of a university lecturer. His student and protégée assassinates him. Edgar comments specifically on the play:

Using the form to undermine it, in short. In the same way I believed (and still do) that part of the content of individual terrorist activity is a kind of equal and opposite mirror-image of certain aspects of capitalist ideology.¹

Edgar's plot concerns a "cell" of young urban terrorists, members of the ISCRA--Insurrectionary Commandos of the Red Army. (In Russian iskra means a spark and was the name of the revolutionary newspaper edited by Lenin.) ISCRA is described as:

a number of small cells, probably about a dozen, linked by a directing committee. Each cell is three or four people, only one of whom knows anyone else.²

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 14.

²David Edgar, Operation Iskra (manuscript dated 1973, with rewrites and updated notes dated 23 September 1974). Subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

Paula, a cell member, has been arrested following a bombing in a London boutique. Alex, Jan, and Silo, who make up the cell in question, are planning a retaliatory bombing at a power station, where a strike action is under way. The bombing is set to coincide with Paula's inevitable sentencing.

The structure of the play is cinematic. We move back and forth between the courtroom and Paula's trial, the preparations for the bombing, and the Tactical Force's attempted entrapment of the terrorists, covering many different locations such as pubs, cell hideouts, the university, and the law courts. Suspense builds as the trial progresses, the bombing preparations near readiness, and the spies infiltrate the cell. On the day of the dress rehearsal for the bombing, Sarah, the Brigadier's protégée, shows her real allegiance and kidnaps him. This section of the play switches back and forth between the staged run-through of the break-in and setting of the bomb (while Alex dresses up in female clothing to escape, almost as though Edgar realized a thriller without a disguise scene would not do) and Sarah's tutorial with Chandler, at the end of which she produces her cleverly concealed gun and kidnaps him. On the day planned for the real bombing, the terrorists fail to get into the plant because of a picket line. Sarah opts for individual terrorism and shoots Chandler in cold blood. She gets away, but Jan and Silo are arrested. Jan's interrogation scene is almost a duplicate of scene two--a mock interrogation scene which forms part of the Iskra training--and the two scenes thus frame the main action of the play.

Edgar sets forth conditions that can cause urban terrorism and at the same time suggests that it is not the best solution, since he shows it failing. The bombing in the boutique is botched, the cell members having not anticipated the picketline. Silo's trust of his former school chum, Sarah, implicates the entire cell in Chandler's murder, even though she was acting alone. Edgar provides enough information on the terrorists for us to understand their backgrounds and beliefs. Paul is working-class, but had made it to the university, where she perceived the system as discriminatory to someone like herself. She was inspired by the activism of many of the 1968 events, but disillusioned by the university New Left, whose convictions seemed to her academic, rather than real or activist. A telling passage in her trial follows (PROS = PROSECUTOR):

PAULA But I don't mean that revolutionary action by the working class is dead, as the present heroic action of the power supply workers indicates.

PROS You approve their action?

PAULA Of course I do.

PROS Although it is illegal?

PAULA The law against which they are fighting offends against all principles of justice.

PROS Nonetheless, their action is illegal and you approve of it?

PAULA Yes.

Later, she says:

PAULA I think it's fair to say that anyone except an extreme pacifist would countenance the use of force at some time.

PROS Let me quote you some more from this pamphlet. Do you agree with this? "Urban guerrilla warfare is based on the analysis that when the conditions are right for armed struggle it will be too late to prepare for it?"

PAULA My lord, I think the prosecution's insistence on probing my views rather than my action proves that this is indeed a political show trial, mounted to remove me and my co-defendants because we represent an ideological threat to the state.

PROS Miss Hennessy must be aware, m'lud, that she is being tried for criminal offences, and that in this country there is no such thing as a political trial.

PAULA With the present conspiracy laws there's no need.

Paula is articulate and calm and expresses some of Edgar's sentiments about what he sees as the insidious violence of capitalism:

Apparently when the state uses force that is not violence,
but when the people use force that is violence.

Sarah, too, gives statements about the thinking and influences behind terrorism. In her "tutorial," Chandler drills her on counterinsurgency techniques. She must know how to crush terrorist organizations and at the same time must know what guides and motivates them. She expounds Marx, Trotsky, Lenin, and, significantly, Mao's three stages of revolutionary warfare: "Organisation. Civil disorder. Terrorism." In this scene Edgar has her ironically, and, unbeknown to her tutor, expounding her own beliefs, not those that she would suppress, as he believes.

Edgar creates a society whose liberty has been eroded. He wrote Iskra in 1973 but set it in 1977, allowing for updating of the script for future performance. He does not place the play in the distant future because he implies that its events are close. The power workers are rebelling against the 1976 Industrial Co-operation Act, a sterner version of the Industrial Relations Act, the subject of The National Interest. Edgar also throws in some tongue-in-cheek predictions which are not far from the mark in spirit, though thankfully inaccurate in the specifics: Spiro Agnew as the American President, a Super-Concorde project, and an attempted assassination of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Edgar concludes that a repressed society will eventually react with violence and terrorism, some of which will misfire, while some will be unorganized and therefore even more dangerous. Michael Billington's review includes a succinct summary of the issues:

Like Howard Brenton in Magnificence, Mr. Edgar sets out to discover the cause of revolutionary violence; like him he also shows the bomb throwers partially defeated by their own tactical incompetence. But his main conclusion is that militant terrorism will inevitably follow on the gradual suppression of personal liberties and he dates the start of this to the late sixties.... He makes the point that violence never springs out of a void but derives from a complex chain of cause and effect.¹

Edgar calls Iskra "faction" because he says it is "based very closely and authentically on real subject matter."² He also refers to the play as "the dress rehearsal for Destiny,"³ and Ronald Hayman rightly notes that Chandler anticipates a central military character in Destiny.⁴ In that play, however, Edgar attempts to understand and explain why people become involved in fascist organizations, whereas in Iskra he examines how people react to forms of repression and loss of personal liberty, which may not amount to fascism, but are closely related.

Operation Iskra is a turning point in his playwriting, according to Edgar:

¹Michael Billington, The Guardian, 6 September 1973, p. 10.

²Barker and Trussler, "Toward a Theatre," p. 16.

³David Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

⁴Ronald Hayman, British Theatre Since 1955 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 109.

It was the first play I had written about hardline politics --urban terrorism and counter-insurgency--in contemporary England not using agitprop. It was the first time I tried to talk about politics using realistic techniques.¹

The play is, therefore, an appropriate introduction to the discussion of Edgar as a social realist. Elements of social realism have been noted in some plays already. Iskra uses several: the characters are recognizable and typical in that they embody social forces; the politics of the characters on both sides of the ideological fence are recognizable and topical, as is the sociopolitical framework of the play. Edgar returned to other writing styles after Iskra, but was also working on early drafts of his social realist play, Destiny, first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1975. After this play, with the exception of the documentary, Motorcycle Factory, and a revue, The Perils of Bardfrod, social realism appears as the dominant feature of Edgar's playwriting, even, to some extent, in his adaptations. He is still too interested in experiment for me to conclude that social realism is his dominant genre, but it has become a consistent feature.

¹Itzin, Stages, p. 144, citing her interview with Edgar.

Chapter VII

SOCIAL REALISM

Why did David Edgar adopt a dramatic style that he and his colleagues initially rejected? He explains the departure from agitprop as follows:

I wrote many such plays which were redundant the moment they'd finished their run--a built-in obsolescence. I then began to think much more in terms of plays that would live a little longer. Also I felt the issues I wanted to deal with were growing increasingly complex and I wanted to deal with those issues in an increasingly complex way. Agitprop is a simple direct form. It's not a form where you can deal with complex ideas, particularly with those political questions which concern the relationship between historical events and the perceptions of the people who are passing through them. In the early seventies in England the main political issues were economic, the main events were strikes. In the mid to late seventies the issues became much more social, particularly racism and feminism. So the things that I felt it was important to write about were those subjects which were least appropriate, in my view, for the agitprop form.¹

In addition, he and his colleagues were also addressing the question of where the plays should be performed:

The prestige of small theatres is small, or it certainly was small. And there was a feeling that we were better than that --a natural progression. I don't think people can sit and go through the agony of writing eight hours a day if that kind of ambition isn't somewhere working away. The second point, which is much more substantial, is that Howard Brenton, David Hare, and I and a number of other people wanted to write plays about public subjects which did not take place in rooms, but in areas, which it is nice to have space to represent. Because streets are larger than houses, and battlefields are larger than bedrooms. And we wanted the numbers.

And while this is not true, obviously, of the small houses of the major national companies, with most theatres you can't

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

have twenty-character plays in an eighty-seater auditorium. Beyond that, there was also an urge to make big spectacular events.... I believe in theatrical spectacle, and I think that occurs, partly, in large spaces.¹

Destiny was the play that confirmed for Edgar that this thinking was probably correct, as he explains:

I spent six years of my life writing and making shows which went round England in the backs of vans, which were performed in working men's clubs and upstairs rooms in pubs, in conference rooms, and attempted, and in some cases achieved, the creation of a non-theatre-going working-class audience. There is absolutely no question that the play of mine which has had the most effect on the way people think about things is a play which was presented at the Aldwych Theatre in the West End of London--Destiny. And it was not just because it was a better play, it was because by making that statement in the very eye of the capital, that statement had an effect beyond the people who actually saw it. It was discussed in the political columns of the newspapers as well as the arts pages. I wasn't asked to talk about the docks when I wrote Wreckers. I hadn't been asked to talk about housing when I'd written Rent. I wasn't asked to talk about the Industrial Relations Act when I'd written The National Interest. I wasn't asked to talk about the politics of health when I'd written a play called O Fair Jerusalem. But I wrote a play called Destiny which went on in the West End and within twenty-four hours, the editors of three left-wing newspapers had rung me up asking me to write articles. Now that may be depressing news about the editors of left-wing newspapers--that they, too, are not immune to the attraction of the bright lights --but that's what it's like.²

The plays to be discussed in this chapter were, in fact, not performed in big theatres, but the desire for those spaces belonged to the impulse toward social realism and an enduring body of work not limited by its topic or time-frame. Reaching as many people as possible is fundamental to socialist drama and is therefore part of the desire for larger spaces and different writing styles. Socialist drama in the West

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 15.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

arises from care and concern about the fate of people, to which the topics of Edgar's plays will attest. It is unlike the "me" plays that typified popular American drama in the seventies, in that it is an unselfish drama, more concerned with "us" and our social and political functioning, than with private issues.

Social realism is not a term in common theatrical usage, though Gassner employs it to describe American social drama of the twenties and thirties, particularly some of the work of the Federal Theatre and the Group Theatre.¹ The term is more commonly used in the world of painting and sculpture; the Oxford Companion to Art describes it as a term "used to describe 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture in sense (2) (the opposite of abstract), and has a specific political or social content."² The entry adds that the term is also extended to paintings "which carry a strong social implication although they may not be realist in sense (2), but to some extent abstract."³ The British theatrical form is free enough to include this interpretation.

Before looking at the plays I will include further discussion of the term and what it means in contemporary British theater. It must not be confused with Socialist Realism, though Edgar and his fellow political writers do embrace socialism. Socialist Realism is an official doctrine

¹John Gassner, "Social Realism and Imaginative Theatre," in Dramatic Soundings (New York: Crown, 1968), pp. 456-71.

²Harold Osborne, ed., Oxford Companion to Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 955. See also Georg Bussman, "Some Attitudes to Art and Politics in the Twenties," in Georg Grosz: His Life and Work, ed. Vive H. Schneede (New York: Universe, 1979), pp. 153-69.

³Osborne, Oxford Companion, p. 955.

of literature and drama originally adopted by the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, under the guidance of Stalin and Gorky, and reaffirmed at various times since then. It is the genre of Marxist orthodoxy and carries with it certain guidelines: it must be positive and constructive in its depiction of socialist society, may never become critical, and the heroes must have positive moral and intellectual traits. The point of view is socialist. It shares this last feature with Britain's writers of social realism. However, the social realist makes his stylistic choices freely, while the socialist realist conforms to rules, rather like the French neoclassicist. Indeed, like Corneille, he can easily be called to task for nonconformity. He must also uphold the accepted morality and, with their positive and constructive portrayals of socialist society, his plays essentially conform to Ellul's ideas of integration propaganda.¹ In contrast, Britain's social realism is highly critical of existing society and its institutions.² In this it resembles critical realism, which the Soviet critic Suchkov disapprovingly notes, is based on "the illusion that society can be transformed through the moral enlightenment of its members, a fallacy that has persisted in critical realism down to the present day."³

¹Ellul, Propaganda, cited by Szanto, Theatre and Propaganda, p. 9.

²For general references to socialist realism, see: Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1977), pp. 567, 575; Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York: Samuel French, 1940), pp. 358-65. For specific discussions of socialist realism, see Georg Lukacs, Realism in Our Time, trans. Necke Mander (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 93-125; Damian Grant, Realism (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 76, 77; Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 37-58.

³Boris Suchkov, A History of Realism (Moscow: Progress, 1973), p. 159.

Optimism is indeed an important feature of British social realism, though the Hungarian Marxist critic, Lukacs, observed that "Today critical and socialist realism are as one in their struggle against reactionary forces in politics and art."¹ Social realism is part of that struggle and has a socialist base in that its practitioners are left-wing, some more committedly and actively so than others. Edgar is one of the committed, in life and in art. He acknowledges Lukacs as a critical mentor, describing his conception of social realism in Lukacs's terms:

Putting typical people into a total context. Basically social realism presents recognizable behaviour, like naturalism, but it is structured in such a way as to draw wider lessons. The naturalist really is a cameraman. Zola, I wouldn't view as a naturalist at all. Certain in Lukacian terms, the early nineteenth century French novelists are classic social realists, your Zolas and your Balzacs, and certainly, obviously, figures like Tolstoy. And the great Brecht-Lukacs debate was actually about Brecht attempting to employ expressionist techniques, shocking, dissonant, non-realist techniques, as against Lukacs who basically thinks that following Balzac's death world literature never recovered.... I think I learned a lot from David Hare in the lecture that's published with Licking Hitler--his point about plays that go through time. I think that brought home to me what that was about, which was placing specific individual lives within an overall social context. And doing so from a point of recognizability, which starts from behaviour you can recognize and judge, I mean you can't really judge a piece of Absurdist or Symbolist drama. I mean you can only judge whether you like it, whether its metaphors appeal and involve. What you can't do is say I've been in a similar situation or behaved like that, or I haven't behaved like that. A play can establish credibility by just getting those things right, and then go on to do other things--go on to be surprising and controversial.²

Edgar's statement about not viewing Zola as a naturalist points up some of the confusion that surrounds that term and its relationship to realism.

¹Lukacs, Realism, p. 103.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

Furst and Skrine comment that even Zola, in his art reviews, used the words "impressionist," "realist," "actualist," and "naturalist" synonymously.¹

It is not necessary to detail Zola's historic statements on naturalism further than to recall the connection with scientific method and observation and the conditioning factors of heredity and environment.² What clearly differentiates Zola's naturalism from realism is determinism, for the realist believes in free will. The political writer in Britain urges change, believes change is possible and for the most part pays little heed to determinism. In Destiny, for example, Edgar portrays two young men from identical working-class backgrounds who end up on polar opposite sides of the political spectrum. Raymond Williams, the Marxist critic and Cambridge scholar, writes:

The theory of naturalism, in fiction and drama, is then a conscious presentation of human character and action within a natural and social environment. It is a specific culmination of a long tendency of bourgeois theory and practice. It only ceases to be bourgeois (and then, strictly, ceases to be naturalism) when, as in Marxist theory, action is seen, not only within an environment, but as itself, within certain limits and pressures, producing an environment.³ (my underlining)

My interpretation of Williams's statement is that he sees realism as a nondeterminist form in which action--dramatic action--occurs within a clearly drawn and specific social and public environment and, "within

¹Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, Naturalism (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 5.

²Emil Zola, Preface to Therese Raquin (Paris, 1873); Le Naturalisme au Théâtre (Paris, 1881).

³Raymond Williams, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism," in English Drama: Forms and Development, eds. Marie Axton and Raymond Williams (Cambridge-New York, 1977), p. 205.

certain limits and pressures," causes it to change--produces a different and continually changing environment. The theory applies to Edgar's social realist plays. As a distinction between naturalism and realism it is too simple since the hope for and effort toward change is exemplified in The Weavers, unquestionably a naturalist play. On other occasions Williams is not consistent in his differentiation of the terms.¹ Edgar, however, sees himself as a realist in the tradition of the nineteenth century, as described by Suchkov:

The essence of realism was social analysis, the study and depiction of the real life of man in society, of social relations, the relationship between the individual and society, and the structure of society itself.²

He adds:

A spirit of research and a thirst for knowledge characterized the great realists of the nineteenth century who, in portraying and investigating life and revealing the objective contradictions of capitalism, inevitably adopted a critical attitude towards bourgeois society.³

Edgar and his colleagues exemplify such a spirit, sharing with these realists a capitalist target. Edgar explains his attitude:

I think what capitalism now means is the multi-nationals. What capitalism is fundamentally inimical to is democracy --people controlling their own environment in all kinds of ways, in all senses of environment. So, I'm agin capitalism because, rather than agin capitalism per se.⁴

Lukacs adds one further point that is relevant to the plays under

¹See Raymond Williams, Politics and Letters--Interviews with New Left Review (London: Lowe & Brydone, 1979), particularly "Brecht and Beyond," pp. 214-34.

²Suchkov, History of Realism, p. 17.

³Ibid., p. 103.

⁴David Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

discussion, particularly Baby Love, Edgar's first social realist play.

Lukacs wrote that realism portrays

a dialectic between man-as-individual and man-as-social-being. It is these contradictions and contradictions both within the individual, and underlying the individual's relation with his fellow human beings--all of which tensions increase with the evolution of capitalism--that must form the subject matter of contemporary realism.¹

The tensions described by Lukacs inform Edgar's 1973 play, Baby Love. A key statement is made by a young Pakistani when the English girl he loves is arrested and committed to a prison mental institution. He says, "the outside world invades the inside world--and things die." The play focuses on the young woman, Eileen, who, less than two months after her miscarriage, steals a baby, soon believing it to be her own. Edgar had been angered by several babysnatching incidents in which the women had been treated as public criminals. Little had been done to examine the private circumstances and mental state of the women or their need of help rather than punishment. In Baby Love Edgar portrays the same situation, showing the outside and public world to be constantly at odds with Eileen's inside and private world. She might not have lost the baby but for red tape, as Shahid, the Pakistani father of the child, explains:

Because the ambulance will not come unless they are told by a doctor of a hospital. And Eileen's doctor doesn't work at night. So this doctor had to come from Leeds. (Pause.) It was only just over thirty minutes, you see, from the pains starting. (Looks at his watch.) And not much more until it is dead.²

¹Lukacs, Realism in Our Time, p. 75.

²David Edgar, Baby Love (manuscript dated 6 February 1973). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

The baby was only six weeks premature, and the doctor admits that medical care might have saved it. Eileen was not living with Shahid, the Pakistani father of her baby, because of more red tape. They had been living together until the civil servant's investigation of Eileen's claim for benefits (welfare) forced them apart for financial reasons. The social worker-claims examiner explains:

I found a pair of men's underpants in the claimant's bedroom, and established that the claimant could provide no alternative address for the young man in question. I therefore expressed to her my view that she was cohabiting, and told her that, under the provisions of the Social Security Act 1966, she was not entitled to benefits. The claimant said that the man in question was unable to support her as he regularly sent a proportion of his wages to Pakistan, but I informed her that this was not a matter for the commission, and that her benefit would accordingly cease forthwith.

The outside world's treatment of the interracial couple is harsh, with all institutions hostile to her. In addition, Eileen's mother rejects her, her aunt quietly disapproves, and the doctor assumes the pregnancy was a result of general promiscuity. The inside world, of which Edgar gives us only a glimpse, and that mainly in retrospect, consists of the friendship between two lonely people. The friendship slowly deepened into love, and out of that love, a wanted child was conceived. As the outside world invaded this private world, everything died symbolically with the child.

Edgar then focuses on the disturbed new private world that Eileen creates for herself with the stolen baby. She is happy, functioning, and her attempts to feed the baby with the help of a baby book are highly comic, but it is not a real world, and the outside invasion shatters it. When the police do find her, she becomes angry and crazed,

fighting with the police and trying to suffocate the baby rather than give it up. The police are cruel but pay little more than lip service to the idea that Eileen is mentally ill, rather than a criminal. The priest and the psychiatrist, similarly, are not ill-meaning, but rather inept at dealing with Eileen as an individual in crisis, and we see the public institutionalized side of religion and psychiatry unable to set up a "dialectic" with the individual. Eileen tells the psychiatrist about the priest:

He said I were a sinner and offered me compassion to make me good.... You say I'm mental and offer me "help" to make me sane. And neither's looking at me. He's looking at a sin and you're looking at a fucking problem.

Lukacs's statement about a public-private dialectic exactly describes Eileen's dilemma in the play. Eileen has been unable most of her life to function effectively in any form of social setting--school, college, work--and this inability, since it is not possible to function in isolation, is a source of tension. The outside inevitably invades her private world.

Raymond Williams's observation that realism shows action creating environment is also relevant. While the social environment is hostile to Eileen and, indeed, causal, there is also the build-up of that hostile environment. We see it in action along with the forces and actions that produce that environment, as Williams describes--action by public officials, actions coming from racist attitudes, and actions from Eileen's family, particularly her mother who was desperate for Eileen to climb the social ladder as she had failed to do. Edgar makes clear that there was always choice involved in these actions. Only when mental illness overcomes Eileen does choice cease to exist for her.

Edgar includes sections that condense needed information in an almost documentary style. Eileen's aunt states the facts about Eileen's family and childhood, and Shahid recounts his meeting and friendship with Eileen. Janet, the natural mother of the stolen baby, is only seen being interviewed in public, or her voice is heard over the television. Even if expressing private griefs Edgar shows her doing it in a public environment. Edgar's focus is Eileen. He creates a more psychologically complex character than in any play to date, or for many plays to come. He comments:

I think Eileen in Baby Love was probably the closest I've got to writing a completely rounded woman, although she is in a very personal situation.¹

He provides details of her life; he gives her language written in northern dialect--not phonetically, but in grammar and turns of phrase. He adds the psychological twist of timing the babysnatching for the time her baby would have been due, had it lived to term. Yet, despite the "personal situation" and the psychological complexity, Edgar's interest, ultimately, is the public treatment of Eileen and anyone like her. She thus is perceivable as a "typical" character, placed firmly in a social context with which she is at odds. This is Edgar's method of social criticism. He offers a critique of a legal system that does not fairly differentiate between mental illness and criminal behavior; of prison psychiatry that prefers drugs or out-of-date methods to individual help; of a public health system that cannot respond to emergencies without red tape; and of a social security system that does not allow for individual cases. He cites racism as causal in this personal story.

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 17.

Edgar's own comments are informative:

I think that was a gut play, because I was very deeply angered by the Pauline Jones "baby-snatching" case--though I should say that the play was based on a number of cases, not just that one. I think also that at the time I was actually living the play's own ambience--that strange combination of Asians, *declassé*, subproletarian people, and students, in that environment which is very much the centre of Bradford, with very little conventional, young working-class life within it. The character of Eileen really came out of that. And I was also interested in doing something which made a positive statement, which was that although she eventually got drugged out, she did actually defeat that ambience. It was a return to the themes which I'd treated in a rather crude way in Excuses, about working-class deviance.... In a way, Eileen is the same character as Geoff in Excuses, though what she had, which Geoff didn't, was a kind of wit and social competence and sparkiness.¹

Edgar does not perceive restrictions of time or place as part of the baggage of social realism, but uses staging techniques familiar from the agitprop work; intercut scenes and direct audience address. The play is in five scenes, opening in Eileen's flat just after the birth of the baby and just before the baby dies. The scene ends with her holding the dead baby. Scene two opens with her talking to a baby in the pram. The lights change, and we see Janet by the same pram telling the press how her baby was stolen from it. Only then do we guess that Eileen does really have a baby with her and whose it is. This scene also intercuts to a third location--the police station where Shahid is reporting Eileen missing. Janet's television interview that ends scene two becomes the sound background for scene three in the flat to which Eileen has escaped with the baby. Scene four uses three spots that switch back and forth between Janet's expressing her happiness at the return of the baby, Eileen's numb singing of Beatles songs, and the court coun-

¹Ibid., p. 12.

sel's outlining the case and sentencing her. The final scene takes place at the prison hospital, though spots light up Eileen's aunt and Shahid as they talk about her. Eileen sees through the shams of the forms of religion and psychiatry she is offered and seems to opt for the numbing desensitized world of drugs. She is dosed and is then held by the nurses, who love and coo over her as though she were a baby. Jonathan Hammond evokes the impact of the play in his review:

The quality of compassion the author has for his central character is something new in his writing. He skillfully evokes all sides at her dilemma; her own helplessness at the enormity of her psychological and emotional problems and society's brutal indifference to and inability to cope with them, despite the presence of a few sympathetic authority figures who try ineffectively to help.¹

It would not have been possible to treat as effectively this sensitive social issue with the broad strokes of the agitprop plays. Lukacs notes that "content determines form," explaining that

It is the view of the world, the ideology, the Weltanschauung underlying a writer's work that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes this intention and the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing.²

It is possible to depict big political issues in broad strokes or even caricature, as Edgar has demonstrated in his agitprop and documentary plays and some of his parodies. The content of Baby Love demands a more specific and complex treatment. The social analysis depends upon a recognizable social context and upon characters who are typical, meaning they represent recognizable social forces in that society. The scope of

¹Jonathan Hammond, Review of Baby Love, Plays and Players, July 1973, p. 60.

²Lukacs, Realism in Our Time, p. 19.

those forces may be limited, as in many of Edgar's plays, and in Baby Love, but they are recognizable.

The same is true of Saigon Rose, a full-length play written in 1976, the year after Blood Sports and The National Interest, which also have strong elements of social realism, and Destiny, which I will consider at greater length in the next chapter. While I have suggested that, true to Marxist thinking, content in Edgar's social realist plays determines form, Edgar comments:

I find myself slightly at sea discussing form, and I find it quite interesting that form has developed in the new political theatre in Britain in such a pleasant way. It's perhaps significant that there have been very few major pieces of analytical work written by recent British playwrights--compared, say, with the new American theatre in the mid to late 1960s, when there was a much more profound challenge to form than has happened here over the last ten years. Here the challenge has been a challenge of content. Plenty,¹ for example, is a beautifully constructed piece in many ways, but it's not formally innovative, considering the radical nature of its content. The same is true of Destiny and of all sorts of major and important plays that have been written.

[Question:] Perhaps, in a curious way, it was your own early plays which were more challenging in that respect? What I miss from the late 1960s is the sheer anarchic joy of a lot of the plays, which at times made them very messy and sprawling and inarticulate, but was often enormously exciting.

Yes, we have become nervous about that. I'm just no longer the person I described at the beginning of this interview--someone who rushed in like a bull in a china shop, writing eight plays a minute for quite a long time, based largely on a talent for making people laugh. And only then beginning to develop in the public eye as a writer. I mean, I have no unperformed plays, there is no bottom drawer, and that has meant that my work has developed.²

One of the developments that is part of the move to social realism is the coexistence of the public and private spheres of the

¹David Hare, Plenty (London: Faber, 1978).

²Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 23.

plays. The private sphere was largely absent from the agitprop work but features in Edgar's social realism, often because of tension between the private and public spheres. In Baby Love characters from the public world, the National Health Service doctor, the social worker, and the police, invade that private world and finally drag Eileen into the public world of the prison hospital. In Saigon Rose the private world is invaded by "a particularly virulent strain of gonorrhea mutated during the American involvement in Vietnam."¹ And this becomes a matter for the public health authorities. Edgar sets the play in Scotland and links this disease to the results of the exploitation of the North Sea oil and the petrodollar takeover.

Edgar creates a quartet of oddball characters who are involved in the La Ronde-like progression of the action and the disease. Claymore, an American photographer, passes the disease to Vicki, who gives it to her husband Clive, who gives it to Mo, a young Scots girl who becomes a model for Claymore's pornographic pictures. Claymore, Clive, and Vicki are all around thirty and very much products of the sixties. Claymore had been a draft card burner, who, coincidentally, had been sheltered one night by Vicki back in those revolutionary days. Clive, the most fully drawn character, is a journalist who describes himself in a typical moment of self-pity as

Middle-class. White. Anglo-Saxon. Church of England.
Male. Even heterosexual. Nothing going for me at all.
A historical reject. A sociological leper. A personal
reject.

¹David Edgar, Saigon Rose (manuscript dated May 1976). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this unpublished manuscript.

He had been part of the radical intellectual left of the sixties, but now all that remains of that Clive is a friendship with a Scots working-class Marxist, McLusky, who tolerates his fallen ways out of loyalty, until pushed too far by Clive in the final scene, where Clive shows that the depth of his loyalty is opportunism. Early on Edgar gives them a very funny scene in a macrobiotic restaurant where sexual politics, in the form of the yin and yang of macrobiotic cooking, are argued. A class confrontation results when the waitress, Mo, dumps a full tray on the floor as a symbolic act of work stoppage. She had given in her notice, effective at that precise moment. Clive scurries around cleaning up the mess, but McLusky warns:

Clivey, take that tray out, and you are guilty of a direct and conscious act of class betrayal.

Clive hides behind a pretended intellectualism and puts up a smokescreen of left-wing jargon or self-conscious prattle in order to avoid human contact. While he and Vicki divide the household goods when they decide to separate, the jokes come nonstop: he rattles off song titles and record labels instead of feelings; he even suggests they split the cauliflower. When he brings Mo home to bed, she edges to the bedroom with a certain directness while he rattles on (this scene is a virtual repeat of Vicki and Claymore in the first scene of the play, where he is clear on his intentions and she hangs back), saying:

Did you enjoy Leith? I am in no way generally distinguished, but I do have a slight claim to fame. I was once stopped for speeding in Great Junction Street. They let me off with a caution, so I have actually been dismissed by the Leith police.¹

¹ British elocution class tongue-twister runs "The Leith police dismisseth me."

He even adds:

Usually I make it a rule not to sleep with a woman until I know her well enough to be sure she'll get the joke. (Slight pause.) If she spots when it's the punchline. (Slight pause.) As it were.

Erika Munk, in her review of the New York production, sums up the character:

one of those dry, repressed stereotypical Brits who cannot open his mouth in even the most extreme situations without being clever, ironical, self-pitying, self-deprecating, and self-centered to the point of existing only in a self-conscious void.¹

The pity is that, as McLusky lets us know, there had been the promise of a more substantial man.

Clive is the central character, but Mo is the sympathetic one and undergoes a sad change. She also links the private world of sexual politics with the outside world and its politics. She is a young Scots girl from Peterhead, a coastal town now ravaged by the effects of the oil industry on the ecology, the town, and its inhabitants. An oil worker describes his life to Clive--forced overtime, long work periods before time off, unpleasant living conditions, no family quarters, and now abandoned by his wife just after the birth of their child. Mo, herself, has broken from the traditions of her quiet Presbyterian upbringing, succumbing to the petrodollar lifestyle. Her family, coming across one of her centerfold layouts, has thrown her out. The final image of the play shows her dancing with Claymore, the American photographer, as she says:

¹Erika Munk, The Village Voice, 7 December 1982, p. 85.

You know. It's a wonderful feeling. That I've had. To free your knots. And cut your ties. With no restrictions any more. No family. No refuge. You're completely independent. You're completely free. (Pause.) And so, pornographer. I have'na got a choice. (Pause.) I've got to dance with you.

The image is powerful and laden: the most vulnerable character feeling there is no choice but to dance with the outsider, the one who brought disease to her private world, the one who now uses her for his pornography; once unspoiled Scotland now dancing with American oil. The implication is that the American oil companies are rising in Scotland, ruining the environment and dehumanizing lives. They are an unwelcome presence just as, in Edgar's view, the Americans were in Saigon, where the physical disease was mutated. Edgar makes the connection in one of what I term his mischievous turns of humor; he calls it the Saigonization of Scotland, adding a neat pun on his title when he notes, "Saigon has risen, on the shores of the North Sea."

The private story of the sexual liaisons is linked and given its social context by a social health investigator, Heather MacIntyre. She has four monologues between the scenes where the Claymore-Vicki-Clive-Mo contacts are made. She addresses the audience directly in parodies of pulp-fiction storytelling, and we only slowly realize her true function in the play. She, in the meantime, has told the long story of the travels of Saigon Rose to her territory and of her subsequent investigations. When she finds Claymore, she is integrated into the main action of the play and is invited to the VD party which forms the final scene. In a typically insensitive way, Clive has decided it would be fun to get the VD group together with their social worker and invites McLusky along for the ride. It is an extremely funny scene where Edgar catalogues

numerous facts about VD but presents them through character-based dialogue rather than through agitprop "out-front" polemics. When Heather catches up with Claymore, her explanation of what Saigon Rose is and how it evolved is realistic. At the party she is a mine of information on the subject, but it emerges as shoptalk from a character who is unable to leave her job at the hospital--or wherever it may have taken her:

I mean, we're pretty sure that Mussolini had both gonorrhoea and syphilis, Hitler had gonorrhoea, Lord Randolph Churchill, of course, was syphilitic, as was Henry VIII, Ivan the Terrible, Napoleon, Catherine the Great, Louis XV. And then there's the artists, Wilde, of course, Van Gogh, Strindberg, Gauguin, even Keats, certainly Schubert and Schopenhauer, Goya. And during the great outbreak of the 1490's and 1500s of course, you couldn't move for them. Charles VIII and Francis I of France, Erasmus, Benvenuto Cellini, Dürer, at least three popes ...

It seems that she could go on endlessly, so Clive interrupts, but the conversation soon turns to a VD rhyme contest:

CLAYMORE The blob on your knob can cost you your job ...
 CLIVE Don't give a dose to the one you love most ...
 McLUSKY If you don't treat the syph, you'll end up a stiff.

This culminates in a medical student's learning rhyme about progressive VD symptoms, bringing the section to a rousing climax. Edgar has also put across vast amounts of information without breaking the realistic mode of the play, since the information has all issued from character and situation.

The language of the play is adapted to the characters. McLusky and Mo are written with an indication of their Scots dialects and Clive's character is written in a pompous semijournalistic style. Only Heather, in her monologues, is given changing parodied speech, but once she is integrated into the action it becomes character-rooted. Edgar gives to

Clive a key image in the play and one that Edgar has used on two other occasions. Discussing with Mo the gonorrhea he has passed to her, the ravaged Scots shoreline, and the fervor of the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, he says,

There is, apparently, a variety of carp that lives in Lake Erie, an otherwise dead environment. The reason they survive is that they've mutated sufficiently to live off the poison in the water.

In The ... Show¹ a doctor takes members of the audience to a freak show saying:

Mutants, you see, all of them, like the carps in Lake Erie, who have mutated sufficiently to live off the poisons in the water.

And a song elaborates the theme. In Not With A Bang a slide displays the caption:

There is evidence that a mutant strain of carp is breeding in Lake Erie. The fish live off the poison in the water.

The idea of adaptation to an increasingly polluted or debased environment obviously disturbs Edgar. In Saigon Rose the image suggests the North Sea oil worker who, having lost all semblance of a family and a decent life, has mutated to some hardened creature who is able to subsist on the poisons. It also suggests that Mo, too, will mutate and adapt to the pornographic values of the permissive society and of Claymore. A claymore, it should be noted, is a large, double-edged Scottish broadsword and a very dangerous weapon; Claymore mines were U.S.-made antipersonnel weapons used in Vietnam. That Claymore is an American is of significance since Edgar is attacking both the capitalist destruction inherent to the petrodollar and the American presence in Vietnam. Subtler criticism of American influence appears in the character of Claymore

¹The All-Singing All-Talking Golden Oldie Rock Review Ho Chi Minh Peace Love And Revolution Show.

and his beliefs.

Edgar is also writing about the late sixties and its issues, through the character of Clive in particular, but he notes,

although a lot of my work and a lot of me is about the late 1960s, all my plays were written in the 1970s. And I think that's quite important, in that they're all plays about a now rather embarrassing feeling of the late 1960s generation being the Peter Pan generation. Almost everything I've written relates to that either by saying it was nonsense anyway, and we always knew it was--which I think a lot of the early plays do do--or by looking at it in a more distanced and I hope positive way, as I'm trying to do now.... I do think that when Poliakoff says that anybody who is writing now has to relate to the late 1960s, although it's a piece of shorthand, it's quite accurate.... Yet almost everything academic that came out of the late 1960s has been undermined.... The generation that was never going to be assimilated has been assimilated.¹

Edgar is talking about his own generation of late sixties activists and how they have fared in seventies society and how it is impossible to write about such people in the seventies without relating to where they stood in the sixties. He shows Claymore, the former draft resister, McLusky, the still committed but low-key Marxist, and, most fully, Clive. Most of the characters he portrays have been assimilated into seventies society. Clive is not assimilating too easily, becoming a seventies misfit, a true Peter Pan character. Nevertheless he is a recognizable and typical character, a dislocated former revolutionary with self-serving pretensions to lasting commitment. With the characters of Mo and Claymore, Edgar takes the concept of typicality to an extreme, allowing them to stand for their countries of origin, with their private stories paralleling Edgar's view of the public issues of the play, but because he gives them private worlds and psychological depth, they are far from

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 9.

the agitprop characters that such typicality could suggest. The context of the play therefore extends from the private and sexual world to the social world of public health to the multinational reaches of the petrodollar and American imperialism.

In Wreckers Edgar's focus is much narrower, though he does introduce one capitalist character, Lord Vestey, whose industrial interests (Vesteyed interests) extend to many corners of the globe. Edgar looks in this play at the public worlds of work and politics of a group of Londoners from the working-class East End, almost neglecting the private worlds of his characters. Most of the agitprop and documentary plays deal largely with workers, the workplace, or government policies that affect working life, and work is often a significant element in the plays that focus less directly on this aspect of society.

Wreckers traces the growing political awareness and involvement of a group of East Enders as they survive the 1972 dock strike, the jailing of five dockers by the Industrial Relations Court under the recent Industrial Relations Act, and the conflict with a friend when he crosses a picketline and is subsequently jailed for his part in industrial theft. They are all reunited four years later in their work for the Labour Party. The issues are the rule of law and the nature of morality. Of the play's twenty-nine scenes, one is set in the private world of the home, and the rest are in pubs, meeting halls, public areas, such as the London Tube, or various places of work. Private relationships are of only peripheral significance but most effective when Hudi, the driver, tries to cross the dockers' picketline only to find he is confronting his friend Micky. The scenes are divided by music and song,

with songs sometimes holding a main place in a scene. Also, the character George serves to introduce and break up scenes. In Act I George is a detective sergeant in the police force but, amusingly and inexplicably, becomes a journalist in the second act, providing exposition, directly addressing the audience and occasionally becoming involved in the dramatic action--a self-consciously theatrical device. He mostly provides dates, settings, time, and economic and political background. He opens the play:

OK. The prologue. Fill you in. Time: 1972. Edward Heath is Prime Minister. Harold Wilson is leader of the Opposition. The Queen is the Queen. Place: The East End. London's Gangland. Where force rules the frightened streets, only might is right, and if G. Davis is innocent OK, that sets him apart from 90 per cent of the population. Subject of story: Conspiracies of various kinds to undermine our Way of Life and Cherished Liberties.¹

He explains that he is a policeman, or, "as they call us around here, the filth," and then launches into the first song, "The Filth." He continues and introduces scene two:

It is January 1972. Unemployment is nudging a million and the Stock Exchange index is nudging 500. Inflation is over seven per cent and the pound is sinking below two dollars sixty. And it's a Friday night in a public hostelry on the Isle of Dogs, the kind of place where even the cat backs the Hammers, and you can't bung a brick without braining half a dozen colourful East End characters.

Throughout, George continues in this pulp-fiction-cum-journalism style, but makes clear the important facts in very much the same way that Heather McIntyre does in Saigon Rose.

In many ways Edgar seems to be harking back to the multiscenic structure of the agitprop and documentary plays, where a character like

¹David Edgar, Wreckers (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 2. All subsequent quotations from the play are from the printed script.

George would frequently tell the audience what it needed to know to keep up with the action and where music and song would be integral elements. But the scenes themselves are realistic in content and in dialogue. The language is colloquial and evokes the East End accents of the characters. While the scenes stand as realistic, there is another element. They are mostly quite short, sometimes seeming truncated, but each scene makes its point and can stand alone in true Brechtian fashion, though Edgar does not provide slogans, nor does he tell us what will happen in the coming scene, and he even draws us in emotionally. In effect, Edgar is again playing with a received approach to theater and manipulating it for his own purposes, taking only what works for him, turning the rest on its tail.

His characters are drawn realistically even though he gives us minimal private information. Rachel and Micky are married. Rachel is a presser in the garment industry, Micky a docker. We come to know them mainly through their public behavior. We see Rachel at work, becoming more militant. In the pub the conversation is about strikes and labor problems and the law. We see their growing activism and eventual involvement in the Labour Party. Hudi is a former docker who tries to cross the dockers' picketline. He is a thief, suggests blackmail to Rachel as a way to get a wage increase, since she discovers her boss is using stolen cloth, and he beats up his girlfriend Linda. He is not an appealing character but may be seen as a working-class deviant, as Edgar suggests of Eileen in Baby Love and Geoff in Excuses Excuses. When he is released from jail he, too, becomes politicized and is part of the left-wing faction of the internal struggles of the

local branch of the Party. They attempt the ouster of a right-wing Labour Member of Parliament for his support of the rule of law in helping to "emasculate" the 1976 Dock Labour Bill.

Edgar creates the End End milieu and its public problems effectively and fully, including reference to such issues as squatting--Linda, jobless and drifting after her episode with Hudi, ends up surviving as a squatter--and the St. Katherine's Docks' renovation, which failed to include housing for local workers as was promised. The public issues hark back realistically to the 1972 dockers' strike and the jailing of the five dockers, the picketing of the jail, and the eventual release, and the later rifts in the Labour Party leading eventually to the formation of the Social Democratic Party. Edgar shows the dockers and the drivers at odds because of containerization and their indecision on union support. On the containerization issue Edgar uses a familiar agitprop technique of visual simplification, but he does not use cartoon methods; he incorporates the device into a realistic scene. Hudi, using some stolen candles--"Shall we say, they fell off the back of an altar"--demonstrates the problem of his friends in the pub:

(He picks up as many candles as he can hold and takes them to Linda, clambering over the centre chair. He gives the packs to Linda and walks back, round the chair to the other table again. Then he gestures to Linda to do the same in reverse. She comes to him, climbing over the chair, hands the pack of candles to him....)

HUDI Linda was a factory abroad. I was a factory at home.
(Leaving Linda, he goes to the centre chair.)

HUDI This is the docks. Slow, wasteful, expensive.
(He goes back to the chair with the candles.)

HUDI Eureka.
(He sweeps the packs of candles into the carton, and picks it up.)

HUDI Quick. Efficient. Cheap. Containers.
(He throws the carton, over the chair in the middle

to Linda, who catches it. Hudi turns to Micky.)
 HUDI Sorry, mate. Progress.

The songs in Wreckers, while certainly a nonrealistic Brechtian device, advance the action. Linda's song, "Sob Story," gives a condensed account of what happened between her and Hudi, with a few personal details about background. By delivering the information in a song rather than in a realistic scene Edgar directs the audience away from the private circumstances. Similarly, her song about her life since Hudi left her avoids sentiment because it goes quickly into a scene about the public issue of squatting, even though the song itself is moving:

Three years
 Through the maze of London's homeless
 Through the haze of half-light living
 What the hell

She was a victim
 Drained the bitter cup
 Drained it and it Grew Her Up.

The "Pickets' Song" compresses the events of the dock strike

And the law ground into motion and
 Injunctions they were sought
 And fellow workers took the dockers
 To the bosses' court
 Judge Donaldson he ordered that
 Three lads should go to jail
 So down we went to Chobham Farm
 We knew we mustn't fail
 And told them, If you break that human wall
 There won't be jails enough to hold us all.

As the group politicizes in the second act of the play, Rachel and Paul, a new character and a member of the Labour Party, are recruiting for the Party, and most of the scene takes the form of a song, broken only by snatches of dialogue concerning internal problems, or when George interrupts to note the passage of time. Some songs comment on the situation in more general ways, such as "Who Is the Labour Party For?" or "Law

Locks Up," which poses one of the central issues of the play:

The Law locks up
 The man or woman
 Who steals the goose
 From off the common
 But leaves the greater villain loose
 Who steals the common from the goose

 The Law demands
 That we atone
 When we take things we
 Do not own
 But leaves the lords and ladies fine
 Who own things that are yours and mine.

Functionally, the songs serve as a chorus, commenting, adding information, and breaking the intensity of the dramatic action of the play, in the same way that the character of George does.

In his explanation of the background of the dockers' disputes Edgar finds an insidious chain of connection which Itzin describes concisely:

In the play Midland Cold Storage was the apparent enemy but was eventually shown to be simply the local link in a chain leading to the House of Lords, which, in fact, emasculated the 1976 Dock Labour Bill. Edgar showed that behind the front of an Ulster Bank, Midland Cold Storage was owned by Lord Vestey who also owned (in addition to 100 companies in the UK and in countries abroad, including the worst of the fascist dictatorships) land in Australia, which bred Vestey cattle, slaughtered in Vestey slaughterhouses, transported in Vestey lorries, shipped in Vestey ships to Vestey cold storage depots and thence to Vestey shops. A "Vesteyed interest" quipped Edgar. In the play the East End workers discovered the inter-connections between industry and politics, and became sufficiently politicised to be able to fight the battle in the East End constituency trying to oust a right-wing Labour MP.¹

By demonstrating the politicization of the East End workers, Edgar is exemplifying a crucial aspect of social realism--the dramatization of social analysis taking place on the part of his characters. The hope

¹Itzin, Stages, p. 148.

is that it will stimulate that same process on the part of the audience.

In his unpublished lecture Edgar makes this point and explains:

Social realism is obviously a synthesis--dare I say it, even a dialectical one--of the surface perception of naturalism and the social analysis that underlies agit-prop plays. To explain, it is first necessary to be recognizable, and only then, having won the audience's trust, to place those recognizable phenomena within the context of a perceived political truth. It is indeed in this combination of recognition with perception that the political power of theatre lies.¹

When asked about the impulse behind the writing of Wreckers Edgar said:

It goes back in a way to what I was saying about the failure of the left to confront political issues that are really in the marketplace--like law and order. Just as Mary Barnes is in part a wry comment on the Laingian theory that schizophrenics would further the revolution, so Wreckers looks at the dominant radical tradition of the deviancy school--the idea for example that the Kray twins² were somehow articulating an ill-formed but real protest against the capitalist system. So the set of ideas I wanted to confront and worry in Wreckers had to do with the fact that working-class life in the East End of London is based on an infrastructure of crime--which seemed to me the kind of question which revolutionary organs discussing the dock strike were unable to confront. That play was an attempt to look at criminality and actually ask, "Look, what is our attitude to theft? Do we actually believe that there are forms of anti-social behaviour which occur among working-class people which are directed superficially against the rich, but which are totally unacceptable?"³

Edgar provides the irony at the end that the capitalist may himself turn to petty crime. The dock warehouses are burning and Linda tells Hudi that the bosses did it: "Arson. They burn them down when they got preservation orders on them." They react with ironic generosity:

¹Edgar, "Political Studies," p. 17.

²The Kray twins, now serving jail sentences, ran a protection/extortion racket in London. Their methods included torture and murder.

³Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 17.

LINDA Can't blame them though.
 HUDI Why not? It's criminal.
 LINDA Oh, sure. Criminal. But you got to bear in mind, environmental factors. They can't help it, owners of the companies. It's not their fault.
 HUDI Go on.
 LINDA I mean, you got to look at the background. Childhood, I mean. None of our advantages.
 HUDI Oh, yuh, I see. Denied the benefit of poverty.
 LINDA Exactly. And deprived of hunger.
 HUDI Day after day, their mothers going off for Bridge Fours, leaving them with only the au pair for company.
 LINDA Night after night, their dads coming home stone cold sober on the 5.15 from Waterloo.
 HUDI And from their teens, or even earlier, interned in Victorian institutions in which they are trained in the dreadful ways of their class.
 LINDA Exactly.
 HUDI No surprise they turn out how they do.
 LINDA Can't blame them.
 HUDI Course you can't.
 LINDA Personally I blame the system.
 HUDI So do I.

The London Times review was highly favorable to Edgar:

He conveys a humanistic ambiguity, a recognition of flaws in the people he nonetheless supports.... Despite the blatancy of its form, the play has subtleties and is richly entertaining ... pungent lyrics.... The radical education of Hudi is shown against a background of the political climate--government changes ... the emasculation of the Dock Bill by the House of Lords.¹

The Plays and Players reviewer found the play's complexity confusing but did grant "real insights into the militant point of view and Edgar's ability to provide both sides with realistic punchy dialogue is evident." But, he continues, "Issues of this magnitude are too complicated, too many-sided, to be reduced to cartoon form."² This last statement I find strange, because only in the songs and the character of George does Edgar

¹Ned Chaillet, The Times (London), 21 April 1977, p. 12.

²Allen Saddler, Plays and Players (London), April 1977, p. 39.

approach a cartoon style. And this is a device used to condense and put across necessary information, set time bridges, lighten the tone, and allow the audience time for analysis between the realistic scenes of the main action. The mixed styles keep the intellectual involvement high by countering the emotional pull.

Wreckers was written for and in collaboration with England's 7:84 company, which, at the time, had six performers, some of whom played instruments, and four musicians, all of whom acted. In the introduction to the printed script Edgar describes the work process:

This show began with lengthy discussions between the group, the director, Penny Cherns, and me. There was a strong feeling that the show should be about the law, both in its application and basic character. Out of this came the idea of a play set in the London Docks, which would deal with criminal law, with industrial law, and, finally, with the nature of Parliamentary legislation as a whole.

Having decided on the subject and agreed on an outline, we researched the show, everyone reading round the subject and conducting interviews collectively.... At the end of the research period, I produced another outline, which was discussed and amended. I then went away to write the script, returning some weeks later with a draft, which was extensively re-written during its five-week rehearsal.

7:84 was founded in 1971 by John McGrath and takes its name from the statistic that 7 percent of the population owns 84 percent of Britain's wealth. It is a touring company, aiming at a working-class audience and playing to them in clubs, community centers, halls, and theaters and aiming to provide theater that has a direct relevance to their own lives. Since this production Edgar has had differences of opinion with McGrath, mainly on the form best used by left-wing theater and on the playing place. McGrath writes:

There has been for some years a tradition within British theatre which is fairly coherent and very active, which began to develop elements of the forms of working-class

entertainment into a new theatrical tradition that identified its work with the interests of the working class as its audience.... I differentiate this kind of theatre, in involving itself with working class audiences and forms, from "political" theatre which is on the side of the workers but expresses itself in the language of high cultural theatre--important and excellent though that may be. The work of Brecht and Piscator in the 20s is the best example of this genre; they have had many followers from the American Guild Theatre in the 30s down to Brenton and Hare today.¹

And of course Edgar should be added to the list. Edgar comments on the issue:

Brecht never got a working class audience. Piscator never got a working class audience, even modern film-makers. I mean, nobody has solved it. Eisenstein didn't solve it. People have got closer to it. People have made heroically more of an effort than I. McGrath is an example. I have severe differences with McGrath, as you know, but I've never denied the courage of his projects, or, indeed, the self-sacrifice of his projects, in terms of his own personal career, but on the other hand he hasn't cracked it.²

McGrath has steadfastly refused to work in the large theater spaces to which Edgar, as well as Brenton and Hare, have now gravitated, and this is one of their differences along with a debate about the significance of popular forms of entertainment. Edgar has deemphasized those forms that were very much a part of the agitprop and documentary plays, perceiving them as the least successful elements:

What became clear was that the images the audiences related to (in the sense of those that they remembered and commented on afterwards) were not those that were drawn from popular-cultural traditions. It was rather those images that we drew from bourgeois populist culture (films and television) that created the greatest resonances.³

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), pp. 61-62.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1982.

³Edgar, "Political Theatre," p. 29.

McGrath totally disagrees and has done the opposite, continuing to draw on those traditions and to play in small spaces. In some ways, however, Wreckers does draw on traditions of working-class entertainment, especially in the use of song and in the character of George, but, by selecting his characters, their language, and their concerns from the working class and blending some traditional elements into a social realist approach, Edgar adds the important analytical dimension that he considers essential to political playwriting. The approach may also appeal to a wider audience. The issue of the audience and the playing space will continue in my discussion of Destiny, but I include here a related comment by Edgar, since it leads into the next play to be examined:

If you want to be a full-time professional playwright you have to start from where things actually are. Therefore you have to start with confronting your audience. Now that audience has changed.... There is now a very substantial movement audience, and I think that's an important audience to address. There is no point in addressing that audience on the horror of a nuclear holocaust. There is no point in addressing that audience to argue against racialism. What there is absolutely a point to is an attempt at analyzing what racialism is and to posing the various contradictions and conundrums to fighting it. There is no point in arguing to that audience that women have had a raw deal. There is a point in doing what I tried to do in Teendreams. Teendreams attempted to take feminism as given and then explore some of its contradictions and some of its problems, with a view to presenting the audience to itself.¹

Teendreams does indeed attempt an analysis of the problems and contradictions of feminism. As in Wreckers, Edgar covers a period of years and, similarly, deals with and tries to explain the growing politicization of his main characters. Most of the play is set in 1975, but Edgar also takes us back to the student activist days of 1968, when the men made the speeches and become the political heroes, and the women

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1982.

did the office work. Ruth, one of the students, says:

It is indeed 1968. And everything's in question. Everything is challenged, everything is new. We don't demand, we occupy, because the plastic culture's melting on the stove of history. (Slight pause.) So one does just wonder... Why the fuck we're still doing the typing and making the tea.¹

Late in the play a brief flashback takes us to 1961, when the two main characters, Frances and Rosie, were thirteen and becoming aware of society's inequalities, not to mention the H-bomb. The play also takes us to 1978 and the aftermath of the 1975 episodes. Change is a main theme of the play. Enormous changes take place in the lives of these women, changes for which they were unprepared. The young Frances and Rosie promise each other never to change, but have to go through a form of death and rebirth to give that promise new substance seventeen years later. Similarly, we see two lost teenagers terrified of change, but facing it. Rosie tells the fifteen-year-old Trisha:

You might feel, must feel, that everything has stopped, but that's not true. What's happening is that you're changing, and that isn't good or bad, but just--it's true. I mean, the feeling, carnage. Feeling smashed and broken. That is what change feels like. You are feeling change.

Edgar deals with women of different social backgrounds and of two successive generations--the older group being exactly his own age, with his own experience of 1968 student activism. Frances and Rosie are from opposite ends of the social spectrum. Frances is wealthy, middle-class, political, and active in her union when she becomes a schoolteacher. She has a seven-year relationship with her left-wing working-class college boyfriend, Colin. They practice equality in the home and in the workplace.

¹David Edgar, Teendreams (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this printed script.

Rosie, in contrast, marries early and "well," has no children, and soon becomes the bored middle-class nonworking wife and mother. A night out at a women's consciousness-raising group, when she forgets to call home, causing her husband to have to babysit and miss his snooker game, explodes her marriage. She contacts Frances again and moves in with her. The two come to terms with their lives and the slow progress of feminism. We finally see them at the end of the play get into their "glad rags" for a night on the town, facing life with energy and optimism.

Along the way Edgar introduces other political issues, some familiar from his other plays. Frances and Colin are involved in the fight against the Tory Rent Act (see Rent) and try to enlist the aid of their former college friend, Ruth, whom they find rehearsing an agitprop play in a "squatted house." The agitprop play is about the marital enslavement of women and has Marxist overtones:

It's a marriage play. Tony's the Church and State, and I'm the little woman, wedded unto Capital.

The play includes a parody of a wedding service reminiscent of some of the service sections in The Rupert Show:

Wilt thou, Man...have this Wo-Man for thy wedded wife, wilt thou beat her, exploit her and scorn her, in her sickness and your wealth, and forsaking all others, except of course for those bits of stuff crumpet skirt arse and cunt on the side that are every Man's Due And Right, for as long as you feel inclined? ... Screw the ring upon the Wo-Man's finger! ... Place the chain around the Wo-Man's neck! ... You may rape the Bride! ... I now pronounce you Man and Slave.

The crux of the scene is an argument between Ruth and Frances on feminist activism. Ruth believes in total focus on feminist issues, while Frances believes in setting the example of a woman who is actively involved in her work, her union, and other political issues:

We obviously think that women should be mobilised. That's why we're here.... And I personally don't think it's possible to emancipate our sex without emancipating the working class. I don't think you can just change your lifestyle and the rest follows. I don't think you can change the insides of people's heads without changing what's outside them first.

Frances is also angered by the uncompromisingly militant stance, saying:

What, uh, to coin a phrase, gets up my nose is the assumption that if you don't happen to agree with every word, you're a secret rapist. Or an aspirant rapee.

The crisis of the play comes when Frances is assigned blame for the teenage Trisha's suicide attempt. In trying to motivate Trisha and, in particular, her best friend Denise, and give them hopes more substantial than the glossy magazine ideals that run their lives, she unwittingly disturbs their whole foundation. Brewer, a male teacher at the school, puts the blame on Frances:

And you know, that what you've done, is you have taken from those girls their props, supports, the things hold up their lives, and given nothing in return. You told them they shouldn't be their kind of person, and the only choice they had was, on the one hand, for Denise, become a man, be what she thought you wanted her to be, take on the toughness and aggression, the machismo, be a thug, a bullyboy; and, on the other hand, Patricia, cut off from her femininity, despise it, left with nothing but despair. And I don't see frankly, what else you could think that they could do.

Frances is so disturbed by Trisha's attempt at suicide, which takes place in her flat when Trisha is babysitting for Rosie's children, that she decides to go back home to her parents and abandon public life and work. Unexpectedly she finds renewed courage to return to her political aims.

Frances is the protagonist of Teendreams, but Edgar includes a range of women taking part in the feminist struggle in different ways. Sandra is a working-class girl, beaten by her husband, who has escaped

with her baby to the "squatted house." Lying by her as she feeds her baby is a placard which reads "Fuck the Family." The Women's Consciousness Raising Group airs some special problems--the need for children's nurseries and day care, or, in the middle-class neighborhoods where most women don't work, a meeting place for women to find support, abortion, male supremacy, and other familiar feminist issues. The Frances-Ruth argument points up the dilemma of the left-wing activist who is a feminist by example, but whose main energy goes to other causes. Rosie typifies the bored housewife whose misery is the unexpected fruit of the supposed luxury of not having to work. The working-class teenagers are unformed and unmotivated except by glossy-magazine claptrap, and Edgar points up the difficulties of reaching them. Ironically Trisha, the good-looking one, survives well, and in the 1978 section we see her demolish a sexist approach by Rosie's former husband, Howard. He has been crude and suggestive and asks for her phone number:

Oh absolutely Mr. Potter. It's Whitehall 1212.¹ I'm sorry. But look on the bright side, eh? Can't let you have my number, but I certainly got yours.

The other side of her apparent success is that she is "dressed in an outrageous but sexy uniform" for her job as salesperson for a calculator company and is falling prey to success in a sexist environment. Denise, on the other hand, is falling prey to the working-class deviancy that Edgar has mentioned in connection with Eileen in Baby Love, Geoff in Excuses Excuses, and Hudi in Wreckers. She tells Colin, whom she meets in the park:

¹The phone number of Scotland Yard.

I used to be a juvenile delinquent. When you was on the telly. But then I got this accident. Well, tell a lie, in fact, was kind of planned. You jump the list, for council flats, if you're a mother. Get away from home. I haven't seen the bloke. An age. Think he's in Borstal. Was a wash-out, anyway. And on your own, can screw the SS, that much more. So what d'I do? Not nothing much, in fact. Get by. Keep going, Paul and me, and take no shit from anyone. A lot in fact. I'm a fucking superior mother.

She offers to sell Colin a toy Kermit the Frog, of which she has many at home: "Shall we say, they fell off the back of a Mothercare trolley."¹

The coincidence of Colin meeting Denise and Howard meeting Trisha is part of a balance of forces and a symmetrical pattern that Edgar has set up in the play, for purposes of contrast, parallel, and irony. Both Frances and Rosie choose men from different classes, resulting in opposite lifestyles and behavior. Colin takes an equal share in the domestic life, and Frances is seen as being in control of her work life and its responsibilities. Rosie has risen to a middle-class lifestyle and is shown as a slave to the domestic needs of a chauvinist husband, who is absent most of the time. Rosie and Trisha, who both undergo the most traumatic changes, are seen as soul sisters in the hospital scene and in their subsequent survival. Edgar continues this pattern of correspondences in other ways, one of which is in his juxtaposition of scenes and manipulation of time.

Scene 1 takes place in 1975 and shows Trisha's suicide--it is not until scene 17 that we learn she did not succeed--and scene 2 takes place two weeks later when Frances evaluates her life and goals:

When I was 19, and went to college, 1968, the dawn in which
of course 'twas bliss to be alive, and when I met him at the

¹Mothercare is a low-priced high-quality chain store that sells maternity clothes and all needs for babies and infants.

demo and he whispered sweet and secret dialectics in my ear, and when we walked off hand-in-hand into the sit-in, and in that very moment suddenly my whole life changed.... I thought it had. And even more, I thought that tatty teenage fantasy was going to be a blueprint for The Changing of The World.... Blueprint. Change the world. In fact a blueprint to escape the world. And me. And I've been on the run, from me, this seven years, and now at last I'm going to turn me in. It's quite simple. Thought we could change people. We were wrong.

Scenes 3 and 4 take place in 1968. Scene 3 shows Frances and Colin at a student sit-in and building takeover and in total contrast to her friend Rosie, whose traditional wedding takes up scene 4. Scenes 5 and 6 are similarly juxtaposed for contrast. It is 1972, and in scene 5 Frances and Ruth have their feminist argument in the "squatted building," while scene 6 shows Rosie efficiently juggling heating baby bottles, cooking fish fingers for the older children and a steak dinner for the adults. Crosscut with this scene is another contrasting one of Frances at home with her NUT rule book, on the phone with a male colleague telling him how they must go about challenging a union ruling.

Scenes 7-19 are all set in 1975 and show the reunion of Frances and Rosie and Frances's involvement with the teenagers, Trisha and Denise. This section peaks in scene 14 in a dreadful fight between the girls over a boy, and Trisha, in tears, jeers:

I'm not surprised he wouldn't kiss you properly. I mean, he probably just did for a joke himself. Kiss Denny. Probably a bet. Kiss ugly Denny.

Denise tears down Trisha's beauty charts and posters and implicates Frances by telling Trisha:

Miss Lockett says it. (Pause.) Says that girls like you are just a waste of time.

In scene 15 Denise causes the other schoolgirls to ostracize Trisha.

Scene 16 shows Trisha's arrival at Frances's flat to babysit. Chronologically this scene precedes the opening suicide scene of the play. Rosie visits Trisha in the hospital in the next scene, and they are revealed as soulmates going through the crises of change.

Scene 19 is a repetition of scene 2, in which Frances declares her intention of going home. The intervening scenes have explained why Frances feels that she has failed, what she has done with her life, and what she was trying to do and return us to this starting point. Scene 20 is set at Frances's family home and includes the 1961 flashback section when Frances and Rosie promise each other to remain true to their ideals. The irony is that they undergo big changes in their lives in order, at the age of thirty, to reaffirm those teenage dreams. They also learn that change is essential for the survival of an ideal. Scenes 21-23 bring us up to 1978: Denise meets Colin (both with prams), Trish meets Howard, Rosie's divorce is through, Frances is teaching English to Asian women, and both women are on an upswing.

The time scheme of the play is clarified by the choice of pop music, which is part of almost every scene change, pinpointing the year and the spirit of the scene. For example, the women's CR group is introduced by Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man," and Suzie Quatro's "You Can't Make Me Like You" runs all through the disco scene when Denise makes up to Trisha's heartthrob, Gary, with the lyrics becoming integral to the progress of the scene. The only non-pop music is that which introduces the Rosie-as-a-married woman sequences. Her wedding is introduced by Charpentier's "Te Deum," the cooking scene by the Gloria from Bach's B Minor Mass, and the bedroom scene by Corette's Concerto

in D minor.

Edgar places half of his play in private domestic settings and the other half in public areas--meeting halls, school locations, a disco, and so on--so as to reflect the private-public tensions involved in feminism and their inseparability. The CR scene stresses this point, too, in the topics discussed. The play also shows women at work, Frances in particular and in contrast to the married Rosie, whose unpaid work lay in the kitchen and the bedroom, the two places we see her before the CR meeting and her reunion with Frances. Significantly, we see Frances working at home as well as in her formal workplace.

Male characters play mainly symbolic roles in the play, with Frances's friend, Colin, and her teacher colleague, Brewer, playing the only substantial and catalytic roles. Gary, the object of the teenage girls' affections, is seen only as a lolling, posing, sultry magazine-type sex symbol in the disco scene. Howard is a well-dressed handsome figure at his wedding, a sleeping lump in the bedroom and a sexist lecher with Trisha. Colin, insensitive to Rosie and Frances's need to be alone, is a victim of the intense camaraderie that growing feminist sensibilities bring about. Brewer, the teacher, shows some of the problems men face in meeting feminism head on. At first he is sarcastic and hostile toward Frances and her involvement with the teenagers:

For you, of course, they are not little girls at all,
they're victims of oppression, they're exploited by the
running dogs of bourgeois ideology, and thus are nothing
more or less than willing or unwilling soldiers of the
Revolution. Soldierettes.

Later he reveals a commonly held point of view and one with which

feminism has constantly to grapple:

You've transferred your agonies and insecurities and pain on to two schoolgirls, and what's happened is that you've destroyed them by your arrogant conviction that their choices, what they've chosen as their lives, their interests, their dreams, are worthy of contempt. And I hope all the other girls, the Debbies and the Jackies and the Jo's, I hope if they want nothing more than to be wives and mothers, if they've chosen that, they'll realise that what you and your twisted sisters offer is a great deal less, because its content, despite all the rhetoric, is bitterness, self-hatred and despair.

Rosie is the one who answers him on this occasion:

Although, there's limits to your choices, you can choose and map your life. Whereas, my life, and Trisha's, and Denise's, aren't like yours, because they are not mappable. They're mapped. So don't talk to me, to Frances or to them, about free choice. Cos, on that score, dear Nick, you just don't know you're born.

Brewer's attack is the one that immediately precedes Frances's self-doubt and return home, only to find that that is not home anymore:

I've passed the point of no return. The Wendy House was smashed, oh, long ago. So. Back. To all the mess and muck and guilt and failure and missed opportunity. Remembering, perhaps, occasionally what all that pain is for. So what else can I do?

This last sentence is a repeated idea in the play and connected to the theme of choice. Trisha, in the hospital, asks Rosie, "So what else can I do?" Denise had gone berserk and vandalized everything in sight after Trisha's suicide attempt and asks her social worker, "So what else could I do?" Choice and change are the crucial issues of feminism, and Edgar shows just how difficult those processes can be.

Teendreams was written with Britain's Monstrous Regiment company in much the same way that Wreckers was written with 7:84, with the difference that Susan Todd is given partial playwriting credit. The published script includes the following note:

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The form of the work was, initially, discussion of possible themes and content between David Edgar and Susan Todd as collaborators. The company then undertook a workshop discussion period between the writers and the group. This included sessions with women researching in, and working with, 13-15 year old girls, and with women active in the Women's Liberation Movement during the last ten years.... The content, form, structure and progression of the play was then assembled by David and Susan over a further period into a detailed synopsis, which was then discussed by the whole company. David then wrote the play from the sum of this work.¹

Edgar adds:

I wrote it all, and in a way, I structured it all. I was using Sue very much as a source. She had a number of the ideas, but in terms of the order, and how things happened in the scene, that was, more or less, me. If you say there are four processes--research, thinking, writing and rehearsal--then it's doing the thinking process on the same basis that one usually researches; a central committee--you get a lot of input.²

Monstrous Regiment toured Teendreams across England and included performances in London at the ICA. The company was founded in 1976 and describes itself thus:

The Monstrous Regiment is one of many alternative and politically oriented touring theatre companies operating throughout Great Britain. What sets the Monstrous Regiment apart from other politically oriented theatres that developed out of the liberating ferment of the late 1960s, is its emphasis on feminist issues. Although feminism is one factor which sets the company philosophically apart from other fringe theatres, it is, perhaps, most successful in its aims of reaching a working class audience.³

Itzin did not react favorably to the play, noting, in a rare negative criticism of Edgar's work:

¹Teendreams, p. 5.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

³From a pamphlet distributed by the company prior to a visit to the United States (undated).

The audience were asked to question the convictions of left politics over the past ten years without the substance to warrant that questioning. It was not obvious how--or why--the heroine/teacher's relationship with her teenage students tipped them to suicide and vandalism; the reasons suggested in the play--a need for consumerist props and romantic fantasy, without which they had no identity--were presented too glibly to be truly credible. The tone, too was of unbalanced bleeding-heart feminism--all "woe is woman and what a rotten world with all those beastly men."¹

It seems to me that Edgar goes to some length to give validity to different approaches. Ruth and Frances argue, but each respects the other's stance. Frances does not attempt to turn Rosie into the political activist she is, accepting her on her own terms. Trisha is succumbing to some aspects of the sexist society in her attire for her job, but emotionally and spiritually she seems well ahead of the game. Brewer is not made into a loathsome character by his expressions of opposition to Frances's politics, or her behavior. But for the incident on Rosie's arrival at Frances's flat, Colin is a sympathetic character. Because he is not the focus of the play we are less involved with his decline from student hero to pram pusher, though that movement does serve as contrast to the opposite movement of Rosie.

It is true that Edgar has not given all the reasons for Trisha's and Denise's behavior, nor all the influence that Frances brought to bear, but he suggests more than he shows. His strong social criticism does not provide answers, or indeed all the causes. Rather, he sets forth different points of view, some of the problems and some suggestions, "showing the audience to itself." He sees feminism as part of the struggle for an equitable society, making his protagonist a left-

¹Itzin, Stages, p. 278.

wing activist with many areas of interest; she is far from a bra-burning, radical, one-track feminist. He points up the difficulty of reaching alienated teenagers by reiterating a theme from Baby Love. Denise, Trisha, and their ilk had, like Eileen and her stolen baby, created a private world interacting little with society, and that world needed to be shattered. Denise says:

Just, couldn't keep it, Trish and me. We couldn't keep it, safe and sealed. The outside world, came in on us. And bound to.

This is an echo of Shahid's statement, "The outside world invades the inside world and things die."

Edgar's attempt to link feminism with politics in general is discussed in the Plays and Players review. It refers to Colin's insensitive speech when Rosie arrives at Frances's flat:

It was part of the play's general defence of the charge that the feminist movement, or sexual politics as a whole, is some sort of sideshow, distracting potential comrades from the main current of socialism. This is a subject worth arguing but not worth getting obsessed with, in a play which, despite its occasional repetitions and occasional laboriousness does present a real and compelling story, does offer real characters as well as issues and is far too questioning to lapse into dull or ranting agit-prop. If it has a message, it is one of consolation to people disappointed that the revolution turns out not to be an overnight affair.¹

Raymond Williams's suggestion that realism shows action "producing environment" is exemplified in Teendreams. The very existence of the CR group is a step in the process, and the purpose of the group is to activate change in the social environment. Edgar paints portraits of women achieving differing levels of success in activating change, realistically

¹Paul Allen, Plays and Players, March 1979, p. 28.

including Denise the woman who fails, who gives up and lives by cheating the system rather than fighting it.

The concept of action that changes the environment is relevant to all four plays under discussion. I have noted how it functions in Baby Love. In Saigon Rose capitalist oil ventures create the physical and social environments in the Scottish coastal towns, as well as the links between the American involvement in Vietnam and a sexually transmitted disease that arrives in Scotland some time later. In Wreckers people struggle to change the sociopolitical environment by work action and Labour Party activism just as women struggle with their problems in Teendreams. This desire for movement and change emerges as integral to the British social realist work. David Hare articulates this point:

If you write about now, just today and nothing else, then you seem to be confronting only stasis; but if you begin to describe the movement of history, if you write plays that cover passages of time, then you begin to find a sense of movement, of social change, if you like; and the facile hopelessness that comes from confronting the day and only the day, the room and only the room, begins to disappear and in its place the writer can offer a record of movement and change.¹

He continues:

He can put people's suffering in a historical context; and by doing that, he can help to explain their pain. But what I mean by history will not be the mechanized absolving forces theorists would like it to be; it will be those strange uneasy factors that make a place here and nowhere else, make a time now and no other time.²

Edgar has already acknowledged the impact of Hare's statements in this

¹David Hare, "A Lecture," given at King's College, Cambridge, 5 March 1978, published in Licking Hitler (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 66.

²Ibid., p. 68.

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lecture (see p. 145, above), and I sense that he has in fact drunk from the same cup, doing just what Hare describes but in his own way. Brecht, of course, had called for change long before:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.¹

In addition to the requirements of recognizability and the placing of typical characters in a social context I would now include that of a society in process of change as a further element in the social realist play. The social realist play will be critical of bourgeois society, but the critique will not be static; it will promote change. The effective plays will cover a period of time, as suggested by Hare above, explicitly or implicitly. Baby Love offers an exploration of Eileen's past by the prison psychiatrist and the statements made by the aunt and Shahid to show the effects of the passage of time. The exploration of a static situation is anathema to the social realist, for he believes in the lessons of history, he believes in responsibility for change. He will contribute to change by a drama of social analysis which explores the social impulses and the choices behind those changes. John Calder, in his essay "On Political Theatre," proposes another element:

The artist's need to communicate is never more urgent than at times of change when he senses where the changes of tendencies of the moment are leading and what lies at the end of the road.²

Edgar adds to the concept of the dynamics of the social realist when he

¹Bertold Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), p. 190.

²John Calder, "Political Theatre in Britain Today," Gambit 8/31 (July 1978): 6.

differentiates between the historian and the chronicler:

The historian attempts to penetrate the core of events by entering into history and reliving in his own mind the experiences of the past; the chronicler treats his material as inert, empty of determinate content and thus devoid of self-actualising interpretative potential. In the world of letters, clearly, the chronicler is a naturalist and the historian a social realist, one, who, again in Terry Eagleton's words, "penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essence or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a total form and fleshing them out in concrete experience."¹

By dramatizing "concrete experience" the political playwright can, in Edgar's words, "present the audience to itself" in such a way as to provoke intellectual response, disturb complacent attitudes and prompt political responsibility.

¹Edgar, "Political Studies," p. 17.

Chapter VIII

DESTINY

Destiny is a play that results from a committed artist sensing, in John Calder's words, "where the changes and tendencies of the moment are leading and what lies at the end of the road."¹ Edgar wishes to trace the growth of the political right in contemporary Britain, its roots, and its implications.

I am giving considerable space to a discussion of Destiny for many reasons. I feel that it is Edgar's prime achievement prior to 1983 and one in which he confidently assumes the style of writing he calls social realism. David Hare, Howard Brenton, and other British political writers have also adopted the form which is proving suitable for balancing effective dramaturgy with political purposes. An examination of Destiny's structure and content will suggest why it is effective and will contribute to a definition of the form which holds an important place in current British playwriting.

Destiny marks Edgar's first production on a large stage, his first commercial success and his first connection with the Royal Shakespeare Company which has presented three of his subsequent plays. While his interest and involvement with its issues predate Destiny, the success of the play put Edgar in demand as a speaker and writer on racism and neofascism.

¹Calder, "Political Theatre," p. 11.

Destiny was more than the culmination of Edgar's previous twenty-eight productions. The first, and very long, draft had been written in 1973, as Edgar explains:

It had been sort of commissioned, though with no money, by Richard [Eyre of the Nottingham Playhouse], or rather by David Hare who was dramaturg over there. And Richard said I'd like to see the second draft--it was five hours long, with fifty characters. Impossible.

Michael Simpson then read it at Birmingham, and he thought that underneath all the flesh, there was a thin, bright little play waiting to get out. But then his Board refused to allow the slimline version, and it then went back to Nottingham, who accepted it, and it was given a date, but that fell through for various reasons as well. And that was the summer of 1975, which was a period when all the reps were suddenly discovering that they were living beyond their means.... It sort of went the rounds, and it was very depressing. Sheffield refused to read it. Peter Hall at the National very nicely sent me a personal letter turning it down. The RSC turned it down. Theatres which liked it couldn't afford it, and theatres which could afford it, didn't like it.

And then, eventually, Ron Daniels got Trevor Nunn to read it, and said, we must do this at The Other Place.¹ And I said, no, it's for a big stage. But it was clear it was only going to be done by a company which was large enough to be able to afford the number of people in a small space. And The Other Place seemed to be the solution, especially since The Warehouse² was opening, and so it would come into London, if it was good. And it went ahead on that basis.³

Destiny examines the nature of neofascism in contemporary Britain. Edgar's thesis is that its roots lie in colonialism and its aftermath. The play opens in India as we hear Nehru's speech on Indian independence delivered August 14, 1947. The play soon moves to Britain in 1976, with flashbacks to intervening years and events. In the opening scene we meet

¹The Other Place is the experimental smaller theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre.

²The Warehouse was the Royal Shakespeare Company's experimental space in London until 1982.

³Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 15.

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Khera, a young Indian servant, Turner a twenty-year-old British Army sergeant, Rolfe, a thirty-year-old major, and the older Colonel Chandler as they dismantle the barracks in preparation for the British departure. Dominating the set is a huge painting of "the putting down of the Indian Mutiny" in 1857. Other relics of British rule are pulled out as the packing proceeds: a stuffed tiger, a red hunting coat, a bayonet, and a bottle of whiskey. Noises of the celebrations of native Indians form a background to this scene. Rolfe and Turner's attitude of disdain towards Khera is apparent as they ironically continue to give orders and condescend to him in his newly liberated country. The Colonel gives and gets more respect from Khera. His attitude is sharply differentiated from that of Turner and Rolfe, as is shown in this exchange:

TURNER Is it true, sir, they'll all be able to come to
England now, to live?
COLONEL I believe Mr. Attlee is preparing legislation, now
that India is in the Commonwealth.
ROLFE Do you approve of that, Colonel?
COLONEL (Quite sharply.) Of course. It's an obligation.
We are the mother country, after all.
ROLFE I have some reservations.
COLONEL And you're welcome to them.¹

Yet the Colonel's paternalism, echoed by his quoting Rudyard Kipling's The White Man's Burden, proves to be as destructive a force in the aftermath as the outright prejudice of Rolfe, who calls the Indians "a bunch of half-crazed dervishes," and of Turner, who says, "I can't see they're much more than savages, sir, whatever they say." Different racist attitudes are voiced in this first scene with additional overtones of the British class system:

¹David Edgar, Destiny (London: Methuen, 1976). All subsequent quotations from the play are from this published script.

ROLFE I didn't go to preparatory school, Colonel.
COLONEL I know you didn't, Major.

In this first scene, Edgar effectively introduces the emotions and conflicts that will run through the play. He gives the final words to Khera who, putting his British education to good use, notes, whiskey in hand, looking at the Indian Mutiny painting, "Civis - Britannicus - Sum."

Edgar then takes us to England, 1976, where we meet the characters from the first scene again. Colonel Chandler has become a Tory Member of Parliament for a West Midlands constituency. His death sets the action of the play in motion, as we follow the course of the by-election that ensues. Chandler's nephew, Crosby, wins the Tory nomination over the right-wing extremist, Major Rolfe. Sergeant Turner, now a member of the local patriotic league, becomes the candidate for Nation Forward, the growing fascist party--for which read the National Front,¹ England's fascist party and Edgar's real target of investigation. The Labour Party candidate is Clifton, and for a time he becomes the champion of a group of Asian workers, led by Khera, now a shop steward, who are involved in a labor dispute at a local factory. Khera had come to England in 1958, but

Not the England of imagination....
Keep faith in human virtue, while attempting to condone
The mother country's horror at her children coming home.
Gurjeet Singh Khera,
Once a slave,
Returns to haunt the Empire's grave.

The by-election becomes the central and linking event of the play, but Edgar's chief interest is the growth of the local fascist party and

¹The National Front was formed in 1966 by a merger of The League of Empire Loyalists and The British National Party. In 1967 The Great Britain Movement also joined.

its frighteningly powerful showing when the votes are counted. We first meet the fascists at a small and secret meeting held in 1968 to celebrate the birthday of Adolf Hitler. At this meeting someone reads a newspaper report of a racist speech by Enoch Powell,¹ which became known as the "rivers of blood" speech. Edgar comments:

There are Hitler birthday parties held regularly and, as coincidence would have it, Enoch Powell delivered his "rivers of blood" speech on Hitler's birthday. Now I don't know if there was a Hitler birthday party in 1968 which heard the news of the speech, but it's a fair bet, and I've written a scene on that supposition.²

This scene shows the clandestine nature of British fascism in 1968. Uniforms, salutes, and bad jokes against Jews and communists keep it a backward-looking movement, but Edgar shows the impact of Powell's speech on such a group, who find the public declaration of such sentiments by England's Shadow Spokesman on Defence sufficient instigation for further organization. A young man, Maxwell, is financed by a wealthy Canadian to form a new type of leadership:

You must spurn the trappings. Spurn the fripperies. But not the faith.

We meet Maxwell again in 1976 when, as a representative of Nation Forward, the fascist party, he speaks at a meeting of the Taddley Patriotic League, whose chairman is the former Sergeant Turner. We have already seen Turner forced out of his antique business by threats from Monty, a "Jewish cockney" representative of a development scheme who promises that if he doesn't comply there will be some destruction of

¹Enoch Powell is an outspoken right-wing Tory. In 1968 he was spokesman on defense for the Shadow Tory cabinet.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 147.

his store by "our Caribbean cousins." Now he leads his patriotic group towards fascism. This scene is one of the most striking and, according to critics, most memorable scenes of the play in production. It rings frighteningly true, as the diverse group of citizens air their concerns: parasitic worms in the local school, communist infiltration of a local college faculty, falling property values, fixed incomes and inflation, and the image of the Conservative Party, especially the young members, "who often seem more socialist than the socialists themselves." Edgar comments on this scene:

On the page it probably looked rather mechanical--the characters were selected very carefully to be representative of the various different groups and interests, and at the end of the scene a leader of the party made a speech in which he cleverly brought together all the disparate and indeed contradictory interests and fears of his audience, weaving them neatly into the classic Nazi conspiracy theory of history. On the page, as I say, I'm sure the scene looked as if it had been written from a chart, which, as it happens, was the case. But on the stage, I think what happened was that the recognizability of the characters in that situation--the drafty hall, the empty seats, the fed-back microphone, the echoing silences and bowel-shrivelling crossed purposes--gave flesh and substance to my analysis of their actual and subsequent behaviour, and the hopes and fears of the real people portrayed combined with the hopes and fears of the real people watching to create a genuinely mutual understanding of why they came and why they stayed, which it is the unique capacity of the theatre to create.¹

The remarkable thing about this scene is its familiarity. The people who opt for the fascist party are not monsters; they are former socialists as well as former Tories, middle class as well as working class, and Edgar makes them so close to ourselves that we are terrified. He does "show the audience to itself." Dennis Potter's review of the television pro-

¹Edgar, "Political Studies," p. 18.

duction¹ emphasizes this point:

a play which astonished me with its intelligence, density, sympathy and finely controlled anger. For once, too, compassion was not withheld from those deemed beyond the pale. Here was an examination of the extreme right in British politics which caught up all the strands which make it function: the nostalgia, the disappointment, the dumbly aching resentments, as well as the psychotic anti-semitism and other such racism that traditionally disfigures these movements. At times indeed the play was so alert to the pain and yes, the grief, which had drawn some people to the populist Right that it might even have persuaded a few, casual viewers that the National Front was worth supporting.²

Certainly one hopes not, but Edgar succeeded in showing how recognizable people can be drawn into such a movement, and indeed are being drawn in every day in contemporary Britain, not to mention elsewhere in the world.

Irving Wardle's review of the Stratford production was lukewarm, as was frequently the case when he reviewed Edgar's work, though he concedes "admiration for the thoroughness of Mr. Edgar's homework."³ However, when the play moved to the Aldwych Theatre with numerous glowing notices, Mr. Wardle warmed considerably:

a passionate well-informed inquiry into the sources of British fascism.... I cannot remember any play that coupled so much urgent topical information with such dramatic force. ... In dramatic terms it is a transformation show, presenting the indoctrination process step by step.⁴

Inevitably, Wardle repeats his usual phrase, "a hate-filled work," but adds, "its target is worthy of hatred."⁵ Most people, however, noted the

¹Aired 31 January 1978, BBC-TV.

²Dennis Potter, London Sunday Times, 5 February 1978, p. 5.

³Irving Wardle, The Times (London), 29 September 1976, p. 12.

⁴Irving Wardle, The Times (London), 13 May 1977, p. 15.

⁵Ibid.

compassion and lack of hatred, which I certainly see as a dominant feature. I think that the play effectively sets forth Edgar's challenging and frightening thesis that

there is no God-given reason why a national socialist movement should not arise in Britain. By virtue of becoming national socialists, people do not suddenly grow horns--indeed it is possible for people one recognizes and sympathizes with to set out on the dark and dangerous road to that ghastly and pornographic political ideology. I hope the play by treating that problem seriously got that point across, or contributed to getting that across.¹

By making his characters and events recognizable, Edgar is again employing what he calls "faction" (see Our Own People). I have quoted his statements on the Hitler's birthday meeting. He continues:

There is a strike by Asian workers at a foundry in the play. Now here the actual progress of the strike is based on what happened at Mansfield Hosiery and Imperial Typewriters, while the atmosphere is based much more on the different conditions of the West Midlands foundry industry and the struggles they've had there.²

Edgar thus establishes the recognizable social context essential to his thesis by combining actual events with fictitious but familiar characters and transposed environments.

The events and settings are public, including pubs, meeting halls, a factory, a police station, picketline violence, political meetings, and one scene in a restaurant. The only domestic setting is Clifton's house, late one night shortly before the election. However, Crosby visits him on election business, Clifton and his wife argue about politics, and the brick thrown through their window is a political warning. Edgar does not

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 22.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 147.

deal with his private life further than to note that he uses his wife and baby as an excuse when he compromises his political stance, or, in Edgar's argument, becomes a Social Democrat.¹ Similarly, the focus is public when Major Rolfe's son is killed in Northern Ireland. His son's death solidifies his move from right-wing Tory to active fascist, and Edgar sets forth the incident in such a way that the intense pain of his private loss is set against the public political situation. Rolfe says:

The Generals. The Ministers. Assured us that the sun would never set. The Generals. Could not prevent my son, in his high morning, his sun going down. Yet you still won't see. Will you? You generals, you ministers, police-chiefs, you won't see, we are at war. Same war. In Belfast. Bradford. Bristol, Birmingham, the one we lost in Bombay thirty years ago, the one we're going to lose in Britain now. Unless you see in time. Not thugs or lunatics, nor dupes of Moscow. They are ordinary men and women, sane and normal, thousands of them. And there is no time. They're everywhere. Deep, deep inside the gut. There is no time. (He is crying.) The sun has set. And we should not remember. We should not look back, but should, instead, think only of the morning. (He looks at the crumpled flag.) His fault. He turned his back. (The tears stop. ROLFE raises the flag, holding it in a high salute.) We need an iron dawn. (He stands there, holding the flag. Lights fade to darkness.)

Edgar makes Rolfe's thinking understandable to the audience. He comments:

I wanted to create characters that the audience could relate to and in a way that they could confront in themselves. It is facile to say that all the members of the National Front or the National Party wander about in jackboots, siegheiling all the time, that they are self-evidently ghastly horrible people. It is not only facile, it is counterproductive to create monsters (though there are some monsters in those parties). I wanted to create believable people. Some of them are pleasant; some of them are unpleasant. All of them make terrible political, psychological and emotional mistakes. That's what the play is about.²

¹The Social Democratic Party was formed in England in 1980 by a group of right-wing Labourites.

²Itzin, Stages, p. 147.

Edgar allows the audience to have some sympathetic feelings towards Rolfe's mistakes in this scene, though Rolfe-the-bully of the first scene of the play returns in the final scene when we learn that he owns the Metropolitan Investment Trust, the illegal property developers who had ruined Turner's livelihood.

Of the play's twenty scenes, eleven are either directly concerned with the Nation Forward Party or the development of impulses towards fascism. Of the play's twenty-one speaking parts, ten characters are, or become, members of the Nation Forward Party, while there are four Tories, five Labourites--including Khera and his fellow Asian worker, Patel--and two characters who are merely functional and undeclared politically. Edgar therefore gives greatest attention to the elements he condemns.

The most fully drawn character is Sergeant Turner. We meet him as an eager young sergeant in India, but one who enjoys asserting his authority over the natives. Edgar does not suggest that this trait is inherent in Turner's psychological make-up, but rather that it is the British presence in India that creates the false barriers, ranks, and classes that encourage one group to dominate another and acquire racist views. Britain becomes a multiracial society as a result of its earlier colonial policies--as the young Pakistani says in Our Own People: "We are here ... because you were there"--and the white-supremacy attitudes die hard.

Edgar also suggests that economics are a significant factor in the breeding of fascist attitudes, certainly for the characters Rolfe, Turner, and Kershaw, who find it easier to blame their woes on immigration

and internationalism than to search for the truth. Turner becomes a leader in the Taddley Patriotic League after he is forced out of his business, and then a puppet for the Nation Forward Party as it grooms him for the election. A grimly amusing scene occurs when he is drilled in his election speech and gives his answers to possible questions. Maxwell and Cleaver, a petty Nazi and "tinpot Führer," put him through his paces:

CLEAVER Turner, there's pressure from the Pakkies for a separate girls' school, religious grounds. Approve?
 TURNER All for it. As long as it's in Pakistan.
 CLEAVER No!
 TURNER Why not? It's funny.
 CLEAVER Flip. You say it shows the immigrants themselves can't integrate.
 TURNER (Shrugs.) Ask me another.
 MAXWELL Repatriation.
 (CLEAVER holds up three fingers.)
 TURNER Ordered ... compassionate ... humane. (He stops. CLEAVER gestures him on.) But we are honest enough to say that it cannot be voluntary. And that includes all immigrants who were born here.
 CLEAVER No!
 TURNER What's wrong?
 CLEAVER How on earth can an immigrant be born here? Remote control?
 TURNER Well, you know what--
 CLEAVER That's exactly what the hecklers want.
 MAXWELL And on the same score, Dennis, don't say they breed like rabbits.
 TURNER Why?
 MAXWELL Cos then some joker shouts that Queen Victoria did too.

Turner pulls an amazing twenty percent of the vote. In the final scene of the play he visits his former major from the Indian days to get industrial financing for the party. He learns that Major Rolfe owns the Metropolitan Investment Trust, whose development scheme had engineered his business ruin. Turner then seems to grasp at least some of the implications of the vast web of which he has become a part. Edgar

gives dramatic intensity to the scene by the presence of the same painting of the Indian Mutiny that dominated the first scene of the play. He thus visually reinforces the idea that Turner's attitudes were formed by the colonial mentality, a mentality that has destroyed him and has caused bloodshed for centuries. Turner perhaps has a glimmer of recognition as he stands in silhouette, with the unreconstructable Cleaver, and the voice of Adolf Hitler is heard:

Only one thing could have stopped our Movement: if our adversaries had understood its principle, and had smashed, with the utmost brutality, the nucleus of our new Movement. (Slight pause.) Hitler. Nuremberg. Third of September, 1933. (Blackout.)

British fascism, too, must be fully understood in order for it to be smashed, and Destiny stands as a powerful dramatic and political document in promoting that understanding.

Such characters as Turner and Rolfe are recognizable to anyone familiar with English society, and other societies may find their equivalents. It is in the creation of these characters that part of the strength of Destiny as a political document lies, even though Edgar all but eliminates any private dimensions. It is far more pertinent to Edgar that Rolfe was a major in the British Army in India in 1947 than that he got married and raised a son. That that son died is only of significance in the play because he died as a member of the occupying British Army in Ireland. Edgar also suggests that the British presence is an evil continuation of colonial principles, principles that breed the spirit of fascism.

Another recognizable character is the working-class youth, Tony. He, and his friend Paul, had worked for Turner in his antique business.

They appear briefly in an early scene, set in 1970, and again in 1976. Edgar contrasts the courses their lives subsequent take, though they are from identical backgrounds. Paul becomes a committed and active member of the Labour Party's left wing. Tony joins the Taddley Patriotic League and, with it, becomes a member of Nation Forward. He, unlike Paul, is inarticulate, but proves to be a willing worker, though one who causes embarrassment by repeatedly hanging the Union Jack upside down for political gatherings. His special contribution to the Patriotic League meeting scene is a musical composition to the words of Rudyard Kipling's The Beginnings, whose last verse chillingly runs:

It was not suddenly bred
It will not swiftly abate
Through the chill years ahead
When time shall count from the date
That the English began to hate.

Tony encounters Paul again at the police station when they are both arrested after members of Nation Forward disrupt the picket line at the local factory. With Paul, Tony is articulate for the first time, but spouting party jargon:

PAUL All history's the struggle of the classes.

TONY No. All history's the struggle of the races.
(Pause.)

PAUL The workers of all races must unite.

TONY The workers of all classes must unite.
(Pause.)

PAUL Come down to it, the choice is socialism or barbarity.

TONY Come down to it, it's Zionism, One-World Tyranny, or us. (Slight pause. Tony stands.) And when we win, get rid of them, there'll be no need for conflict. Class war. Strikes and all. Then capital and labour work together, in the interest of the nation. Putting Britain first. The nation, over all. (Pause.) 'Course you can sneer. At race and blood. But everything you got, Paul, comes from that. Everything, healthy, worthy, everything with any meaning, value, s'from the blood. Cos seed don't die, what we are doesn't die. Passed on. From generations, passed on, from the legions of the dead to legions of the living, legions of the future.

PAUL Last time they said that, it ended up with putting people into--

TONY (Simply.) No, no, Paul. It never happened. Auschwitz, n'all. Just factories. The holocaust, just photos forged. Invented by the Jews.
(PAUL looks at TONY. TONY still.)

PAUL You Nazi.

TONY Yuh. That's right.
(Suddenly, PAUL out front.)

PAUL And you know, it was like looking in a mirror, looking at him, me old mate, Tony. All correct, the same, identical. Just one thing wrong. Left's right. Class --race. As different as can be. The opposite. The bleeding wrong way round.

Edgar shows how comforting the lies and jargon can be to the simple-thinking Tonys of the world, the appeal of the dogma to the working class as well as to the other classes, whose representatives appear in the Taddley Patriotic League meeting scene. Cleaver is at the other end of the social spectrum, a businessman, "distinguished looking," intelligent, physically strong, and sadistic. He becomes the strong arm of the local party, out to protect British interests at all costs. He "purges" the party of Maxwell, disliking his overly socialist ideas. He is the only character for whom Edgar gives no explanation that permits some sympathy, making him a dangerous, petty-minded, sadistic bully, but Edgar would have fallen short of reality to have omitted such a character.

Crosby becomes the Conservative Party candidate in the election after the death of his uncle, Colonel Chandler. In a dramatic sense he functions as Chandler's heir when the characters from the opening scene in India are reintroduced. Chandler tells us he "became a politician not to master but to serve...like any born to riches, not to plunder, but to give." Soon his widow mourns the changes in the Tory Party, as does the lady at the Patriotic League meeting. Initially, Crosby seems to have some of the Colonel's better traits of tolerance, but before

long is intimidated by being "in Enoch country," and by reports of National Front violence. Eventually he sells out: he proposes to Clifton that they agree to stay away from the local strike as an election issue. The crux of the strike issue is race. Immediately before the election he declares himself against "further coloured immigration," reneging on the commitments made to British colonials by his uncle's generation, and signifying a move towards right extremism. Clifton's defense of the Rule of Law is also portrayed as a rightist move, a move that Edgar sees as a tendency in British society. He would explore this tendency again in his most recent play, Maydays, "a huge, epic piece about why the world has moved to the right."¹ The rightist move by a Labour Party member also foreshadows the creation of the Social Democratic Party in 1980 by a group of middle-of-the-road Labourites, a move not supported by Edgar, who remains a member of Britain's Labour Party. In Destiny only Paul and his Asian friends remain true to the cause of socialism.

Edgar draws the character of Khera with warmth and compassion, evincing sympathy for him. Edgar's Asian characters in Baby Love, Our Own People, and Destiny represent some of the rare sensitive portrayals of Asians by British playwrights. In the opening scene, with the noises of celebration in the background, Khera philosophically finishes up his last hours of service to his British masters, but puts in the minimum effort. Given an order, he "nods and does nothing" and with great charm explains to the exasperated Turner, and then the amused colonel, that the tiger under the dust sheet is stuffed--"They shoot them, then they

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

stuff them." We have already seen Turner speaking to Khera as though he had a mental age of two; therefore, the twist is amusing and creates a warm audience response to the character, especially when Khera has the last words of the scene--in Latin.

Similarly, when the colonel quotes Kipling, our sympathy goes to Khera:

"Take up the White Man's burden -
Send forth the best ye breed -
Go, bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild -
You new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child."

Images of public school, privilege, and colonialism are summoned by the Kipling reference, which makes the use of Kipling by Tony--working class but fascist--a pointed irony. But the colonel is wise enough to know that Khera is definitely not half-child. His observation to this effect prepares us for the Khera that we meet in 1976. He has abandoned his Sikh attire,

The sacred kess and kanga, kachka, kara and kirpan
The Sikh rejects so he can be a proper Englishman.

Against all odds, as other plays of Edgar have testified, Khera becomes a shop steward and organizes his fellow workers into a union. Trusting Clifton's integrity, he gets his workers to support Clifton as the Labour candidate in the election. After the picketline violence, Patel, a friend and colleague of Khera, is arrested and about to be deported. He had come to England on a student visa--necessitated by the 1971 Immigration Act, and had become an "overstayer." Clifton will not step in to help since his opposition to the Immigration Act involves "asking for the

law to be changed, not broken." Khera offers his experience of the Rule of Law:

In Amritsar. 1919. A Brigadier-General, Dyer, ordered his troops to fire on a crowd of unarmed Indian demonstrators. Nearly 400 killed. Facts took some time to come out. Then, of course, Dyer was investigated. Strict legality. Censured. Asked to resign.

It is given to Khera to simply state the gut issue of the play:

It runs quite deep. Even the poor, white British, think that they, not just their masters, born to rule. And us, the blacks, the Irish, all of us--a lesser breed, without the Rule of Law.

Edgar explores his thesis on different levels. Economic greed was part of the colonial impulse, and economic growth may ultimately promote nationalism. Monty, of the Metropolitan Investment Trust, tells Turner, as he ousts him from his store, "You're suffering a gross deficiency of greed." When Turner, in the final scene, begins to acknowledge negative implications of his fascism, he repeats the words, looking at the Indian Mutiny painting, saying, "I'm suffering a gross deficiency of greed." It is the small glimmer of hope that Edgar offers.

Edgar presents his analysis of neofascism in a complex episodic plot in three acts and twenty scenes. Most of acts 2 and 3 take place in 1976, but the scenes are not strictly chronological, while the six scenes of act 1 move about in time between 1947 and 1976. Edgar explains his thinking:

What I wanted the audience to do was actually view the play in terms of social forces involved, not necessarily to be bothered with strict chronology. I suppose the interesting thing is why I'm so nervous about it.¹

The linking and crossreferencing of the issues, the characters, and the

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 12.

themes contribute to the play's analysis of the impulses behind fascism.

The first scene in India occurs nineteen years before the next scene which, like the rest of the play, is set in England. Edgar's structure thus reflects his thesis that the roots of neofascism lie in the loss of the Empire and the dislocation afterwards felt by people from both continents. The first and last scenes are dominated by the presence of the painting of the Indian Mutiny that has traveled from one continent to the other, symbolically reinforcing his idea.

Scene 2 begins the dramatic action and takes place in 1976. It concerns Chandler's death and the decisions to be made about his successor in the Tory Party. Scene 3 deals with the same issues but with the potential Labour Party candidate. Scene 4 shows Turner, the future Nation Forward candidate, as a silent participant in an Armistice Day service. Apart, and unaware of his presence, is Rolfe, who has just lost the Tory Party nomination to the more liberal Crosby. He tries to persuade Kershaw, managing director of the company involved in the labor dispute, to join him at some "meetings":

KERSHAW Why talk to me?

ROLFE I'm testing water.

KERSHAW Only mine?

ROLFE No, any Managing Director of a major British company whose shares were two pounds fifty eighteen months ago and at the close on Friday just topped sixty-four.

He continues his persuasion with another of the right-wing theses:

You see, Frank, it's not true that we've lost an Empire, haven't found a role. We have a role. As Europe's whipping boy. The one who's far worse off than you are. Kind of--awful warning system of the West. And to play that role, we must become more shoddy, threadbare, second-rate. Not even charming, quite unlovable. And for those--the people that I come from, that despair is a betrayal.

That this conversation takes place during a service commemorating those

who died to crush fascism and preserve freedom is a superb irony. Kershaw resists until the strike gets out of hand. He then induces Nation Forward to break up the picketline, and, in the final scene, negotiates financial support for the Nation Forward Party.

Scene 5 flashes back to 1970 and the visit of the Metropolitan Investment Trust representative to Turner's antique shop, where Tony and Paul are introduced in the play. Scene 6 is set in 1968 on Hitler's birthday. Here we meet Maxwell and Cleaver and see their petty little group ignited by Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech and the promise of finances from Dumont, a Canadian.

In the first act, Edgar analyzes some of the impulses behind rightist moves by establishing the social circumstances, the chains of connection, and the problems. Turner's shop is adorned with Tory Party posters before his ouster prompts his move to the right. In the Armistice Day scene Edgar shows that economic interests motivate Rolfe and Kershaw. Rolfe is further spurred by his loss of the Tory nomination to a more liberal candidate. The final scene of the act shows the nature and sentiments of the fledgling Nation Forward Party as they don arm-bands and badges, turning their clothes into uniforms and saluting the portrait of the Führer, accompanied by a recording of the SS marching song. Only two scenes later a group of basically decent citizens become members of this organization, citizens, most of whom would have been horrified at the earlier scene. By raising all of the big issues in the first act, setting forth key moments and events, such as Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, Edgar can minimize further exposition and maximize the complexities for an analysis of what led up to the social

and political climate in Britain in 1976.

Edgar says he used familiar techniques in this play:

Although I think Destiny has an agitprop structure, it is not an agitational piece. Indeed some people argued that it tried so hard not to be agitational that it became positively supportive--which I don't agree with--of what it was attempting to describe.¹

What Edgar has done here, as so many times before, is take the elements of agitprop structure that could best serve his purpose, in this case that of describing and analyzing a frightening phenomenon of contemporary Britain. In some cases his use of agitprop techniques serves to compress essential information into quick statements, taken "out front," which means that he can cut a scene off when the main point has been made, as he does, for example, when Monty ousts Turner from his shop:

TURNER (Sits.) I don't get what you mean.

MONTY (Out front.) So told him. Idea was to conceal a whole row being bought by one developer.

The fully realistic scene would have to include Turner's reaction to the loss of his livelihood, which would essentially be personal and emotional. Edgar wants to get the facts of the situation across--we can imagine the rest anyway--therefore, he cuts the action, even having Monty comment to the audience, "I hate this bit," as he adds threats of vandalism if Turner won't cooperate.

A similar technique of condensation serves to reintroduce the four characters from the India scene. Here Edgar, in brief verse monologues, sums up the intervening years and the characters' attitudes to contemporary Britain. I have quoted from the other three characters' monologues. I will quote Turner's here:

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

In '47. Came on home.
Sergeant Turner, to a Midlands town.
Another England, brash and bold,
A new world, brave and bright and cold.
The Sergeant looks at England, and it's changed before his eyes;
Old virtues, thrift and prudence, are increasingly despised;
Old values are devalued as the currency inflates,
Old certainties are scoffed at by the new sophisticates:
And big capital and labour wield an ever bigger clout,
And it's him that's in the middle and it's him that's losing out--
Sergeant Turner, NCO:
Where's he going? Doesn't know.

Even in the monologues, the focus is on the character's attitude to public issues.

The approach is essentially agitprop, but it also has a cinematic quality. The monologues are like sudden close-ups, and the abrupt comments and speeches taken "out front" have the same effect. The fast cuts between scenes that Edgar's script calls for are also cinematic. For example, at the end of act 2, scene 2, after Cleaver and Maxwell have drilled Turner in his speech and Cleaver has then dismissed Maxwell, the script reads:

CLEAVER We've had a little purge.
(Slight pause. Briskly.)
Right. Once more. The speech.
(Blackout.)

Scene Seven

(Immediately spot on TURNER, in front of the banner. If possible he should be radio-miked. His speech is cool, assured, professional. It echoes round the theatre.)

The scene is short, consisting only of the election speech. At the end the script reads:

Applause, but also heckling. A chant from the hecklers:
"Nation Forward, Nazi Party." It is drowned by the singing of
"Land of Hope and Glory." Sounds of violence, chairs being
turned over. The hecklers attempt the internationale. It's
drowned by a much louder chant, as sounds of violence grow:
"The Reds, the Reds, we gotta get rid of the Reds." The spot
on TURNER fades, as his face progresses from triumph to alarm.
Blackout as the chants and sounds of violence go on growing
till, suddenly, they cut out, and two single rifle shots are
heard.

Scene Eight

Lights. ROLFE stands. He is in a dark overcoat, over a suit which shows signs of hasty travel. The stage is empty, though we are in fact in the army HQ, Lisburn, Northern Ireland. ROLFE holds a union jack, crumpled in his hands. He almost cradles it, as he would a baby. He looks up at the audience.

And he mourns the death of his son, shot by a sniper in Northern Ireland.

Most of the scenes of the play are intercut in this way, sustaining a smooth and fast pace and dramatically linking events from scene to scene. Another instance where scenes are even more directly linked is at the end of the police station scene. A "suspect" has sat with his back to the audience throughout the scene. Then:

Lights cross-cut to INSPECTOR and SUSPECT. We now see that the suspect is PATEL. INSPECTOR holding an Indian passport.

INSPECTOR Right, Mr. Patel. Let's go through it just once more. . You claim you entered when?

(Blackout.)

Scene Four

(Lights on a Pakistani restaurant. A couple of tables. CLIFTON and SANDY are sitting, eating. PAUL and KHERA have just come in, are standing.)

PAUL They've arrested Prakash Patel.

What may now be described as an episodic-cinematic technique, using agitprop types of compression and direct audience address allows Edgar to include large amounts of information and many areas of exploration, thus suggesting some of the complexities of his subject. While the plot of Destiny is essentially about the efforts of three parties to organize an election campaign, it serves more as a spine which links the other issues of the play: discriminatory labor practices, union involvement with politics, corporate involvement with politics, immigration policies and the rule of law, to mention only the larger issues, all of which contribute to an explanation of the main issue--why Britain is moving

politically to the right. Edgar posits causal relationships between the issues through a free approach to plot, time, and place that facilitates the dramatic expression of the complexities. His sense of history adds to the persuasiveness of his thesis. The technique is Marxist and one that has come to be favored by several of Britain's contemporary political writers.¹ Suchkov's comments on causality are useful in understanding Edgar's approach:

Causality in realism is expressed not only in the organic unity of the whole work and its parts, the unfortuitous nature of its details, the consistent development of the plot and the relationship between its characters, and a well-founded structure, but also, and indeed, above all, in a historicist approach.²

The purpose is social analysis, to show the audience to itself. As Edgar has stated, the play is not truly agitational in the way that many of his plays are. Rather than rousing his audience to action, the play disturbs complacency, provoking self-examination. If, however, thought may be said to precede action, then Destiny may be seen as indirectly agitational, or perhaps, intellectually agitational, and an equally valid and more subtle approach to political playwriting. Irving Wardle, in an article in Plays and Players, expressed the impulses behind political theater in Britain in a way that describes the dramatic workings of Destiny quite well:

The "drift towards politics," it seems to me, consists of two quite separate drifts. The first begun by David Mercer and continued by Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar, is a rational movement to penetrate the befogged workings of our society, enlisting the audience's assent through fact and open debate.

¹ See p. 185 for comments by David Hare.

² Suchkov, Realism, p. 84.

The writer does his homework, and leads the spectator from the known to the unknown, treating him as an ally in the pursuit of understanding. This used to be called demystification and it takes its stand on Brecht's line, "People will observe you to see/ How well you have observed."¹

Though Wardle goes on to criticize the left-wing impulses, that he calls the "Gulag lobby," I think these opening remarks fairly assess Edgar's social realist approach. While socialist principles inform all of his plays, beyond the early writing there is little sense of doctrinaire conformity. Edgar comments:

In the early seventies, in the agitprop stuff, I would see my role as applying the great truths of Marxism and Leninism to whatever subject I was dealing with. There was little discovery. When I was with the General Will we had workshops on Marxism which then prompted the plays. We had discussion, reports--but as a writer it was a matter of communication rather than discovery. I think the last play of which that was true was Destiny. Its structure is very much agitprop. It's based very much on Trotsky's analysis of Fascism, which I wouldn't reject because it's one of his, perhaps his greatest achievements--his articles about the rise of Fascism in Germany. I looked back and saw the date and found it was 1931. Unbelievable. His prescience. Everything I've said is hindsight.²

By the time that Destiny was performed Edgar had become very involved politically, as a working activist, speaker, and writer. His article, "Why The Front Is Beyond The Pale," serves, in its vehemence, as a useful contrast to his dramatic treatment of the same issue in Destiny. He writes:

The Front preaches violence, that its members commit acts of violence and that the publication of its propaganda has encouraged violence in others.... The National Front is unique in its view that the Black, Asian and Jewish "races" represent a threat to the existence of the British nation.... Finally

¹Irving Wardle, "The Gulag Lobby," in Plays and Players 26/6 (March 1979): 8.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

the Front shares with the National Socialists the view that a person's race determines the way he or she behaves....

The National Front therefore seeks to exploit the democratic processes to propagate an ideology that will threaten, and is already threatening, the civil liberties, the democratic rights and indeed the very lives of groups defined solely by their colours and their races.¹

His approach is specific, charged, and openly antagonistic, and appropriately so for political journalism. However, his vehemence could run the risk of disbelief on the part of the naive. His very human portrayal of the fascist characters in Destiny, on the other hand, provides the recognizability that makes people think seriously for two and a half hours of performance and for some time afterwards, a basic goal of all political theater.

¹David Edgar, "Why The Front Is Beyond The Pale," Sunday Times (London), 1 October 1978, p. 15.

Chapter IX

ADAPTATIONS

An anecdote is told of Charles Dickens's going to the theater to see one of the many stage adaptations of his novels that appeared on the boards almost before the print was dry in the books. He is reputed to have spent the evening prostrate on the floor of his box, feeling not at all well. Critics have conjectured that Dickens would have been happier had he seen David Edgar's adaptation of Nicholas Nickleby. Edgar certainly showed more respect for the departed Dickens than most of those whose versions were staged, and for profit, right under his nose. By 1840 nearly a dozen versions of the 1838-39 novel had appeared on the London stage, some focusing on selected episodes, such as Stirling's The Fortunes of Smike at the Adelphi on February 3, 1840. Allardyce Nicoll quotes the Saturday Review writer who inquired dismally in 1870, "What will become of the English stage when the public has grown weary, if it does grow weary, of dramatic versions of the stories of the late Mr. Dickens?"¹ Little could the gentleman have guessed about Dickens's films that would follow in the twentieth century.

Dickens received no remuneration for these "pirated" versions. Oscar Brockett explains that England's first copyright law was passed

¹Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama: 1660-1900, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 4:2. For discussions of stage adaptations of Dickens's work, in addition to Nicoll's book, see Ivor Brown, Dickens in His Time (London: Nelson, 1963); Alexander Woollcott, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play (New York: Kennikat Press Inc., 1922); F. Dubrez Fawcett, Dickens the Dramatist (London: Atheneum, 1952).

in 1833: "But, while the act protected dramas written after 1823, it did not cover dramatization of novels, and the force of the bill was further reduced by a court decision which declared that the acting rights to printed plays belonged to the publishers."¹

When Edgar was asked to adapt Nicholas Nickleby he had already adapted two other books for the stage, both of which had living authors, and authors who, unlike Dickens, had the full protection of the law, had they felt misrepresented. Furthermore, both books were autobiographical and dealt with traumatic episodes in the lives of the two authors--Mary Barnes and Albie Sachs, both of whom approved the adaptations. (Mary Barnes and the actress who first portrayed her, Patti Love, became friends because of Barnes's support of the project.) Mary Barnes's book traces her recovery from schizophrenia in an experimental house run by R.D. Laing. Sachs's book describes his solitary confinement in South African prisons.

In both cases Edgar overcame with relative ease one of the first obstacles to adaptation--approval of and contractual agreement with a living author. Nicholas Nickleby, of course, did not require permission, but since the script evolved during rehearsals, Edgar had to resolve his relationship with the two directors, Trevor Nunn and John Caird. Edgar said,

Neither of them work with living writers very often--Trevor I think, not for twenty years. Quite often they would have a firm concept which they, not in any sense deliberately, wouldn't get around to explaining. I was, in a sense, writing

¹Brockett, History of the Theatre, p. 433.

a lot of the script for a different kind of show than subsequently happened.¹

The problems were happily resolved.

Adaptation for the stage is fraught with difficulties beyond the mechanical ones of selecting characters and locations and time span. The writer hopes to find a way to remain faithful to the spirit and intentions of the original, while finding a reason to adapt, a relevance for the new audience, and a personal relationship with the original. The adapter should also be at ease with a variety of dramatic forms in order to sense which dramatic method will best serve his vision of the completed work. I have already demonstrated Edgar's theatrical versatility, and the different methods he uses in the three adaptations display his discretion further. A writer without Edgar's prior experience with collaboration (the General Will, Monstrous Regiment, and 7:84, for example) might not have worked so effectively when he came to Nicholas Nickleby.

Adaptation, however, is often met with suspicion, perhaps a holdover from some of the hack work that plagued the nineteenth century. Dickens includes a reference to such practices in Nicholas Nickleby, when Nicholas is asked by Vincent Crummles to adapt a French play: "turn that into English and put your name on the title page."² Edgar describes his experience:

I met the full force of the prejudice that has always existed against the transformation of literature from one medium to another. My work, I was told, had ceased to be "original." It was assumed I was only doing it for the money, or that I was "marking time" while I developed a "proper idea." Maybe

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

²Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1884), p. 337.

I had "dried up" completely. Or perhaps I had not, and would soon return to the fold, and start writing "real plays" again.

In fact I think the three adaptations I have done are all real plays, and should be judged as such.... Throughout the process of adaptation, I wanted to preserve a visible relationship, as a writer, writing in our present day, with the works I --or in the case of Nicholas Nickleby, we, had chosen.

In all cases the act of choice was the central decision.¹

Mary Barnes and The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs were both out of print when Edgar chose to adapt them in 1977 and 1978, respectively. Mary Barnes has since been reissued. Edgar also notes that Nicholas Nickleby was out of "literary favor" at the time of the adaptation, a situation that was radically changed by the success of the production.² Edgar writes:

The adapter chooses to transform a book because he or she feels that that transformation, in itself, will make the statement that a work, which has perhaps grown dusty on forgotten shelves, has something important to say to our times. ... In a lot of ways, I find the process of adaptation is very like the normal process of play-making. Most plays--particularly but not exclusively plays on social or public themes--do involve writers in extensive research into the subjects in which they are interested. It might be too pat to say that a stage adaptation is an ordinary play researched from a single source, because, obviously the playwright is considerably more circumscribed than usual, not least by respect for the original author. But I think it is true to say that the only difference is that the adapter is intervening much later than the writer of an original play in the same process of transforming daily life into theatrical art.³

Albie Sachs is a South African Jew, born in 1935. As a lawyer in Capetown he defended many opponents of apartheid, including black and

¹David Edgar, "Recrystallization of the Novel," The Times (London), 28 November 1980, p. 11.

²"Edwin McDowell, "Publishing: 'Nickleby' Book is S.R.O.," New York Times, 23 October 1981, p. C27.

³Edgar, "Recrystallization," p. 11.

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"coloured" clients. In 1963 he was arrested under the Ninety Day Law and held, uncharged, in solitary confinement. After his release he wrote his account of the experience, which was published in London and New York as The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs. It is banned in South Africa. Sachs left South Africa in 1966. For a time he taught law at Southampton University in England. Later he moved to Mozambique. Edgar describes his interest in adapting the book:

Albie Sachs's Jail Diary is a story of the heroism of a left-wing individual imprisoned in South Africa, and I adapted it at a time when the Left collectively, was in a mood of pessimism, doubt and, above all cynicism.¹

In addition to his attraction to the book because it was a morale booster for the left, the issues of the Diary were of obvious interest to Edgar --racism, human rights, and the rule of law. There is also an irony: chapter nine of Sachs's Diary is entitled "Fantasy," and in this chapter he describes his thoughts about writing a book. Then he decides otherwise:

I will write a play. A stage has volume, people standing up, people talking, and a live crowded audience. I get off my mat, put on trousers and a shirt and walk to and fro in the cell, thrilled as I develop the project.²

For the next seven pages Sachs goes over ideas for this play, some of which Edgar uses, most significantly and effectively Sachs's idea for making the audience understand what solitary confinement is like. Sachs writes:

¹Ibid.

²Albie Sachs, The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs (London: Harvill Press Ltd., 1966), p. 93.

One of the most difficult things to get across to the audience will be the horror of prolonged inactivity and deprivation of external stimuli. It is no good merely telling them of the mental disintegration that follows from staring at a wall for hours on end. The best thing to do is to give them a wall to stare at.

I reappear at the side of the stage and explain the problem to the audience. We shall lower a screen on the front of the stage, I tell them, to give you some idea of what it is like. You are asked to look at it and nothing else for the time it is there. Don't speak to anyone or look at your programmes, or the person sitting in front of you. Simply stare at this screen, I will say, we have our walls to stare at day after day, you will have it for only three minutes. I fade and the screen is dropped. For three minutes exactly there is complete silence in the theatre. The members of the audience are surprised at how long it takes for three minutes to pass. They notice how their concentration flags, how difficult it is to hold a train of thought. They receive some taste, from an emotional point of view, of what it is like for us.¹

Edgar's version reads this way:

ALBIE But as I think of it, I am aware, increasingly, the real problem is to show just what it's like, in isolation, the disintegration, and the horror of it all, to people who are not alone, because they are together, watching, as an audience, my play. And then I think. Perhaps the best thing is, not in the play, but in the audience, for them to see, for me to come out, to the audience, and say, my day is sitting staring at a wall, now I am going to make you sit and stare, you mustn't talk, or read your programmes, look at other people. For three minutes you must sit and stare. And then perhaps you'd know. Just what's it's like.

(Pause for about 15 seconds. Then ALBIE goes to his bunk. He lies down. Another three-quarters of a minute. ALBIE puts his forearms across his face. He does not move, for another minute and a half. Then he puts his arms by his side. Another half a minute. Then he swings his legs out, stands. He speaks, not to the audience, briskly, as he walks out, through the fourth wall of the cell.)

ALBIE When this is over, I will leave South Africa. I owe that thing to me.

(ALBIE walks out of the set, off the stage.)²

¹Ibid., pp. 95-96.

²David Edgar, The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs (London: Rex Collingwood, 1982), p. 44. All subsequent quotations from the play are from this published script. I will only cite specific page references when I am comparing passages from the two versions.

At the performance I attended in New York everyone was silent, but discomfort spread through the audience. Each small movement or rustle of a program was magnified, but people seemed to respond to their instructions and show great relief when the house lights went up, indicating the intermission. Edgar had not needed to lower a screen. The walls of the cell on stage were enough, the walls we had already been looking at for an hour. Edgar's dramatic sense probably suggested that this would be even more effective than Sachs's idea of the screens.

The scene is at first presented as a fantasy of Albie's, just as it is in the book, something he dreams up while trying to occupy his time in the cell before winning the battle to be allowed reading and writing materials. Edgar's inclusion in his play of the three minutes of looking at a wall proved to be a bold and theatrical evolution of the fantasy, forcing a response upon the audience.

About half of the play is in monologue form, as though Albie were writing the diary then and there, creating the same sense of immediacy and urgency that the book, written in the present tense, creates. It also enlists the audience members in a special way since they become the "friend" with whom Albie shares his experience. The monologues are broken by visits from prison personnel and police interrogators, who try to break Albie's will and make him incriminate himself and others who may be involved in resistance to apartheid.

The play is remarkably close to the book, and while certain incidents and characters in the book are omitted in the play, Edgar's selective process has allowed for most of the range of emotions and incidents. Edgar describes the approach he took as a "honing down":

of constructing a very sculptural work, of taking what was already there--the book--as a fairly precise little block of stone, and chipping neatly away at it.¹

Some sections from the book appear almost unaltered in the play, particularly in the monologue sections. For example, when Albie finally receives pencils and paper, Sachs's text reads,

The paper is dazzling white and in my hand is a pencil. The wood feels clumsy between my fingers. I must use it, but to do what? I rest my hand on the pad and wait for my fingers to start moving. Should I write my name? But that would be silly. Should I draw something? But I am hopeless at drawing. The pencil point is on the paper now at the top right hand corner of the page. Slowly it presses up and down on that spot. The lead markings are like a small pit of charcoal. My first creation is taking place. There it is: a tiny black blob. Is that blob me, all hunched up, secretive and anonymous? Is it my cell, so small, sealed and impregnable? I know what the trouble is: I am frightened, scared that I will reveal myself for them to see.²

The playscript reads:

When I first received the paper it was dazzling white and the pencil felt clumsy between my fingers. I rested my hand on the pad and waited for my fingers to start moving. First I thought of my name but that seemed a bit silly. And then I thought of drawing but I'm hopeless at drawing, and finally I made a blob. A tiny black blob, on the corner of the page, and thought, here it is, paper and pencil, the power of communication, the summit of civilization, and all that I can manage is a blob. And I suppose, that I was frightened, too, that they would read it, what I wrote, and see inside my mind.³

Edgar transposes Sachs's account into the past tense in this way to denote the passage of time. The monologues usually account for the time elapsed since the last scene, bringing us up to the present of the current scene. In one monologue Albie recounts the variety of word

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," pp. 20-21.

²Sachs, Diary, p. 160.

³Edgar, Diary, p. 55.

games, crosswords, and memory games that he now uses to pass the time. Sounds from outside Albie's cell are contrapuntal to the whole scene. Young black boys are being called forward. They respond, "Ja, baas" and are caned to the laughter of the guards doing the beating. For most of the scene we hear the names, the children's "Ja baas," the sound of the cane, and the laughter. As Albie plays at remembering American states and cities, a child finally screams, just when Albie, in his game, realizes that he omitted a city and a state: "as in Birmingham, Alabama." It is the same year that four young black girls were murdered in a bomb explosion while attending Sunday school in Birmingham, an episode mentioned in Sachs's book elsewhere, but effectively transposed to this scene. The beatings similarly appear elsewhere in the diary.

Dialogue from the book often appears in Edgar's play with only minor modifications. For example, when Albie is being interrogated by Warrant Officer Vlok, Sachs's text reads:

"You are being detained under the Ninety-Day law at the moment. What happens afterwards depends on the Attorney-General. He will decide whether to prosecute you or not. In the meanwhile, I warn you, in terms of judge's rules, that we are going to put certain questions to you and if you answer them your answers will be recorded and may be used in evidence if you are brought to trial."

"Am I obliged to answer the questions?" I ask. I know well enough that the main point of the caution which, the judges have laid down, must be administered to all suspects, is that suspects need not answer questions if they do not wish to do so.

"No, you are not obliged to answer any of the questions," he replies dryly.

"But if I don't answer the questions then you will continue to keep me locked up under the Ninety-Day law."

"The two things are quite separate."¹

The play reads:

¹Sachs, Diary, p. 175.

VLOK Well, you are being detained under the 90-Day law at the moment. What happens afterwards depends on the Attorney-General. He will decide whether to prosecute you or not. In the meantime, I must warn you under the judges' rules that we are going to put certain questions to you, and any answers you give will be recorded by Lt. Wagenaar, and may be used in evidence if you are brought to trial. (Pause.)

ALBIE The point being, of course, that I am not obliged to answer questions. (Pause.)

VLOK No, you are not obliged, under the judges' rules.

ALBIE But under the 90-Day law, if I don't you can keep me locked up for ever.

VLOK Yes, Mr. Sachs, that's right, I'm not very impressed you know the law so well, it is your job.¹

The sections of the book that Edgar has chosen not to include for the most part involve other characters, particularly other prisoners whom he sees (though may not speak to) at exercise time in other sections of the yard, or, in one case, with whom he finds a way of conversing for a brief spell; there are also two visits from his mother. The dramaturgical task for Edgar was how to create for an audience in a packed auditorium the isolation and slow passage of time, when in fact only two hours were elapsing. Eliminating all other prisoners, Edgar shows Sachs having human contact only with his captors and with the offstage "whistler," as he calls a prisoner in a neighboring cell whom he manages to contact this way each evening during his early days:

And on I go. Through all my songs. And he or she, my whistler, whistles back. It is an act of love.

Both diary and play show that such minimal contact is essential to mental integrity. Edgar adds his own cruel twist to the situation, by showing how hopes can be raised just by hearing human sounds, and then cruelly dashed:

¹Edgar, Diary, pp. 28-29.

Suddenly ALBIE sits up.
He has heard something.
Then we hear it too. It is a WHISTLER.
The WHISTLER is whistling "If I Had a Hammer."
ALBIE whistles too.
The WHISTLER stops.
ALBIE whistles Beethoven's Fifth.
The WHISTLER repeats "If I Had a Hammer."
ALBIE responds with the same tune.
But then we hear the WHISTLER getting closer.
ALBIE stops whistling.
The whistling stops outside the door.
It's opened by the 2nd SERGEANT.
2nd SERG They want you in the office. Kom.
(Pause.)
ALBIE What for?
2nd SERG How should I know? Interrogation.
(ALBIE stands, puts on his jacket.
Blackout.)

For the most part Edgar's changes and additions take the form of such dramatic reinforcement of the emotions aroused by the selected incidents from the book. One other small but dramatically effective change comes at the end of the first ninety-day period. In Edgar's adaptation Colonel MacIntyre of Capetown Security hands Albie his release order:

ROSSOUW Now all you have to do is sign the receipt for
all your property, and you can go.
(ALBIE signs the receipt.)
ALBIE I can go home?
ROSSOUW You can go anywhere you like.
ALBIE You're not going to arrest me again?
ROSSOUW You are completely free.
(Pause. ALBIE believes it.)
ALBIE Oh, am I. Oh, am I. Oh, I don't know whether to
say thank you or fu...
(ROSSOUW a slight sympathetic smile.
Even MacIntyre a smile.)
Can I phone my mother?

As Roussow gets a telephone line for him, Vlok enters:

VLOK (Smiling.) Hallo Albie.
(ALBIE turns to VLOK.)
ALBIE Oh, Mr. Vlok, I--
VLOK A great day, eh?

ALBIE I mean, we brought it off, after all that, I'm
actually--
VLOK I'm placing you under arrest.¹

In the book Albie is more skeptical, both for some time before the end of the ninety days and at the moment that he is handed the release papers:

"Are you going to arrest me again?" I ask as I sign the property receipt. "You are now completely free," the captain replies. I do not trust him.²

But soon he is convinced and becomes jubilant, before Vlok arrives with the same news. The difference in the two versions is slight, and, here as elsewhere, amounts simply to a theatrical way of getting an audience to respond to the material as a reader would.

The diary concludes with the day of Albie's release after a total of 168 days in confinement. Edgar adds an epilogue in which Albie is re-arrested and imprisoned two years later under a new 180-day law. The regime has become increasingly oppressive; interrogation tactics now include sleep deprivation and torture, methods formerly reserved for nonwhites who are at present also likely to be killed. Albie does not survive the new tactics as successfully, and a false confession is extracted from him. We see him after his release, in a scene where he is preparing to leave South Africa for England, where he would live for several years, beginning in 1966. He is in his former law office talking to Danny, a black man who had also been at the first prison and proves to have been the Whistler. Albie feels drained.

¹Ibid., pp. 41-42.

²Sachs, Diary, p. 207.

And intellectually, of course, it's still all there, but all the feelings, all the passions, all that wild-eyed innocence, been shorn away. What's left is the belief, a little core, as hard as steel, quite pure. But rather cold.

Danny convinces him he will be remembered:

DANNY They'll say still, Albie Sachs. That one, the one locked up alone for all those days, who ran off to the sea. (Pause.)

ALBIE You're right. That is the one. They must remember. (LIGHTS fade.)

Albie had dreamed of running the six miles to the beach on his release.

In his diary, Sachs vividly describes his run and the meeting with his friends at the beach. In the play the scene is highly theatrical.

Albie's release papers are brought to him. He doesn't look at them, because he notices the open door:

He stands and walks slowly forward, out of the cell, through the fourth wall. LIGHTS fade to a spot on ALBIE. And ALBIE, on the spot, starts to run.

And the next scene picks up immediately:

ALBIE (ALBIE running.) I am free. I am FREE. I am off to the SEA.

Throughout the next scene we see Albie running, as he describes how he feels and what he sees. His happiness is unbounded. As in the book, he finds a cameraman on the beach and asks him to take his picture:

(The CAMERAMAN lines up the shot.)
VOICE Hey, Albie!
2nd VOICE Albie!
3rd VOICE Hey, hallo, Albie!
CAMERAMAN Now.
(And ALBIE SACHS leaps up, punching the air with his fist, a cry of triumph:)
ALBIE OUT-SIDE!
(SNAP BLACKOUT. In the DARKNESS, at once:)
ROUSSOW Well, hallo Albie.

For the third time Albie is going back to jail. After the elation of the run, the effect on the audience is one of total shock, but it

reflects the insecurity and uncertainty of life in South Africa under the legal system of apartheid. For the sake of dramatic effect, Edgar has played with real time, for Albie was not put back in jail until two years later.

In his adaptation of The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs, Edgar's dramatic technique is, in one area, quite untypical. The playwright goes to great length to engage the audience emotionally. Some of the sections that I have quoted involve manipulation of the audience's emotions by building up expectations only to deflate them--an effective device to present the constant dashing of Albie's hopes. The scene where the audience is asked to stare at the wall for three minutes in silence forces an emotional reaction, an empathic one. Only in the last scene, showing Albie's later imprisonment and decision to leave South Africa, does Edgar play down the emotional content by reporting the facts rather than showing the experience, thereby reminding us that we should understand the political message intellectually as well. Edgar opens the play in a similar way, with Albie delivering a lecture in which he ironically acknowledges a debt of gratitude to J.B. Vorster and his oppressive apartheid regime:

without whom, all of this would certainly have been--a great deal easier. Without whom, many more would not be here.

While the play focuses on an individual story, the framing scenes provide the public perspective, and we are constantly reminded of the public implications of his story by Albie's repeated refusals to incriminate others and by the ever-present spectre of the South African legal system that Albie has to fight one minute and defend the next, the system that allowed his imprisonment in the first place, but which, nevertheless,

provides him with certain guarantees. While we focus on Albie, we are always aware that he is just one prisoner among many, again reminding us of the public perspective of the play.

Edgar finds in Sachs's diary additional subjects for reflection beyond the major political issue of apartheid and the Ninety-Day Law. He notes:

The instinctive and political reason I wanted to do it was that I wanted to write a play in which the central character was a nice guy. It is almost so clichéd that it doesn't need saying, but our whole dramatic tradition has trained us very well to write plays about despair, despondency, missed opportunities, and failures....

But here was a story about a guy who was very limited politically in a lot of ways and who was faced with the ironical situation of having gained his strength from being in the collective struggle against apartheid in South Africa, but who, cut off from that collectivity, managed to survive. And the way he survived was again ironical, because he drew on his own individuality, his middle-class pernickitiness and puritanism, in the way he structured his day, his day, his pedantry--all the things that were disastrous in terms of being a revolutionary activist, in that situation became virtues. However much we know that it is not the individual but history that throws up the man, there's a sneaking suspicion that that's now entirely true in the real world. I wanted to write a play about individual revolutionary heroism, and that text provided me with an opportunity to do it.¹

Albie experiences physical and mental problems, cramped space, isolation, flea-ridden blankets, and other miseries, plus the psychological trickery of his interrogators; he forces himself into an exercise regimen, planning his day with such activities as a game of chess on a checked beach towel with bits of orange peel; he fights the bureaucratic hierarchy on such matters as clean blankets, paper, and books, as much out of the need for a goal as the very real need for the items in question.

¹Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 20.

The diary gives only the barest details of Albie's life before prison, and Edgar gives even fewer. The focus is on Albie's struggle to survive the ordeal. Edgar manages to give enough substance to the surrounding characters, the captors and interrogators, to make most of them more than ciphers. The diary makes it clear that Albie always thought of them as human beings and perhaps victims of the systems themselves; also that he is incapable of hate, whatever they do to him. Edgar achieves the same balance, particularly with the most fully drawn secondary character, Snyman, the warrant officer at the second of the three prisons that house Albie during his first double term. Edgar comments on his portrayal of Snyman:

Although I think I have chosen the right incidents, done the right amount of promotion and so on, that character is there in the book.¹

While Albie is still allowed only the Bible as reading material, Snyman, a fundamentalist, lends him his biblical encyclopedia and takes full opportunity to air his racist interpretations of the Bible. Much of the play's humor comes from the scenes with this character. He becomes a strange companion to Albie. He bends the rules and spends time with Albie, breaking the monotony and solitude of his existence, though Albie has to endure Snyman's Bible lectures. Snyman begins to confide his personal problems to Albie, commenting, "Doesn't the Bible say I should love my enemy?" He is a self-styled expert on the Bible and on most other things that come up, and Edgar gives him the repeated catchphrase, "As it happens I am something of an expert on ..." Edgar makes him a complex and oddly appealing character, despite his extremism,

¹Ibid.

just as Sachs does in his own account.

Albie survived his ordeal by maintaining a positive outlook and a sense of humor. In the book when Albie returns a volume of G.K. Chesterton, Snyman says,

"Oh, yes, Chesterton; when I was younger I used to read a lot of his books. Now I haven't got the time any more."

"I found it very interesting the way he argues for a Catholic society. Chesterton was a Catholic, you know?"

For the first time the station commander is at a loss for comment. The strident voice is silent now. He takes the book from me and departs without saying a word. I want to laugh out loud but pretend I have noticed nothing.

In another incident in Sachs's personal account Albie knows that an interrogation is being taped and gets perverse pleasure from grunting, shaking his head, and doing anything but speak a coherent sentence. Edgar's Albie has the same sense of humor, and Edgar conveys, as in the book, how crucial it was as a survival technique. A guard tells Albie a joke against lawyers. He repeats the joke to his other guards to gain moments of much needed human contact. Much of Albie's humor in the play is ironic, seen first in his opening acknowledgement of Vorster. On the fifteenth day Albie observes:

The morning was a hive of activity. I piled my blankets, cleaned my jug, had my exercise, scratched my calendar, read my Bible and ate my lunch. After lunch I slept.

Later he shows us his blood-spattered vest (undershirt):

Not the brutality of the apartheid state. The violence of probably unsegregated fleas. Who have become intolerable.

His recounting of the saga of the flea-infested blankets is funny. Albie tells of the round of visits from the Constable, the Sergeant, the Station Commander, the Captain of the Special Branch, and on up to the Major from Pretoria, all of whom think that the matter must go to a higher authority

before clean blankets can be allowed. Edgar puts the saga effectively into a monologue, rather than in dialogue as Sachs does, and gains some extra humor through Albie's descriptions and "acting out." The humor is not gratuitous but rooted in character and situation. Albie must keep himself occupied in order to survive. His resources are limited, and he expends enormous energy on any small project that can keep him busy, particularly if it will place him in contact with other people, whoever they are, as the blanket project does.

Time is virtually a character in the play. Pointedly Edgar only occasionally specifies how many days of imprisonment have passed. The audience, however, wants to know, and the withholding adds enormously to its empathy with Albie.

Edgar's language is close to that used by Sachs, with modifications for the spoken word as I have exemplified in the passages already quoted. The use of the past tense is a repeated device to indicate the passing of time and to bring the audience up to date with the stage present, whereas the diary is written almost entirely in the present tense. Where Sachs says simply that characters speak in Afrikaans, Edgar writes his dialogue in Afrikaans, making the speakers--the police and interrogators--even more alien. There is another benefit to this. It roots the action in a specific locale, providing a Brechtian distance which allows the audience to draw its own parallels closer to home. Edgar's analogy with racism and fascism in England implies subtle warnings for a country coming to terms with its new identity as a multiracial society. A specific parallel situation also comes to mind, not mentioned in the play but certainly known to any British

audience. In 1824 a law was passed aimed at "Rogues and Vagabonds" that empowered the police to pick up a citizen on suspicion of a crime and hold him for twenty-four hours without charges (It became known as the "Sus" law). During the seventies the law was used to harass and discriminate against nonwhites to an alarming degree. Changes that have taken place in South Africa since Sachs wrote his book also had to be suggested in the play. According to Edgar,

I was concerned to show that Albie Sachs's imprisonment by the South African authorities took place in 1963, when the present police state in South Africa was in its infancy. Albie Sachs himself, writing shortly afterwards, merely mentioned from time to time the uncertainty of ordinary policemen faced for the first time with their new political role, and the resentment of the uniformed branches of the security forces against the new importance of the Special Branch. I wanted, writing many years afterwards, to give this much more prominence, and so selected, emphasized, and occasionally invented incidents that demonstrated this fact. Also I wanted to show Sachs's internal conflicts about his own heroism in resisting the authorities, in a way that he, obviously, could not do in a book about himself. So, again, my selection was made with that in mind, and, again, I found new material, partly from external sources and partly from my own imagination. The result, I think, was quite clearly a play, by a person who was not concerned in the events of his play, about a book by a person who was.¹

The last two sentences apply equally in Edgar's 1977 play, Mary Barnes. This is an adaptation of Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness, written, in alternating chapters, by Mary Barnes and Joseph Berke, one of her doctors. The two perspectives on the same story make fascinating source material for a play. As with Jail Diary, Edgar found additional sources. Among them were the theoretical writings of R.D. Laing, who converted Kingsley Hall into a therapeutic community for the mentally ill. Here he was able to practice the mental health

¹Edgar, "Recrystallization," p. 11.

care that he substituted for the shock treatment and drug therapy normally prescribed in hospitals. Mary Barnes, a schizophrenic, was nurtured and "cured" in Kingsley Hall and became Laing's most celebrated patient and a successful painter.

Laing and his colleagues took over Kingsley Hall in 1965 and moved out in 1970 when their lease was not renewed. Mary Barnes lived there for most of those five years as she traveled through madness toward health. She lived with other mentally ill patients and a group of doctors, social workers, and various guests who spent time at the Hall, a large house in the working-class East End of London. Since the beginning of the century, the Hall had been a center for community welfare and Gandhi had stayed there on his 1931 visit to London. Under Laing's supervision it became a community where all shared tasks and roles according to needs and abilities.

Edgar had to create the atmosphere of this house, its purpose, and its East End location, as well as its period--the sixties. He comments:

I decided to adapt Mary Barnes because it was a book about a group of radical psychiatrists at the centre of the late 1960s counter-culture, and I felt, ten years later, that the time was ripe to look again at the fierce, unique and challenging ideology of that movement.¹

Recreating that movement and time necessitated a freer adaptation than for a merely personal story. Edgar explains:

It is based on the book in the sense that the Shakespeare plays of history are based on Holinshed. It's a play which relies very heavily on a single source, but it also relies on many other sources--interviews, other books--so I don't view it as an adaptation in the sense that either Nicholas

¹Ibid.

Nickleby or Jail Diary was. Jail Diary is very much the book and Nicholas Nickleby very obviously is very much the book.¹

Edgar also had to provide a truthful picture of R.D. Laing's theories and practices; to remain true to Mary Barnes's history, yet selective in the choice of incidents and the stages of her "journey." He had to condense five years into two hours of stage time and select his characters from the much larger group that is described in the book.

The play is reminiscent of the sixties; the "radical psychiatrists" represent the radical consciences of that decade, while the therapeutic community suggests other communal experiments of the era. There is an environmental artist, Zimmerman (based on a John Latham who is mentioned in the book), who makes a "skooba box":

Empirically it's a large, black wooden box, with lights inside that flash on and off when you sit in it. Essentially I gather it's more to do with meditation, mind expansion, and the hidden breathing oneness of the cosmos. The discovery thereof. He calls it an environment.²

There is a pot-smoking American hippie, Beth, who is suitably undefined as a wacky visiting friend or patient in need of help. There is Angie, an upper-class English rose, struggling to throw off her background and become part of the radical left. Dinner conversation is heated and often political, with a left-wing bias. Edgar comments on this aspect of the times:

The key ideological perception of the late sixties was that the working class was no longer the primary agent of revolutionary change, or if that wasn't accepted, that they weren't the only agent.³

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

²David Edgar, Mary Barnes (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979). All subsequent quotation from the play are from this published script.

³David Edgar, interview with the author, July 1982.

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This idea runs through the play as the middle-class characters seem to be the politically involved ones (this has been a feature of many revolutionary movements), who comment on their working-class neighbors:

"The working class. With Morris Minors, television sets. Sucked in."

Edgar also noted:

The Marxist prediction that the working class would become increasingly immiserated was actually not true. They were becoming increasingly well off.¹

And he illustrates this point in the play.

Edgar balances his social picture with Duggie, the more conservative psychiatrist who believes in rules and hierarchies. We see him remove his perhaps preferred attire of tie and jacket when he arrives at Kingsley Hall, and he dons "a floppy old sweater, on which is pinned a CND badge, [and] a pair of suede shoes." Angie's mother and brother add to the conservative picture. They do not understand Laing's psychiatry, Angie's Trotskyite politics, or much of what is happening in the sixties. They suggest a faded era of gentility and its class structures as well as the Tory viewpoint. American influence or British society is suggested by Eddie and Beth. The working-class neighborhood is represented by Keith, the "local Beatle boy" who practices with his musical group at the house, as he had done before the community moved in. With these characters Edgar suggests a spectrum of British society and of political attitudes from the sixties. He bridges some scene breaks with music, sometimes introducing it during a scene. Recordings of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, the Jefferson Airplane, and others add period color.

¹Ibid.

Of the fifteen characters in the play, only Mary Barnes retains her real-life name and comes close to her real-life counterpart in the book. Most other characters draw elements from several real-life counterparts or are crystallized versions of the original. Joseph Berke, the American psychiatrist and co-author of the book, was the most important force in Mary's recovery. He lived at Kingsley Hall for a relatively short period during Mary's five-year stay; he would visit her or, later, she would visit him for "sessions." His counterpart in the play, Eddie, seems to be a full-time resident at the house and, unlike Berke, does not get married. Edgar concentrates on the essential facts of Berke's relationship with Mary and his enormous contribution to her recovery, but Eddie may serve dramatic functions that differ from Berke's life.

In addition to Eddie, Edgar creates three other characters who are psychiatrists--Brenda, Duggie, and Hugo. Brenda is a left-winger from Yorkshire, of working-class origin. Early in the play she utters a Laing sentiment:

HUGO A Nato officer was on a naval exercise. Polaris. He refused to press the button. Said that no man should be so commanded. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, put in mental hospital.

BRENDA Whereas the person, President, Prime Minister, controls the bomb for real, and threatens to explode it, he is obviously sane.

Laing had written:

The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous, and far more estranged from "reality" than many of the people on whom the label "psychotic" is affixed.¹

¹R.D. Laing, Preface to The Divided Self (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1965), p. 12.

Duggie is the conservative, and he leaves Kingsley Hall after unresolved disputes about rules, hierarchies, and Mary Barnes's behavior. He wants a more defined doctor-patient relationship. His closest real-life counterpart is Laing's colleague, Esterson. Laing commented in an interview with me after seeing the New York production:

He thought it would decrease the perplexity, the confusion, if we set up some sort of rules. Most people weren't on for that and he wasn't for all people participating. But he was going to leave anyway. He might have stayed on if he had got it his way around.¹

What Edgar also shows is the possibility that Laing's "no rules" meant it had to be Laing's way round. Laing is loosely represented by Hugo. Edgar gives the character a subordinate role, but a strong presence and guiding spirit, particularly in the two dinner scenes where he quietly dominates the proceedings. Laing says:

He's the closest of the characters to me, but he's not me any more than one of the other characters is Esterson, or one of the other characters is Joe Berke, or one of the others is Mary Barnes. They're all transformed and show stances adopted by each of us at different times.²

Similarly, each patient in the play combines elements of more than one real-life character. Laurence, for example, helps in Mary's recovery and is also a theatrical device to elucidate psychological theory. Mary develops a psychological transference onto him, as her brother. In the book someone named Stanley fills some, but not all, of the functions of Laurence. Beth is a friend of Eddie's and his fellow American. This arouses jealousy in Mary, the jealousy Mary felt when Berke married and was about to become a father. Angie is loosely modeled on someone in

¹R.D. Laing, interview with the author, May 1983.

²Ibid.

the book called Catherine, whose relationship with Mary is described by Berke in this way:

Catherine was the first person whom Mary tried to guide through the experience of psychosis. Previously Mary's presence had benefitted John Woods or Stanley, but only within the context of the day to day activities of the community and not with the specific purpose of helping them.¹

In the play Mary helps Angie and is devastated when Angie's parents take her out of Kingsley Hall to institutionalize her, a simplification of what happens to Catherine in the book. Edgar connects the loss of Angie with Mary's renewed worry about her real brother. Her new-found ability to help others is now transferred to him. In the play, Simon closely resembles the book's counterpart--Mary's real brother, Peter. Small sections of dialogue, recorded by Mary in the book, appear almost verbatim in the play when Simon visits and then moves into Kingsley Hall for a time, beginning to rectify his years of living in institutions and depending on drugs.

Edgar's characters populate a plausible Kingsley Hall with patients, doctors, guests, and artists, but it is not an accurate portrait of the place, the inhabitants, and the events; as Laing explains:

You've got to remember that there were fifteen to twenty people living at Kingsley Hall at that time. Fifteen Mary Barnes. People going through equivalent sorts of things. She was ONE. At the time the focus wasn't on her the way it is in the play. There were a lot of other stories going on simultaneously. That isn't brought out. It wasn't brought out that for months on end she did nothing else but be in her room. All the characters in it behave as though Mary Barnes is coming up all the time with them and between them. That wasn't particularly the case.²

¹Joseph Berke, "Untangling Mary's Knot," in *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; reprinted with revisions, 1982), p. 360.

²R.D. Laing, interview with the author, May 1983.

However, it was the case at certain times, and those times Edgar selects. We see the setting up of Kingsley Hall by the doctors and then the arrival of Mary. She is there because, "I've come to have a breakdown." To do this she decides to "go down," which means she will try to become a fetus and grow again through the stages of childhood. Occasionally she needs to regress and "go down" again. Some of the characters help her; others oppose her. On the road to recovery Mary starts to paint. She discovers her ability causes total disruption by wanting to paint everything in sight, and then achieves recognition as a painter with a private exhibition in London. Eventually she is able to help Angie and then her brother, a critical and final stage of her recovery.

Berke writes that he had to warn Mary when she was helping Catherine (the Angie counterpart):

I used to emphasize to her, "Mary, it won't help Catherine if you simply repeat with her what we did together. While it may be true that your 'down' and that of Catherine are in some ways similar, it is also obvious from what you tell me about her that her way is quite different from yours. Always remember that you and she are separate people."¹

Edgar has Eddie warn Mary about her relationship with Angie when he says:

Listen. P'raps you're right. But mustn't force her, do what you did. What she wants. OK? (Slight pause.) Just let her, what she wants to. Different from you.

The problem becomes even more intense when she tries to help Simon. According to Barnes's and Berke's accounts, Mary had identified with her brother when he was in utero and then developed a great jealousy. She was sent away from home for the two weeks surrounding his birth, resulting in further trauma. When he was twenty, he and Mary were

¹Berke, "Untangling," p. 361.

alone in the house. According to her:

One night while I was in bed, my bedside lamp on, Peter walked into the room. Standing above me he said, "I have come to sleep with you, I want to come into bed with you."

"No, Peter, we are not children any more."

He turned and slammed out of the room. He could have killed me. My muscles froze.¹

Mary tells her parents, and the result is that Peter is committed to a mental hospital and put in a straitjacket. The memory haunts Mary. Edgar's treatment of the effect of this incident and her relationship with her brother provides an excellent example of his combination of psychology and theatricality.

I have referred to the brother transference that Mary develops with Laurence. In the play they fight and play in a childlike manner. Mary writes of Stanley in the book:

Stanley was very quiet. He never talked. We became great friends, able to romp and fight each other.... Younger than me, Stanley was at times like my brother with whom, as a child, I used to fight a lot.²

In the play, when Mary gets upset she reenacts the enmity. After Beth claims a lot of attention, including Eddie's, and says, "I had this brother ...," Mary repeatedly screams "whore" at her. During the second dinner scene when tensions are high, Mary seems to confuse Laurence and her brother Simon for a moment:

MARY (Suddenly, violently.) Laurence takes people's letters hides them. Peed in the Games Room. Put blood on my painting. Don't keep rules. Don't finish. Simon he said bloody had to have his mouth washed out with soap and water.

¹Barnes, "My Life up to Forty-Two Years," in Mary Barnes: Two Accounts, p. 56.

²Barnes, "The Down Years," in Mary Barnes: Two Accounts, pp. 156, 157.

A few moments later Laurence goes offstage to the games room and returns, having taken down Mary's paintings--one of the causes of tension that evening. Mary is devastated, and Laurence realizes he has been manipulated, particularly by Duggie who had wanted them down. He follows Mary to her room to apologize and make up:

(He goes to MARY, and, rather clumsily, puts his arms around her and kisses her on the cheek.)
 LAURENCE There.
 (MARY suddenly pushes at him.)
 MARY You can't do that.
 LAURENCE What?
 MARY Not children any more!
 LAURENCE Uh, came to--
 MARY (Quite viciously, crowing.) He says he wants to come to bed with me. He came into my room. We got to tell the doctor.
 LAURENCE Uh?
 MARY I mean, we're just not children any more.
 LAURENCE I only ...
 (Upset, LAURENCE stands and goes to the door, turns back.)
 Came to say ...
 (He turns and goes out. Slams the door. MARY lies back, rather self-confident.)
 MARY I mean. I mean to say.
 (Slight pause.)
 I had to lock the door. You were away. I had to lock the door.
 (Slight pause.)
 Quite a relief, they came, in their white coats, with jacket, for you, long white jacket, with long arms and bits of string. A great relief.
 (Pause.)
 And so. And so you went inside.
 (Slight pause.)
 You've gone inside.
 (In great pain.)
 BLACKOUT.

It is not suggested in the book, by either Mary Barnes or Joseph Berke, that Mary had a strong and lasting "transference" onto any particular fellow patient at Kingsley Hall, but Edgar's creation of the Mary-Laurence relationship is a synthesis of her approach to the ambivalent

association with her brother. Laurence does not appear until almost halfway through the play, when Mary has made considerable progress on her journey and is ready to deal with her feelings about her brother. Eventually she is able to meet her real brother and gets him to live at Kingsley Hall, too. Edgar connects the departure of Angie, whom Mary was helping, to Mary's decision to commit herself to rescuing her brother from hospital and drug therapy. When Simon is at the Hall Edgar creates a scene where Laurence's repeated and loud record playing drives the quiet Simon to run away.¹ Mary's version of the facts is that the house, in general, was too noisy for her brother after his years of sedation and hospital isolation, but by linking the two men--the substitute brother and the real brother--Edgar keeps the plot tighter without abusing psychological realism. He simplifies the key events and stages found in the book, providing more causative links and sharper linear progression than in the two personal accounts. He thereby enhances the textures and adumbrations that attracted him to the adaptation. Mary Barnes's story evinces personal courage, but it tells of a collective struggle of the sixties against both mental illness and the Establishment's treatments of those it deemed mentally ill. His play subtly implies political parallels. At the first dinner scene Brenda says:

The very word is invalid. Invalid. You know, in feudal times, there were no mad, or sane, defined as such. Communities supported those who couldn't work, quite automatically. But then, when people started being paid in cash, as individual workers, then the criminal, the ill, the lunatic, were separated

¹Edgar drew this incident from Barnes, "The Down Years," p. 158, which reads: "One night when Raymond was away, Stanley played a Beatles song over and over again.... Eventually shutting my door I went to sleep. In the morning, I awoke to the same music."

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off. Defined as "other." On the grounds of being unexploitable. Their functioning impaired.

Soon Eddie adds an anecdote:

Last century, the Southern States, the medical profession had to classify a new disease. Occurred exclusively among black slaves. They called it drapetomania. It was manifested in the slave's desire to run away.

Angie says of herself:

When she was 16, told her father she believed in free abortion on demand. This shocked him rigid. Sanctity of life. He was a General. A fucking Army General. His job, desanctifying life.

The therapists tell stories of violent treatment of mental patients and Eddie's story of the Puerto Rican girl, forcibly removed from her group therapy session for spontaneously dancing, is taken verbatim from Berke's own account in the book.

To reawaken the sixties Edgar refers to specific political events such as to Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for reelection and to the culture of the sixties such as the local staging of an "event," mantra chanting, and pot-smoking. He betrays some nostalgia when Zimmerman says,

I liked it when the students went to Washington, and hummed a mantra, tried to levitate the Pentagon. Good image.

But he is realistic when he has Brenda say,

We didn't build the future. But we are no longer, other, to ourselves.

And she seems to be referring as much to politics as to the Kingsley Hall experiment.

Notwithstanding these other elements, the focus of the play is on Mary who is rarely offstage. Just as Edgar combines functions and actions of several real people to create one representative dramatic

character, he synthesizes events and behavior patterns into specific and exemplary dramatic incidents. For example, in Mary's and Berke's accounts she refused to eat on several occasions and for dangerously long periods of time. Edgar dramatizes only one such incident, the first. Believing herself to be a fetus, Mary refuses all food. She wants to recreate a sense of the umbilical cord by being tube-fed. Since there were no medical facilities at the house it was deemed unsafe. Eventually Eddie persuades Mary to drink from a baby's bottle:

MARY drinks. Then Eddie turns his head, slightly, to look at BRENDA, to acknowledge his pleasure that MARY is drinking. This small gesture causes MARY to feel very bad, and she spits the milk out, in EDDIE's face.

MARY Wrong. WRONG, Eddie!

EDDIE himself takes a drink of the bottle, and spits it over MARY. MARY looks astonished. Then EDDIE gives the bottle to MARY, who drinks and spits over EDDIE. She begins to chuckle. EDDIE drinks and spits. MARY drinks and spits. Laughs. EDDIE takes the bottle, drinks and swallows.

EDDIE Glug-ug-ug-ug.

MARY looks at him. He drinks again.

EDDIE Glug-ug-ug-ug.

MARY laughs, she takes the bottle, drinks.

MARY Glug-ug-ug-ug.

EDDIE (Takes the bottle, drinks.) Glug-ug-ug-ug.

MARY (Takes the bottle, drinks.) Glug-ug-ug-ug.

She takes the bottle from her lips. EDDIE doesn't take it back. She chuckles, repeats the noise.

MARY Glug-ug.

EDDIE Come on, you want to finish up?

MARY Mm mm.

He cradles her in his arms and feeds her with the bottle.

This incident serves dramatically to set up the bond between Mary and Eddie, to illustrate how Mary's regression was manifested and, since the regression to childhood was the beginning of her "journey," to establish a first step in Mary's progress. Further illustrations of Mary's eating problems become unnecessary.

Edgar similarly condenses Mary's emotional connection to her painting into one highly theatrical incident where she fingerpaints a Crucifixion scene, playing the different characters as she paints, identifying herself with characters in the painting. In her own account Mary writes:

My work seemed to wall up from within me. To grow almost of itself. It wanted to come as it liked. Then it seemed to give back to me.¹

Berke writes: "She did not differentiate herself from her paintings."²

Later in his account he discusses her Crucifixion paintings:

Mary had previously endeavoured to rise above her emotional pitfalls by converting to Catholicism. Symbols of her profound, almost mystic faith abounded in her paintings. But she had never painted the Crucifixion. I wondered if she saw, as I did, the many similarities between her torments and the suffering of Jesus on the Cross.... I suggested she paint the Crucifixion.

What followed was an astonishing transformation of her life's agonies into dozens of huge, brilliantly coloured canvases all depicting the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the image of Christ with his head turned painfully aside, his mouth shrieking in desperation, Mary had finally and convincingly captured her own history on fields of red and gold and orange and yellow.... Never once did she stop or look up although, as she worked, she would often laugh, or talk with or even scream at this or that figure (or vice versa--she played all the parts), as the figure began to make his presence known in the painting. From time to time a beautiful smile would break across her face. It was as if, at that moment, she had transcended all her troubles and entered an ecstatic reverie.³

Edgar's version picks up on Berke's writing as Mary plays the soldiers jeering at Jesus, the soldier who offers the drink, Jesus himself; finishing up this way as she continues to paint her picture:

¹Barnes, "The Down Years," p. 146.

²Berke, "With Mary at Kingsley Hall," in Mary Barnes: Two Accounts, p. 251.

³Ibid., p. 257.

MARY Hey you! You up there. Come down. If you're so great, so clever, come on down. He can't. Well, ask him why. Can whisper. Can't. Can't talk. He's sulking, in a paddy. Cos he can't come down. I won't. I won't come down. Stay in the dark. (Pause.) Be empty. Nothing. Void. Hang on.

Mary suddenly notices Hugo, who says: "Oh, Mary, must you suffer so?"

But Mary responds:

MARY No. Wrong. Not suffering. No more. It's you who's suffering. Not me. It's you who's stretched and bleeding, up against the golden sky. Not finished. Not alone. You're not the only one. Not on my own.

Again Edgar demonstrates a further step in Mary's recovery by synthesizing several incidents into one.

Mary also found emotional release and discovery in writing short stories. Again Edgar selects one, using it verbatim, to illustrate a further phase of Mary's recovery. The story is about "a tree in the forest who felt very sad and lonely for her trunk was hollow and her head was lost in a mist." The tree is smashed to the ground in a storm but gradually grows again, "and in the light, the tree felt loved and laughed with life. Her branches, bent, to other trees."¹ Edgar juxtaposes this with Angie's arrival at the house and Mary's newfound ability to reach out and help others, adding symbolic and dramatic reinforcement to this stage of her journey towards mental health.

One of Mary's symptoms was her belief that she was full of badness. Sometimes she felt she had a bomb about to explode inside her. Berke describes an incident when he was rushing from the house to keep an appointment:

¹Barnes, "The Down Years," p. 193.

Mary tore after me, leapt in front of me just as we got to the door, and in what seemed a cold calculated manner, screamed that if I didn't remain with her, she would take off all her clothes, go into the middle of the street, and yell that she wanted to be taken to a mental hospital.

That did it. Without a moment's hesitation, I stood back, made a fist, and hauled off at Mary as hard as I could.... Then I noticed that blood was pouring out of Mary's nose and all over her face and gown.¹

Berke agonized while Mary seemed delighted:

The next day she told me how grateful she was that I had hit her, that the tear-tinged blood had brought great relief to her, and that she loved me more than ever.²

Edgar recreates the incident in much the same way. After Eddie hits her, he is upset and bumps into Duggie:

EDDIE Duggie, I--

DUGGIE I know. She seems delighted.

EDDIE What?

DUGGIE She says you brought her badness out. Her badness, bomb, all down her nose it came.

Edgar takes further the idea of Mary's being pleased when the lights switch to her room:

(She sits on her mattress, blood pouring down her face.)

MARY This is my body. This is my blood. This is Mary Barnes.

By using religious imagery Edgar gives a sense of the effects of Mary's adult conversion to Catholicism and its importance in her recovery. His stage directions call for Gregorian chants when Mary is in "the box" and just before she paints the Crucifixion. The subjects of most of her paintings were biblical, and Mary describes some of them as she brings them out to be hung up. In the painting scene, in addition to the imagery

¹Berke, "With Mary," p. 244.

²Ibid., p. 241.

in the writing, Edgar provides the opportunity for a visual image with the physical painting and the actress's use of her body. In the New York production Laura Esterman echoed the Crucifixion in the final image of the scene, arms spread, hands dripping red paint. She recreated the same image in the scene which marks Mary's regression. In the book there were many regressions, but again Edgar dramatizes only one, creating a startling and theatrical stage picture. Mary initially had been preoccupied with her feces. She had painted and sculpted with them until she was weaned toward crayons and paints. After the second dinner scene, where Duggie rebels against Mary's excesses and Laurence takes her paintings down, triggering Mary's memories of her brother's visit to her room, Mary appears at the top of the stairs, naked, smeared with her feces. Esterman chose to hold her arms up and to the side, head tilted, visually echoing the Crucifixion image and Edgar's own religious analogies in the play.

The sense of a mystical Christian journey begins with Mary curled up in the crèche-like skooba box, hung with Christmas tree lights. The Crucifixion images mark the completion of this journey and lead to the image of her naked and smeared with excrement. Eddie accepts her, literally "takes her shit," Brenda notes "she who takes upon herself the shit of the world," and Mary is able to move on to the next stage of her recovery, a sort of rebirth as a nurturing mother figure.

Mary had always felt rejected by her mother, and experienced at times intense feelings of hatred. In the play she transfers this to Brenda, lashing out at her after an altercation, "You are like a mother to me, Brenda." Yet Mary's maternal instincts are strong and brought out

especially when she meets Angie, who tells her, as she suckles Mary's breast, "You are my mother, Mary," and Mary responds, "I am your Mother Mary," and the two form a Pieta image. The fact that Berke's name is Joseph is not picked up on by Edgar, though his character, Eddie, is certainly a father figure to the suffering Mary and almost a partner in the helping of Angie and Simon.

Mary Barnes may be seen as essentially a social realist play. Edgar creates a microcosm of society, as I have suggested, with characters that may be deemed typical. Using Raymond Williams's yardstick of action that produces environment, interestingly opposite to Laing's psychological theories, we see a group of people experimenting, trying to change an established approach to psychiatry, by their communal living experiment. If Mary Barnes can be accepted as more than a personal story, and as a social document of the sixties, then we do see people acting in a way intended to change the environment. The radical psychiatrists, then, function on both the literal level and as stand-ins for the radical elements of the sixties. Similarly, the strait-jackets and drugs of traditional mental hospital treatment serve as metaphors for an overly restrictive society against which the sixties radicals were rebelling. Mary's struggle to express herself, and other members of the community's objections when she appeared to overdo it, form a dialectic between the private and the public. Edgar evokes the movement of time as new people arrive at the house and as Mary's health visibly improves. The social realist form is reinforced by the way that Edgar frames his play. The opening scene omitted in the New York production sets up an agitprop feeling. In a hospital lecture hall, a

lecturer discusses the symptoms and chemical treatment of schizophrenia. A patient sits in a chair. He is in a stupor, catatonic. The doctor treats the male patient with electric shocks and insulin, admitting to not knowing how they work. "We know they stop the pain." In scene 6 of act 3 this patient appears again. He proves to be Angie's brother, almost automaton-like, dehumanized by twenty years of drugs and shock treatment, a sharp contrast to Mary's five years of successful treatment without drugs. The final scene completes the frame as Angie, "some years later," returns to the abandoned Kingsley Hall trying to recreate her past, which has been "lost" to drug therapy. She has found an old address book recording that she had been in Kingsley Hall, but remembers nothing, not even Mary Barnes when she finds an old painting of hers.

This frame works as an agitprop device and, as in Destiny, Edgar uses other agitprop techniques, frequently to condense information. While Mary lies in the "box," Hugo summarizes the important events of her life in a speech taken directly to the audience. Angie, perhaps also symbolizing her schizophrenia, describes her life and problems in a long speech in the third person. Mary's tree story is a "set piece," not derived from the action or contributing to it, though, with Edgar's approval, the New York director staged it with Mary holding Angie in her arms and telling the story to her as a comforting parable.

The two dinner scenes have several speeches that seem removed and unconversational and become agitprop devices to convey information about a character's background or pertinent issues. Eddie's anecdote about group therapy functions the same way. And Duggie says:

Man who's threatened. Say he's petrified. That's fine. The man who says that he's a stone, is liable to get locked up. To petrify means that: to turn to stone.

Zimmerman says:

Three people. One says he's Marx, and with enough to follow him, he'll change the world. Another says he's Jesus Christ, and with enough to follow him, he'll change the world. The third, who is a doctor of psychiatry, he thinks he'll change the world all on his own. So which of them's the most deranged, then think ye?

Through these types of agitprop speeches Edgar sets the atmosphere, politically, socially, and psychologically. The effect is often disjunctive but serves as an echoing of the communication problems in such a community.

This disjunctive quality is also found in the language construction and its punctuation, as several of the already quoted sections will illustrate. A further example is in the first scene when the three psychiatrists--Eddie arrives later--finally convene in Kingsley Hall:

BRENDA Well.
HUGO Well, here we are.
DOUG Lease signed.
BRENDA Our occupancy--
DOUG Staked.
HUGO Our place.
BRENDA Our liberated zone.

The strange language and vocabulary given to Mary is true to that used in or described in the book. I have referred to Mary's "going down." If people came close to Mary or wanted things from her she saw it as "coming in on" her. "Going against yourself" was another, described by Mary in her own account this way:

In my mind not to take what Noel and Paul gave could be "going against" Noel and Paul. That is to say, going against "therapy," my treatment. Gradually some idea

filtered through that "going against" was really "going against" myself, what I wanted.¹

Mary often insists that some things are "wrong"--for example, she says, "No, Brenda, tea is wrong." Sometimes this means she doesn't want or like something. At other times it could denote a serious fear. When Eddie salts his food at dinner Mary asks:

MARY Why you punishing yourself?
 EDDIE I'm not. Like salt. You don't.
 MARY Why punish me?

Edgar is drawing on this section in the book written by Berke:

Since she didn't like salt, she thought I didn't either, and was only using it to punish myself. She, in her mind, Joe, being punished was equivalent to Mary being punished, she must have done something very bad. Why else would she/Joe be punished? Therefore Mary felt very guilty and upset.²

By drawing on and adopting some of Mary's idiosyncracies of speech, behavior, and attitude, as described in the book, Edgar creates a convincing and moving dramatic character--one that Mary Barnes herself accepted on seeing a production, and one that Laing too acknowledged:

The play has a sufficient presence in its own dramatic form to be convincing on its own terms. I think that the spirit conveyed through the play was quite the spirit of the historical reality, so I find myself quite comfortable with it.³

Laing also considers the play a "fair portrayal" of mental illness and an important reminder that alternative mental health treatments are viable and indeed available. Laing found the political tones in the play somewhat bothersome:

¹Barnes, "The Down Years," p. 182.

²Berke, "With Mary," p. 241.

³R.D. Laing, interview with the author, May 1983.

David is a committed socialist and I'm not. I think the message of the play is trans-political party. It applies just as much to every shade of political opinion. Hence I don't think it is a good thing for it to be identified with a socialist ideology.¹

He has one other misgiving about the play:

I think it would be even more important if it weren't sort of consigned, at the same time, to being a period piece, as it seems to be a contemporary issue, just as it was in the sixties.²

These two issues, the period and its politics, had much to do with Edgar's embarking on the adaptation in the first place. A play about the private story of Mary Barnes or Laing's treatment of schizophrenia would have lacked the "public" quality that characterizes Edgar's plays to date. Edgar discusses his interest in the era:

The generation that was never going to be assimilated has been assimilated.

But, having said that, it seems to me that, ten years on, one can look at the late 1960's in a rather different way, an aesthetic way, because what the period did do was provide a series of images, some of them artistic, but most often artistically expressed in other terms, which have had an immense effect and will continue to do so.... What is summed up in the "personal is political" slogan was a highly important contribution.

And what in a sense I was trying to do with Mary Barnes, without being ambiguous for the sake of it, was to look again at those apparently rather silly looking people, who really did think that the world was going to change by some process of radiation out from the East End of London, but who, nonetheless, helped to cure this woman ... a 42-year-old, fervent Catholic, who got better without drugs or electric shocks. The play presents a kind of counterpoint, I hope, so that the audience gets amused and perhaps irritated by the psychiatrist, but are confronted with their own emotional response to Mary's story, to a point that I call a dynamic ambiguity --an ambiguity which will hopefully lead to people attempting to resolve it in their own minds.³

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

³Barker and Trussler, "Towards a Theatre," p. 9.

He is demanding an intellectual response to his play, a modus operandi of most political theater. What is unusual in Mary Barnes is the high level of emotional involvement that Edgar invites along the way, although he requires the same involvement in Jail Diary, his other "personal play." He has generally avoided details belonging to private spheres, always stressing the public. Here the private almost outweighs the public, but he maintains the counterpoint, with reminders of the outside world of the sixties. He does so often by self-consciously breaking the emotional pull of the private elements. The agitprop devices effect this disjunction, particularly the "set" speeches of the dinner scenes. Edgar considers Brecht "part of the air we breathe," and Mary Barnes has a particularly Brechtian quality in these "alienating" devices, as it also does in its multiscenic structure. In its three acts there are twenty-nine scenes, some very short, and few scenes follow a sequential necessity, either chronologically or as part of a cause-and-effect chain. Gideon Schein, the director of the New York production, changed the order of some scenes and omitted the opening lecture-hall scene, all with the author's approval.

Edgar breaks down Mary's private and complex story into a collage of events which show her "going down" and making her difficult journey, noting the major landmarks along the way. Edgar adds his own voice to the story by his Brechtian epic structure and his overtones of public life and achieves a political play with an unusual blend of the public and private.

Mary Barnes is Edgar's most-produced play in the United States. He explains it this way:

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One of its central characters is American. It's about a period when America and Britain were walking culturally hand in hand--the late 1960s. It's about psychiatry which is an American concern probably more than it is in Europe. It's about families, it's about an experiment in a new form of family. You only have to look at the movie billboards to realize that that also is a great current concern. In a way it's also a very American play, built around a pair of bravura central performances. It's very emotional, very passionate in the sense that it's not the typical British laid-back jagged sophisticated whatever. It's actually a gutsy, out-front, take-you-by-the-throat play.¹

Edgar's dramatization of Charles Dickens's novel, Nicholas Nickleby, may also be described as a "gutsy, out-front, take-you-by-the-throat play" and is certainly not marked by a "laid-back, jagged" sophistication. When evaluation time arrives, Nicholas Nickleby, the play and its production, will undoubtedly stand as one of the finest achievements of the decade in the English-speaking theater. Reams of publicity have related how the script was developed and rehearsed by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the thirty-three-year-old playwright received awards in both London and New York for his adaptation.

So much has been written about the production in newspapers, magazines, and theater journals that I am limiting the scope of my own comments. Though he describes it as a very subjective account, Leon Rubin's The Nicholas Nickleby Story² gives a solid history of the production. My interviews with John Caird, Trevor Nunn's co-director (Mr. Nunn himself was not available), the designer, John Napier, Ruth Kaplan of the RSC's press office, several actors, and Mr. Edgar himself, produced

¹David Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

²Leon Rubin, The Nicholas Nickleby Story (London: Heinemann; New York: Penguin, 1981). The Penguin edition has been used in this paper.

no substantially different versions--only additional personal reminiscences. My first interview with Mr. Edgar, conducted during New York previews of Nicholas Nickleby, appears as an appendix.

During a 1977 visit to the Soviet Union, Trevor Nunn learned that his counterpart at the Gorky Theatre in Leningrad was about to embark on a stage adaptation of The Pickwick Papers and that stage adaptations of Dickens were common in that country. Conditions being right for such a project at the Royal Shakespeare Company in late 1979, Nunn embarked on his own Dickens production, realizing an ambition that had germinated two years earlier. He first invited John Caird to be his co-director and then Leon Rubin to be the assistant. Soon the decision alighted on Nicholas Nickleby with David Edgar for its adapter. The RSC had presented his original play Destiny and his adaptation of The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs; and his other adaptation, Mary Barnes, had been well received in Birmingham and London.

The two-play eight-and-a-half-hour production opened in London, after eight months of preparation, on June 6, 1980, for a six-week run. Its great success brought about two further runs at the Aldwych Theatre: November 13, 1980 to January 3, 1981 and April 23 to June 20, 1981. The RSC production was brought to New York for a fourteen-week run, beginning performances on September 23, 1981. It was generally considered that the RSC "owned" the production and that only that group, with its long months of creative input, could ever perform it successfully. However, in the summer of 1982 the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival of Cleveland, Ohio mounted its own production, using the published Samuel French performance script and rehearsing for the time they would usually take

to prepare two plays. The production was a success and was moved to Chicago for a run in that city. On December 10, 1983 Nicholas Nickleby opened in Sidney, Australia. Variety reported:

Reviews were unanimously enthusiastic, with high praise for direction by Richard Wherrett and John Gaden and for the ensemble playing by the all-Australian cast.¹

Ironically, the notices for Nicholas Nickleby have been, with only a few exceptions, very good for all but the premiere London production. Here the reception was decidedly mixed, and despite warm audience response and good word of mouth, empty seats were in evidence for the early weeks of performance. Publicity had not been strong, as no one was sure of the final product. Rewrites continued until the dress rehearsal, which was never completed, and some scenes were run for the first time, in sequence and in costume, at the first preview. Then came some of the discouraging reviews. Peter Jenkins wrote:

People who enjoy sheer staginess in the theatre may sit through the proceedings more happily than I did.²

Ian Stewart thought:

Dickens put too much into his novel and Mr. Edgar has done likewise with his adaptation.³

Michael Billington, under the heading "A Triumph of Perversity," questioned the value of the whole enterprise,⁴ and Felix Barber commented

Ruthless pruning to three hours and a single performance would not be a sacrilege but a salvation.⁵

¹Variety, 21 December 1983, p. 68.

²Peter Jenkins, The Spectator, 28 June 1980, p. 25.

³Ian Stewart, Country Life, 17 July 1980, p. 195.

⁴Michael Billington, The Guardian, 23 June 1980, p. 11.

⁵Felix Barber, Evening News, 23 June 1980.

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Further negative criticism came from such as Benedict Nightingale (The New Statesman, 27 June 1980), John Barber (The Daily Telegraph, 23 June 1980), and Milton Shulman (The Evening Standard, 26 June 1980). However, considerably warmer responses came from such as John Elson (The Listener, 27 June 1980), and J.C. Tewin, who wrote:

I have never known a more elaborate theatrical treatment of any novel,¹

and Robert Cushman:

Formally, indeed, Mr. Edgar may well improve upon Dickens: He makes the plot not an encumbrance stoically to be borne for the sake of glamorous interludes, but a source of both excitement and meaning.²

On July 8th the Sunday Times published an article by Bernard Levin which is credited by many connected with the production for being a major influence in turning Nicholas Nickleby into a huge commercial success, resulting in a film shown on television in America and the United Kingdom, the New York production, the Cleveland production, the Australian production, and probably many more to come. Levin wrote:

There is only one way to behave at the Aldwych; to surrender completely to the truth, which is that not for many years has London's theatre seen anything so richly joyous, so immoderately rife with pleasure, drama, colour and entertainment, so life-enhancing, yea-saying and fecund, so--in the one word which encompasses all these and more--so Dickensian.... This production of Nicholas Nickleby is ceaselessly entertaining, dramatic, funny, touching, beautiful and right; it is a tribute to England's greatest writer of prose and of the teeming world he conjured up; it is an evocation of England herself; but it is something more than all of these. It is a celebration of love and justice that is true to the spirit of Dickens' belief that those are the fulcrums on which the universe is moved, and the consequence is that we come out not merely delighted but strengthened, not just entertained but uplifted, not only affected but changed.³

¹J.C. Trewin, Illustrated London News, August 1980, p. 98.

²Robert Cushman, The Observer, 11 November 1980, p. 15.

³Bernard Levin, The Sunday Times (London), 8 July 1980, p. 40.

Leon Rubin reports on the response to Levin's article:

From the next morning onward the box office was flooded with ticket requests. The production sold out for the rest of its short six-week run.¹

The later engagements also played to full houses and better notices.

Wardle wrote:

Adaptation is a feeble word for the structural invention, tonal emphasis and stylistic definition of David Edgar's text and for its skill in recreating the realities of 1838 from the vantage point of 1980.²

He continued:

Where the production continually takes you by surprise is in its power to intercut violent episodes with domestic comedy, relate Regency and Victorian modes of behaviour and dissolve the naturalistic scenic outlines so as to establish thematic links.³

The major theme that Edgar found as a link between his vast cast of characters was money, and realizing this was a first step towards creating a unified framework for the project, which was going to be enormous anyway, since Nunn had determined that the entire novel should be staged. His co-director noted:

I don't think there's a precedent anywhere in the world for adapting an entire Dickens novel.⁴

Any conventional, abridged adaptation of the novel would probably have omitted the public meeting of the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company, which appears in Dickens's

¹Rubin, The NN Story, p. 179.

²Irving Wardle, The Times (London), 27 November 1980, p. 11.

³Ibid.

⁴John Caird, interview with the author, 15 September 1981.

chapter two. Rubin explains Edgar's attitude:

David felt that it was crucial for the muffin company scene to be in the script. In any other adaptation there would never be room for such an incident. As he said in an interview with London Weekend: "I want it because the plot is about money and the main plot of the book is almost all about money and relations between people and their money, and I wanted to start with a scene about money." Theatrically he wanted to start with a strong statement about Ralph Nickleby and his involvement with money, because Ralph carries the main burden of the financial plot.¹

In the RSC production the scene follows the company's telling of the early history of the Nicklebys and their arrival in London. While it does not open the show as Edgar seems originally to have intended, this is the first scene with dialogue. It includes Edgar's invention of Ralph investing in the muffin company and establishes the pervasive money theme, which Edgar clarifies and brings into sharp focus throughout the script. As in Dickens, it is the lack of money which forces the Nicklebys to London to seek Ralph's help. Nicholas' adventures are all connected to his efforts to earn money--as a schoolmaster, an actor, and as an employee of the Cheerybles, then as a young man seeking work with a member of parliament, then vainly teaching French to the Kenwigs' offspring. The acquisition of money rules Ralph's life and that of Sir Mulberry Hawk. Lack of money enslaves the Kenwigs to the good favor of their Uncle Lillivick, and more seriously, Walter Bray's debts ruin him and threaten to ruin his daughter Madeline. The list of money-related episodes is even larger, with only one significant change from Dickens. Edgar builds on Verisopht's attack on Mulberry Hawk of Dickens's chapter 38, and the episode culminates in a duel in which Verisopht is killed.

¹Rubin, The NN Story, p. 83.

His debts die with him; therefore, Ralph loses his loan to him of £10,000. The loss of this money, in the Edgar version, is linked to Ralph's other misfortunes, as events seem to conspire to his final ruin. John Caird explains Edgar's reasons for making minor changes in the money issues:

David's main feeling about the financial plot is that in the novel it's terribly murky and difficult to understand, and Dickens hadn't really worked it out at all.... David thought you can't put that kind of murk in front of an audience and expect them to stay with you, so he made up the idea of Ralph investing £10,000 in the muffin company, something which took you right through, and so the man who was the political head of the muffin company should be the man that Nicholas goes to for a job.¹

Similarly, he links together the demises of Verisopht and Ralph.

Edgar also felt the need to strengthen Dickens's frail young women for a modern audience. He says:

For example, Madeline Bray, in the scene of her greatest crisis, where she's about to be married to Arthur Gride, spends the entire scene upstairs in a dead faint. The only time she appears in the centre of the stage in the novel is when she's carried out. However, what both girls do is really quite spunky and is considerably spunkier than the dialogue they're given. Dickens quite often puts more militant remarks, particularly against her mother, in reported speech, or, indeed, in expressing his own opinion--"It might be remarked that...", "Kate Nickleby at this point..." In fact it's very easy to put those remarks in the mouth of Kate in a way that is quite suitable.²

The largest chunk of non-Dickens in the play is Edgar's version of the Romeo and Juliet production by the Crummles. Dickens gives no details of the Crummles' version of Romeo and Juliet, but Edgar provides a final scene true to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of happy

¹John Caird, interview with the author, 15 September 1981.

²David Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

endings for the great tragedies. The lovers are reunited, and Edgar follows the happy event with a rousing finale to the first Nicholas Nickleby play: the Crummles company sings a patriotic song, England Arise, led by Mrs. Crummles dressed as Britannia.

Prior to the Shakespearean rendering, Edgar includes a scene where Nicholas helps Smike learn the apothecary's role, and another where Smike, seen offstage during the Romeo and Juliet appearance, agonizes about his upcoming entrance. Edgar recalls this scene much later when Smike dies, in a scene that perhaps best exemplifies Edgar's approach to adaptation--putting his own definite stamp on the work without losing fidelity to the spirit of the original. Rubin describes Edgar's presentation of this scene to the directors:

The three of us quietly read David's script and were deeply moved. We were also impressed by the technical brilliance of the devices that he had created for the scene. It was to be one of the few scenes in which not a single word was changed. After a very simple introduction to the setting, back at Nicholas' and Kate's home village, out in the meadows where they used to play as children, Smike lies down to rest whilst Nicholas and Kate talk over their respective loves for Madeline Bray and Frank Cheeryble. Then, David's invention took over from the novel. Smike, using the words of the apothecary from Romeo and Juliet learnt in the Crummles Theatre Company, calls out, "Who calls? Who calls so loud?" As he repeats the line Nicholas realizes that Smike is urging him to reply in words from Romeo and Juliet:

NICHOLAS Come hither, man. I see thou art poor. Hold,
there is forty ducats. Let me have--
SMIKE Such mortal drugs I have, but Mantua's law--Is--
is--
NICHOLAS Oh, Smike--
SMIKE Is death to any he that utters them. (Prompting:)
Art thou so bare--?
NICHOLAS Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness,
And fearest to die? Famine is in thy cheeks,
Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes.
Contempt and--
SMIKE No. No, I don't fear to die. My will consents.

(NICHOLAS turns round to embrace SMIKE, who throws his arms round NICHOLAS's neck to stop himself collapsing.)

SMIKE (cont.) You know, I think that if I could rise up again, completely well, I wouldn't want to, now. (SMIKE looking over NICHOLAS's shoulder at KATE:) For nothing can be ill, if she be well.

NICHOLAS Then she is well, and nothing can be ill. (Pause.) Her body sleeps in Capel's monument. (Pause.) But her immortal part with angels lives.

SMIKE Is it. E'en so. I see a garden. Trees and happy children's faces. And her body sleeps. Light on the faces. Living with the angels. Dreamt my lady came and found me dead. Such happy dreams. (He pulls himself up to whisper in NICHOLAS's ear. Then, out loud to KATE:) I'm going home. Who calls? Who calls so loud? (SMIKE is still. NICHOLAS realises he is dead. He picks him up in his arms. He turns to KATE. He is crying.)

NICHOLAS He said--I think you know. (Pause. KATE can say nothing.)

NICHOLAS (cont.) And then he said he was in Eden.¹

Edgar calls this ironic recall of an earlier scene, or any similar crossreferencing of scenes, "referential irony." He considers it a "post-Chekhovian technique." "It's just a combination, on the one hand, of techniques of storytelling which were potentially mawkish and sentimental, and, on the other hand, actually having set up the thing to be real. Having set up the relationships to be real."² Edgar's use of "referential irony" in this scene heightens the climax of the play. Equally important is the plot-tightening that results from relating incidents both in this way, and, as I have already noted, in Edgar's treatment of the financial plot. Edgar manages to include all but the least significant incidents of the novel--he omits the tales told in the coach on the way to Yorkshire, for

¹Rubin, The NN Story, p. 141.

²Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

example--but in order to do so he had to become expert at reducing events to the essentials. Edward Petherbridge, who played Newman Noggs, describes one such piece of compression. Newman Noggs and Nicholas meet for the first time at the Saracen's Head. The scene runs:

NICHOLAS I'm--
NOGGS I know.¹

Petherbridge comments:

You couldn't have a better, longer scene. A marvelous précis of a chapter. It's enigmatic like the chapter, but it's so dramatic because it's so short. When I look at him I can allow all the recognition, everything to go through my mind. First of all I look at him and say, "My God, he looks exactly like his father." I know who he is without being introduced.²

The effort to include most incidents of the novel resulted in a cast of over 135 characters, and Edgar's serious problem was avoiding stereotype and caricature. The small changes such as bringing Madeline Bray more to center stage during her wedding crisis and allowing Kate to say some of the things Dickens only lets her think enabled the playwright to give weight to his characters. We see Lord Verisopht change from a seemingly weak fool and drunk to a gentleman of integrity and honor, whose death the audience laments. Smike grows in stature from the pathetic creature of the Dotheboys Hall scenes to an unfortunate young man of complex emotions. Edgar stresses Nicholas' more human failings, such as his quickness with his fists--the advertising poster shows Nicholas with raised and clenched fists--and so tempers his Victorian virtue. He, too, grows in stature and sensibility as Edgar's handling

¹David Edgar, Nicholas Nickleby (manuscript), Play One, p. 21. All subsequent quotations from the play are from the manuscript version. The play is published by Samuel French (New York, 1982).

²Edward Petherbridge, interview with the author, 6 December 1981.

of the final moment in the play stresses. Dickens ends his novel with the suggestion that the trials and tribulations are over for the Nicklebys and that they can live untouched by poverty and misery. Edgar saw it differently:

At the very end, I'm saying that the vision that Dickens presents in the last chapter is not the vision he presents in the rest of the novel. He doesn't paint a world where everything can be solved by 12,000 pounds and a nice little house in the country with ivy on it.¹

Frank Rich, who did not give a very favorable review, seems to agree and lauds this final moment in the play. Nicholas leaves the family gathering and the happy Christmas caroling when he sees a cold, starving boy lying in the snow, and he takes him in his arms.

This production's most important--and searing--achievement, however, is its fidelity to Dickens' moral vision. When at the very end, Nicholas (Roger Rees) approaches the audience with a starving child cradled in his arms, we feel the full force of the writer's outrage against injustice. It's an image to rival the most powerful I've ever seen in the theatre--also in an RSC production: a mad Paul Scofield hoisting his Cordelia, Diana Rigg, aloft at the end of Peter Brook's 1964 "King Lear."²

Since he had to dramatize the entire novel, Edgar had to go well beyond simply avoiding caricature and tightening the plot. The novel first appeared in serial form and therefore featured many miniclimaxes and "cliff-hangers." It included long but pertinent narrative and descriptive passages that needed some form of theatricalization. Edgar's involvement in rehearsals helped him, even before he had written one word of playscript, to find ways of solving this problem. These early

¹Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

²Frank Rich, "Why 'Nickleby' is Potent but Flawed," New York Times (Sunday), 11 October 1981, pp. F1, F22.

rehearsals included the presentation of research projects on Victorian England and improvisations on characters and incidents in the novel and on these passages of description or narrative. Petherbridge observed:

David Edgar's pencil made notes on many occasions, just perhaps through a chance remark that somebody made, or a little image that came up.¹

Suzanne Bertish's improvisation on Peg Sliderskew as a Scotswoman so impressed Edgar that he wrote the character that way. The Cheerybles became Welsh when Nunn was trying to make the roles more fun for the actors. Smike's frantic rehearsal of the apothecary's lines before his entrance cue was suggested by an improvisation. The most inventive improvisations arose from the narrative passages. Rubin describes the result of such a session:

The actors had proved that human bodies and voices could be used to create setting and invoke atmosphere whilst the actors were still acting as narrators. They could also themselves be the physical representation of nebulous and almost indefinable concepts of fear and desperation. In particular, this was an exciting possibility for the long section of the novel dealing with the events leading to the death of Ralph.²

For Edgar the discovery meant that he could include all necessary narrative and descriptive sections in the novel, so that he might further compress events, establish time, pick different locations, and express emotional states of mind not found in the dialogue, or sometimes, indeed, states of mind which express a subtext contradictory to the dialogue, as in the Fanny Squeers tea party scene:

¹Petherbridge, interview with the author, 6 December 1981.

²Rubin, The NN Story, p. 41.

FANNY Father's been called away, but you won't mind that, I dare venture.

NICHOLAS (Out front:) And Nicholas opened his eyes at this, but he turned the matter off very coolly--not minding particularly about anything just then--and went through the ceremony of introduction to the miller's daughter with as much grace as he could muster.

(Bowing to TILDA:) Your servant ma'am.

FANNY We are only waiting for one more gentleman.

NICHOLAS (Out front:) It was a matter of equal moment to Nicholas whether they were waiting for one gentleman or twenty; and being out of spirits, and not seeing any especial reason why he should make himself agreeable, looked out of the window and sighed. (He looks out of the window.)¹

Tea is served, and Nicholas, not knowing, or even suspecting, Fanny's amorous designs, seems to say all the wrong things. After John Browdie appears, more misunderstandings arise, and Nicholas comments, again to the audience:

And all of this was completely unintelligible to Nicholas, who had no other distinct impression, than that Miss Squeers was an ordinary-looking girl, and her friend Miss Price a pretty one, and that he had been called to join in a game of Speculation.²

When Nicholas settles down for his first night at Dotheboy's Hall, he finally has the privacy in which to read the letter that Noggs had thrust at him just before his departure from London. As Nicholas reads, the audience sees Noggs on another part of the stage delivering the words of the letter. As Ralph undertakes his desperate journey around London before his suicide, the company narrates:

Creeping from the house and sneaking off like a thief.... Groping like a blindman.... Ralph Nickleby went from the city, took the road to his own home. The night was dark, a cold wind blew, driving the clouds before it.... And there was one black, gloomy mass that seemed to follow him, not hurrying in the wild chase with the others.... But lingering sullenly behind, and following him.³

¹Edgar, Nicholas Nickleby, Play One, p. 61.

²Ibid., p. 64. ³Ibid., Play Two, p. 219.

While narrating, the actors physicalize the text, as in the rehearsal improvisations. It was probably the writer's participation in the early process that gave him the confidence to include so much narration in his final script.

When rehearsals for Nicholas Nickleby began Edgar had just returned from the United States and the Long Wharf Theatre's work on Mary Barnes. With not even an outline of a script, he plunged straight into rehearsals at Stratford. Caird describes the early work:

David started writing his script in the second week. We all realized that if the thing had to be written we had to start right away, so he would write a scene, say a Dotheboys Hall scene, or a Mantalini Milliners' scene, and he would bring it back and we would divide the company into four and two parts of the company would do the same scene, in completely different ways. Trevor would direct one and I'd direct one, David Edgar would direct, and Leon Rubin, our assistant, would direct one. Then quite a lot of the time the actors would direct themselves. Sometimes something would come back, and one version would be done as an opera and one as a piece of political agitprop, another entirely in mime, another entirely in naturalist dialogue. It allowed us to see what kinds of theatre we were interested in, and what we wanted to eschew, right from the beginning.¹

Leon Rubin describes his view of Edgar's situation:

In his careful, analytical, organized way he had listened and watched attentively over the first few weeks. As a writer, he had the impossible job of trying to reconcile the directorial approaches so far discussed, the work already achieved by the actors, and his own extensive views on what the script should be like. He also knew that from this moment on, he had to take a positive stance about the writing and demonstrate that though the work and exploration of the novel was a collective act, the actual script must come from him. Already sensitive on the subject of the writer's role, he knew he would have to move decisively and convincingly to take the initiative with the script; the politics of his position were uncertain.²

¹Caird, interview with the author, 15 September 1981.

²Rubin, The NN Story, p. 52.

The task was not easy, particularly when casting decisions were made after eight weeks of work, and actors thought that the way to deal with frustrations over their roles was to make "suggestions" to the writer. Edgar says that the play could have run to about four days in length had he followed the seriously made suggestions about what should not be left out. John Woodvine describes his "visit to the author":

Of all the characters in the book, Ralph Nickleby is written with more--what we call today--psychological depth. There was a point at which I was complaining to David, and he said that the point is if you are to chart Ralph's progress properly, the play actually becomes about Ralph Nickleby, and by the nature of things, that can't be--it's called Nicholas Nickleby. You see, he knew this. To a certain extent I felt that I was making bricks without straw because so much was left out, but the emphasis has to remain with the young people and, in a way, that's what the audience is most interested in. I would have liked a lot more there, but maybe I had to achieve more because it was so spare.¹

Edward Petherbridge similarly confronted Edgar with his worries over his character, Newman Noggs, but with different results. The people with whom I spoke who were connected with the production felt that Petherbridge was the one actor who genuinely contributed in a significant way to his character's portrayal in the final script. He describes his feelings on the issue:

I realized that Newman Noggs could be précised down to things like just delivering a letter. So eventually we had a show-down in which I earmarked various vital things that Newman Noggs did in relation to our hero and that if he didn't do them there was absolutely no point in Noggs's existence. Things like the fact that he spends a whole day's income on a mug of rum and milk to prepare them [Nicholas and Smike] for their journey to Portsmouth, which was not in the first version of the scene. It is very important that when he goes to pick up the family to take them to Thames Street that, although the audience and the reader know very well that he knows exactly who Nicholas is, that he's indebted to Nicholas' father for

¹John Woodvine, interview with the author, December 1981.

a kindness that was given and for which there was no hope of return, and that he's sent the letter to Nicholas. Yet Noggs pretends it wasn't him when he's recognised by Mrs. Nickleby --a reversion to his private "I'm not here" psychology of his job with Ralph. It's a great effort for Newman Noggs to communicate with anyone really. Little things like that seemed important, and they didn't take a lot of stage time.

When the scene of Nicholas and Smike going to Portsmouth came along and didn't have Newman Noggs in it at all, I thought, well, if it's not in now it's not going to be. So we had a discussion about that, fairly amicable, with David and myself, and our three directors, and I went through the book saying what I thought was vital. I was also extremely worried that I had so little to say. In a funny sort of way I learned a great lesson about that. Anyway, David countered with the fact that when Noggs gets to the end of the play and has this great speech attacking Ralph, then the fact that he has said very little up to that point will be so marvelously dramatic.

It all came out very happily, and now, having suggested what I thought were David Edgar's shortcomings, I now come to the fact of his brilliance. The one thing I learned is that, providing a character's actions are carefully selected and précised down, you can, by one gesture, or even two words, say such a great deal and that a tiny appearance for an actor can be a major event in a character's appearance for an audience.¹

This and other contributions notwithstanding, Edgar wrote and is responsible for the script, as Ruth Kaplan reiterated:

He would go in and watch rehearsals and then he would go into his little office and rewrite things. The running order might get changed if a scene seemed to fit better in another place. It isn't set out the way the novel is set out. David definitely wrote it. There was definitely a misconception about this in the whole collective image of the show. David was the one that wrote it. At the end of every rehearsal day, John and Trevor went off together to decide what they would keep and what they would change, so they really decided, and David was the over-seeing person who put it all together. His judgment was used and appreciated terrifically.²

Edgar discusses the development of the script and its structure in the interview which appears as an appendix, but additional mention must

¹Petherbridge, interview with the author, 6 December 1981.

²Ruth Kaplan, interview with the author, September 1981.

be made of some of the cinematic techniques. Lighting technology simplifies the quick crosscutting and even facilitates the "close-ups" that a multiscenic, episodic structure demands if a flow is to be maintained, as I discussed in the section on Destiny. In going a step further in Nicholas Nickleby, Edgar superimposes one scene on another. While Nicholas is relatively content with the Crummles, playing Romeo and enjoying an offstage flirtation with his Juliet, Miss Snevellici, Kate is in misery in London. She has been invited to dinner at her Uncle Ralph's, where she is used as a ploy for his business dealings. This episode is at first intercut with the Crummles' performance of Romeo and Juliet. The stage direction reads:

This is a counterpoint scene between Ralph's dinner party and the performance of Romeo and Juliet in Portsmouth. We see this performance from a number of angles, concluding--in this scene--with the APOTHECARY scene from the back of the stage.¹

The scenes alternate at first--each group of characters leaves the stage and then returns. Eventually, after Kate has had to suffer the ugly advances of Sir Mulberry Hawk, she remains on stage "superimposed" over the Crummles version of act 3, scene 5, which includes another piece of "referential irony":

CAPULET How? Will she none? Does she not give us thanks?
Is she not proud? Doth she not count her blest,
Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought
So unworthy a gentleman to be her bride?
JULIET Proud can I never be of what I hate.

And like Kate Nickleby, whose mother also fails to see the truth, Juliet cries:

¹Edgar, Nicholas Nickleby, Play One, p. 195.

Is there no pity sitting in the clouds
That sees into the bottom of my grief?
Oh, sweet my mother, cast me not away!¹

Ralph rescues Kate from Sir Mulberry and remains on stage, again "super-imposed" on Romeo and Balthazar and the introduction to the apothecary scene and Smike's backstage pacing. As Smike rushes on, late for his entrance, shouting "Who calls so loud?" Kate enters to take farewell of her uncle, Smike's father. This is the first moment of softness given to Ralph in the play, and we see him almost moved by Kate when the light catches her face as she climbs into the carriage, and Newman Noggs tells us,

And Ralph Nickleby, who was proof against all appeals of blood and kindred--who was steeled against every tale of sorrow and distress--staggered while he looked, and reeled back into the house, as a man who had seen a spirit from a world beyond the grave.²

While the Ralph/Kate scene is essentially that of Dickens, the juxtaposition with Smike is Edgar's dramatic invention. Ralph's presence while his son paces gives added impact to the idea of "a spirit from a world beyond the grave."

In Play Two, when the Madeline Bray plot is introduced, Edgar solves the problem of late-arriving characters and new subplots by staging two scenes concurrently, arousing interest by showing that the Bray story involves many of the characters we already know. The Cheeryble brothers tell Nicholas of Madeline's destitute state and engage him in their plan to help her by buying her drawings and commissioning more.

¹Ibid., p. 201.

²Ibid., p. 205.

Simultaneously, the old and slimy Arthur Gride involves Ralph in his plot to marry the helpless young woman and thereby receive her large marriage inheritance, about which no one else knows since he has stolen the papers. The dialogue switches between the two locations, adding dramatic dimension and counterpoint, as one group wishes Madeline well and the other harm, and one group believes her to be destitute, the other aims to become rich through her inheritance. In this instance the cinematic crosscutting adds dramatic irony, creates tension, and arouses interest in a new but all-important plot thread.

The staging of Nicholas Nickleby lies outside the scope of this study and is already well documented in many articles in newspapers, magazines, and journals for those interested, and Leon Rubin's book also covers this aspect effectively. Many relevant areas of focus are discussed in the interview appendix, leaving only one important question of significance here: How does Edgar's work on Nicholas Nickleby fit with his established image of political playwright? The pragmatic "response" laughingly offered by Edgar, during our first interview, was that it was an offer he couldn't refuse. However, Edgar's next play, the highly political Maydays, opened on the big stage of the RSC's new London home, The Barbican. No one can truly say whether the company would have produced that play anyway, but what is clear is that the association between David Edgar and the RSC can only have been enhanced by the award-winning collaboration on Nicholas Nickleby.

Pragmatism aside, the real answer lies in a brief look at Dickens's novels which, like Edgar's plays, are crammed with tales of social injustice. A list of social topics dealt with in Dickens's works would

have quite a lot in common with such a list made from Edgar's works. In Nicholas Nickleby Dickens focuses on the growing disparity between the rich and the poor aggravated by industrialization. His portraits of the greedy and selfish capitalists, Ralph Nickleby and Sir Mulberry Hawk, might be seen as 1838 versions of the capitalists of Edgar's Destiny. Because Dickens is kinder than the 1980 writer of social criticism, he also gives us the Cheerybles, but their presence does not diminish his attack on the evils that money can produce. Julius Novick observed in the Village Voice, writing of the London production:

He [Edgar] is clearly aware that Dickens' great subject was the great subject of his contemporary and fellow Londoner, Karl Marx: the new industrial-commercial civilisation that was burgeoning all around them, so overwhelmingly powerful and yet so heedless, productive of so much wealth and so much misery.¹

Just as the political playwright hopes to change society in some way, Dickens wrote of things that appalled him and that he hoped could be changed. He is credited with some influence on the abolition of public hangings, and his exposé of the Yorkshire schools in Nicholas Nickleby resulted in the closing of such brutal establishments. Anthony Lewis wrote in his New York Times article about Nicholas Nickleby:

Dickens hated injustice and poverty with the passion of a man who has experienced them. But he had no program but human decency and kindness: an absence of doctrine that nowadays is endearing. George Orwell saw him as a man "with a touch of anger in his laughter... a man who was always fighting against something but who fights in the open and is not frightened--a man who is generously angry."²

¹Julius Novick, Village Voice, 22 July 1981, p. 77.

²Anthony Lewis, New York Times, 23 July 1981, p. 23.

While Edgar is committed to socialism, his convictions are not unlike those of Dickens, and his program includes one of human decency, as he shows when dealing with British neofascism in Destiny. The spirit of Dickens's generous anger is embodied in the final moment of Edgar's stage version of Nickleby, when Nicholas challenges his audience to understand the suffering that may have contributed to their own comforts. Social realism connects Edgar's political playwriting with this popular, commercial success. Yet Edgar was aware of the problem of relevance. He wrote:

We constantly had to remind ourselves that we were adapting a novel six generations after it was written. We had decided to do so because Dickens' writing seemed to say something that is deeply important about our country which has not only stood the test of time, but in a sense can best be seen through time.... We know things Dickens did not know, and we see things in him that he could not see....

The point, we found is ... that what he meant was a complexity of aspiration for the ideal, and regret for the impossibility of achieving it; and that this tells us a great deal about him and even more about the times he lived in. So in dealing with these crucial passages I tried to adapt the book in such a way that revealed not only the material, but also the complexities and ambiguities of our response to those as well.... we did it, like Dickens, in the language of the present, but unlike Dickens, with the changed perspectives of a century and a half of passing time.¹

James Leverett's excellent article on the production comments on the timeliness of Edgar's work:

David Edgar's major accomplishment with Nicholas Nickleby, besides the herculean feat of marshalling its myriad parts, is to tune it, ever so subtly, to the modern temper.²

Leverett also discusses the influences apparent in the production and in

¹Edgar, "Recrystallization," p. 11.

²James Leverett, "Masterpiece Theatre," Theatre Communications 3/8 (December 1981): 3.

the writing, most significantly Brecht. I have discussed Edgar's Brechtian propensities elsewhere, but Leverett's comments are useful here:

Put aside Brecht's particular brand of politics, and, to an extent, his celebrated alienation effect, and we see that he opened the door to the possibility of putting new (and old) material on a stage that had long seemed too shrunken to hold much more than a drawing room. His theatre looked back to traditional forms, including melodrama; embraced music, dance and other stylized means of performance; and looked forward to new forms, mainly film, with its ability to intercut and superimpose.

He also blazed the trail for a generation of playwrights, starting with Edward Bond and continuing with David Edgar, to admit into their works broad sections of society--sections palpably and profoundly affected by politics, economics, indeed all the forces of history.¹

The stage adaptation of Nicholas Nickleby embraces all the elements mentioned by Leverett. It is a "generously angry" social realist play which preserves Dickens's spirit and intentions while speaking eloquently to a contemporary audience. To those who belittle the art of adaptation Edgar says:

We looked at one crystallization of human experience--in this case a novel--and I recrystallized it in the form of dramatic incident and dialogue, and the actors recrystallized that in rehearsal. I know they gave real performances and I think I wrote a real play.²

¹Ibid.

²Edgar, "Recrystallization," p. 11.

Chapter X

MAYDAYS

Maydays opened at the Barbican Theatre in October 1983.. It is the first of Edgar's original political plays to receive its premiere production in a large theater space, something that he had been hoping for since he wrote the first draft of Destiny in 1973. The dramaturgical challenge of a large work was one motivation. Another was the growing belief on the part of Edgar and such colleagues as David Hare and Howard Brenton that large stages are more effective platforms for political plays, because of the wider attention received and the resulting possibility of public debate. When Edgar's Destiny transferred from the small theater at Stratford to London's Aldwych Theatre, he indeed found such benefits. Michael Billington supports the idea:

David Edgar's Maydays is exactly what the Barbican is for: a big public play on a big public theme. Its territory is nothing less than the map of post-war politics.¹

Maydays is Edgar's most ambitious play to date. The three-and-a-half-hour epic has fifty-three characters, plus extras, it covers thirty-five years, several locations in four countries and is written in three acts and twenty-four scenes. Six months before its first performance Edgar stated:

It's been a two-year thing to write, off and on. It was sloshing around in my mind for three years before that. The memory of the pain of writing it is very acute, and I feel

¹Michael Billington, The Guardian, 21 October 1983, p. 11.

that it's going to prove some kind of punctuation in my life, whether negative or positive. It's the most risky thing I've done.... I want to get the reaction to that show before I decide what to do next.¹

The reaction from the press was, with some dissension, excellent. Surprisingly, accolades came from such traditionally conservative quarters as The Daily Telegraph and The Financial Times.

The play spans the period in Britain between the election of the radical Attlee Labour government in 1945 and "the early nineteen eighties," after the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher at the head of a Conservative government as radical as Attlee's, but at the opposite end of the political spectrum. The play deals with a group of Britons, some American friends, and two exiles, one from Hungary, the other from the Soviet Union, set against the background of British political life since World War II.

Labour's electoral triumph in 1945 seemed to herald a new socialist era for Britain. The Attlee government filled the political calendar with legislative proposals which, in time, dramatically improved the economic status of the working-class voters who had brought about Labour's huge majority in the 1945 election. Yet, when Britons next went to the polls in 1950 the Labour majority in Parliament was substantially reduced, and by 1951 the Conservatives, under Winston Churchill, were back in power. There followed a period of thirteen years of Conservative rule by a succession of administrations who, by and large, left intact the major acts of social and economic reform introduced by their socialist predecessors. Thus the lot of Britain's working class, the bedrock of Labour support, continued to improve during the 1950s and early 1960s. If one now looks

¹Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

back at all elections since 1959, the Labour Party has been in a constant state of decline. Over 40 percent of voters supported it in the 1959 election, but less than 30 percent in the general election of 1983.¹ Just as in Sweden, West Germany, and other middle-of-the-road countries, so in Britain the advent of a socialist government promoted the economic interests of its supporters with the ironic result that many of them joined the ranks of the right to safeguard what they had gained. Similarly, the unions and the cooperative movement, former strengths of the Labour Party, lost influence, further weakening the left. Earlier on the party was also deserted by those who were disillusioned by the years of Labour government under Harold Wilson (1964-70, 1974-76), who seemed to abandon socialist ideals in favor of consumerism and pragmatism. By 1980 the British Labour Party seemed to many a spent force, a relic of a bygone age.

Following its defeat by Margaret Thatcher's right-of-center party, the Labour Party was riven by internal dissent which, in 1981, led a group from the party's right wing to abandon socialism and establish the Social Democratic Party which, in an alliance with the Liberal Party, secured 26 percent of the vote in the June 1983 election. Some considered this the end of the Labour Party. Some characters in Edgar's play represent that notion, typifying those who, once their economic condition had advanced, discarded their socialism and opted first for moderate Conservatism and later for the more radical Thatcher brand. An American and a Hungarian follow a similar political course.

¹Figures verified by the British Information Service.

Themes of socialist loss of idealism underlie other British plays, notably David Hare's 1978 Plenty and, much earlier, Wesker's Chicken Soup with Barley and I'm Talking About Jerusalem. Jimmy Porter represents working-class frustration with political promises not kept. Edgar's play has some thematic links with these plays, but he attempts a broader analysis of socialism's decline, linking the British experience with that in other parts of the world.

But is British socialism finished? Unlike Harold Macmillan in 1959, Margaret Thatcher was not able to say to the nation, "You've never had it so good" when she called an election in 1983. By then more than three million people (12 percent of the population) were unemployed with youth unemployment as high as 60 percent in some regions of the north. For many, prospects of future employment are dismal. How many of them will vote Conservative in future elections?

In Maydays Edgar deals with socialism in England and elsewhere rather than with Labour Party politics, examining its decline in the light of recent history and offering some hopes for its future. He sees the issue as complex, discussing the left's failures, handicaps, and its possibilities. His title suggests some of the ironies and complexities. The significance of May Day to labor and the left needs no elucidation, and Edgar sets many of his scenes in Mays of different years. The RSC program lists important worldwide events that took place in various Mays of the last two centuries, many of which are points of reference in the play. Not all of these events, however, hold positive significance for the left--Mrs. Thatcher's May 1979 election victory in England, for example, and the May 1871 fall of

the Paris Commune--and maydays are also distress signals from a sinking ship. Yet for the optimistic--and I believe that the play is ultimately hopeful for the left--May Day suggests a spring festival of rebirth.

Edgar deals with a large group of characters and their inter-connections, but mostly with three men featured in the first three scenes of the play. We first meet the working-class Jeremy Crowther as a seventeen-year-old spokesman for the Young Communist League. It is May Day, 1945. The third scene takes us to 1962, when Crowther has become a teacher at a minor public school. He meets the seventeen-year-old Martin Glass, a rebel against the pretensions of his middle-class background, an enthusiastic young left-winger, and a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Edgar shows the changing political convictions of these two men, giving them one scene alone together in each of the three acts in which they discuss their positions in 1962, 1972, and 1978, respectively. By the end of the play, "the early eighties," they are both members of a Tory think tank.

The second scene of the play introduces us to Pavel Lermontov,¹ a young Soviet lieutenant in the invasion force in Hungary. It is 1956. After hearing the point of view of a young Hungarian prisoner, Miklos Paloczi, Lermontov allows him to escape. We then see Lermontov's fight for civil liberties back in the Soviet Union and his imprisonment in a labor camp. His connections with the West begin when he starts to smuggle statements out of his country. Eventually Lermontov is exchanged for a Soviet spy and is exiled to the West. Paloczi meets

¹Lermontov was the name of a Russian Romantic poet.

him at Frankfurt airport and moves with him to London.

The stories of these three men, along with that of Paloczi and Wiener, an American Jew, merge in the third act when Lermontov is wooed by a right-wing group, the Committee in Defence of Liberty, of which Crowther has now become a member. Glass, now a defector from socialism, interviews him for the Sunday Times and is soon lured by Crowther into full participation with the right himself. Edgar charts the political journeys of his three protagonists, supplemented by the journeys of several secondary characters whose lives touch upon those of the three leads. The American thread of the plot begins with Glass's 1967 visit to California and his befriending of Clark Sullivan and his girlfriend Cathy, Wiener's daughter, at an antidraft protest meeting. They all return to London, but in 1970 Clark goes back to the States and is "blown up by his own bomb at a United States Air Force base in Southern California."¹ Ted Wiener comes to console his daughter and wryly quotes Marx to Cathy's London roommates, about history repeating itself, "the second time as farce." When challenged he recounts the story of turn-of-the-century Jews seeking freedom and a new life in America and the current mystery to such people, including himself, of the younger generation:

Our children, without our blessing or encouragement, decided to avenge us. And to wield those self-same weapons, of compassion and morality and justice, against the country that, they thought, had persecuted and excluded us. But when they realised that what they were avenging was not our persecution, but our silence, not our suffering, but our desperate guilt, they turned those weapons on us.

¹David Edgar, Maydays (London: Methuen, 1983). All quotations from the play are from this published script.

In the third act, Wiener, who had been a Communist Party member in the thirties, is selected to present an award to Lermontov on behalf of the Committee in Defence of Liberty.

Another political journey that Edgar charts is that of Amanda. In 1968 she is a member of the Trotskyite group, Socialist Vanguard. She lives, briefly, with Glass, but as he becomes disillusioned with socialism she becomes disillusioned with him. By the eighties she is not formally connected with any party but remains committed to the principles and causes of socialism, particularly feminism, and, in the final scene of the play, she is one of the demonstrators at an American military base, readying itself for nuclear missiles. Another character is James Grain, the committed and unwavering leader of Socialist Vanguard and, in the 1968 scene, the one who convinces Glass to join. He is eventually critical of Glass's "individualist" tendencies and angered by his defection. He tells Amanda in a 1978 scene:

There is shortly going to be a General Election. And in our view the Conservatives will win. They will win in part because the working class has been betrayed, not least by those whom we have always said were really on the other side, and who now appear, in their true colours, so to be.

Phil is a socialist friend of Glass in 1968. By 1970 he opts for terrorism (cf. Operation Iskra), saying:

The bullet and the bomb are not the real revolution but they are real metaphors of revolution.... An action of guerilla warfare serves to show that the power of the state can never be invincible. Such action will destroy this myth, even if we are destroyed ourselves thereby.

Phil receives a ten-year jail sentence for his part in a bombing.

Edgar interweaves the journeys of his characters, providing parallels and contrast to the journeys of his three protagonists. We are

often taken by surprise by the way Edgar links the lives of his characters, but the results are believable and bring cohesion to his vast plot. For example, we meet Brian and Judy in scene 6 when they stay at Amanda's house during a socialist conference in the Midlands. In scene 8 they are part of a student takeover at Leeds University, where they confront an English professor--Jeremy Crowther. They reappear throughout the play, remaining involved with socialist causes, such as the Anti-Nazi rally of act 3, scene 2. They represent those whose commitment survives factions and extremism, who do not aim at prominence but quietly work for issues of human importance, echoing Amanda's course. Interestingly, Brian, a minor character in the play, is the only one who formally joins the Labour Party as Edgar himself did in the early eighties. In Wreckers Edgar deals more specifically with Labour Party activism.

One of the surprising plot links is a character named Clara. In the scene in Hungary she is Lermontov's stenographer. He comments to his prisoner, Paloczi,

They're some of them so slow and stupid. Villagers.
They've never seen a city.

She overhears. Lermontov bumbles the shooting of a Hungarian nationalist, leaving him for dead with Clara. We do not see her again until the third act when she comes to interview Lermontov for TASS. She had formerly been a correspondent to Izvestia and, she tells him,

And formerly to that, attached to the Military Intelligence
Division of the Soviet Army. As--a stenographer.

She had been responsible for his labor camp internments and doesn't deny a personal vendetta, remembering his face in Hungary:

I'd seen it sneering in contempt, at a stupid girl from a Russian village, who knew nothing about music, who had never seen a city and who didn't always understand when people shouted at her very loud.

She now tells him,

Well, after all, you are a traitor to the cause of socialism. Are you not. Pavel Mikhailovich.

The accusation starts Lermontov on the way to a recognition of the dangers he will meet in England if he is to remain true to his beliefs, a recognition that culminates in the award banquet scene, where his impassioned speech and rejection of the award mark the climax of the play. Although the reappearance of Clara is a surprise, Edgar prepares for it in the second scene of the play, leaving the clues and preparing the probabilities, just as he does for the reappearance of Wiener at the awards scene. It is appropriate that it is a Soviet citizen who partially saves Lermontov from becoming a dupe for the right, but ironic in that Clara had fought against him in the Soviet Union.

Robert Cushman notes that the play is about people changing their minds and complains that Edgar, "except in that one fine banquet scene, failed to show us the changes happening."¹ This complaint seems to be based on a premise that minds are changed quickly. In the banquet scene, Lermontov suddenly understands the nature of his hosts' political beliefs and, with Clara's accusation ringing in his ears, extricates himself from the situation. His mind is not changed. His mistake is corrected. The characters who change their minds do so slowly, and Edgar shows successive stages of those changing beliefs, for example, in the Crowther-Glass scenes. The change in other characters is shown through

¹Robert Cushman, The Observer (London), 22 October 1983, p. 34.

dramatic contrast, such as in the two long speeches of Ted Wiener, the first to the young socialists in 1970, the second to the rightists in the early eighties. Paloczi's behavior and statements in acts 1 and 3 are sharply contrasted, and Lermontov asks him,

What has happened to the brave revolutionary, full of dreams,
who understood why peasants brought free food to feed the
cities and who clearly doesn't understand that any more.

Such questions cannot be fully answered, and the ambiguities about the processes of change that Edgar leaves us with strike an honest note. At the same time, he gives possible answers in his sociopolitical portraits of the years covered by his play. We see an American antidraft demonstration broken up by the National Guard using tear gas. We see a student sit-in in 1968 and hear of the student riots and labor involvements in Paris the same year. We see socialism split into rival factions and hear of the industrial strikes that marked the early seventies. We learn of Housing Acts and squatters, feminism on the rise, the fight against neo-fascism, the new peace movement, and we learn of some of the struggles in two communist countries. When Edgar does not dramatize events, the political and social environment and its history are part of the dialogue. True to his desire to be "a secretary for our times," Edgar records the sociopolitical climate of the years covered by his play, referring to selected specific events in order to create a background of fact, a recognizable social context for his characters, and one which offers clues to the changes they undergo.

Edgar's British characters span society from the establishment figure, Hugh Trelawney, Cambridge don and right-winger, to the working-class Amanda, who explains to James Grain why she left Socialist Vanguard:

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All those opportunities, those bold bright schools and gleaming universities. That our folks had never had themselves, but had been through a slump and then a war to win for us. And if we didn't finish it, if we didn't get it right this time, if we didn't actually complete the building of the New Jerusalem, for them, for us, then what the fuck were we about?

And I left your party when I realised the one absolute condition of my membership was checking in those feelings at the door.

Though class is an issue in the play, particularly for Glass and Crowther, Edgar dwells on the political shades of his characters who swear allegiance to numerous hues of socialism before some of them swing to the right. As in Destiny, he gives complex and sensitive portraits of those with whom he would not ally himself--"analysis made flesh" Andrew Hislop called it in the Times Literary Supplement.¹ In Destiny Edgar evokes his art to the varied people who join ultraright movements. He also showed a Labour M.P.'s move away from socialism, foreshadowing Maydays, where he studies socialism and socialists, and why some of them move to the right. He attempts to analyze the loss of idealism, the weakening by splinter groups, the dissension that leads some to the ultraright. The distress signals are clear. Edgar, however, remains a loyal socialist, and the final moments of the play embody his own optimism. Amanda and a group of women, including her teenage daughter, will continue the fight for peace. Edgar does not specify Greenham Common, but the resonance of the recent demonstrations at the American base are clear. Edgar's faith in the women's movement as a new strength of the left is also articulated in this scene. Amanda confronts her old lover, Glass, who has bought back his childhood home next to the base, and who will

¹Andrew Hislop, Times Literary Supplement (London), 28 October 1983, p. 1187.

call the police to have the women removed. Amanda says to him,

You may say that the urge to stop the planet being blown to blazes is a form of brute, material self-interest.... Or that to want these aeroplanes to be removed is merely good old British national pride.... But I think in fact that in the end what they are doing, what we all are trying to do, in our many different ways, can only be accounted for by something in the nature of our species which resents, rejects and ultimately will resist a world that is demonstrably and in this case dramatically wrong and mad and unjust and unfair. And I wonder, Martin, if you ever really felt like that. And if you did, if you can still remember.

Cut into this final scene is another in the Soviet Union. Pugachev, a scientist and former friend of Lermontov, is persuaded to smuggle a manifesto on a miners' fight to the West. It has been written by Korolenko, who had been in the labor camp with Lermontov. Edgar leaves both countries on a note of hope with the struggles continuing despite the setbacks.

Time is treated chronologically in Maydays,¹ unlike Destiny with its irregular jumping back and forth. The linear treatment dramatizes Edgar's vision of the steady decline of the left and comes from Edgar's specified aim to write a history play, "a history of the left,"² and his decision to follow three individuals' lives and their changing political beliefs.

Edgar gives more space to the private worlds of his characters than he does in Destiny, where only one scene has a private setting. There are nine such scenes in Maydays, and Edgar gives a new balance to

¹Act 1 has scenes in 1945, 1956, 1962, 1967, three in "annus mirabilis," 1968, one in 1969, and one in 1970. Act 2 covers the years between 1970 and 1978, and act 3 is set in 1978 and 1979, with the final scene in "the early eighties."

²Edgar, interview with the author, April 1983.

the public and private spheres that adds depth and dimension to his characters. Political feelings and choices are more clearly linked to private feelings and circumstances than in earlier plays, as is shown in Amanda's given reasons for leaving Socialist Vanguard and Glass's reclamation of his old family home which he had rejected as a young socialist. Revenge is an important theme in the play, and, however public the implications, it is initially a personal emotion, as shown in Clara's revenge on Lermontov, and Martin Glass's on James Grain and Socialist Vanguard in his published denunciations of the left.

Revolution is another recurrent theme, and the British characters discuss and are influenced by revolutionary activity in Spain, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and other parts of the world. Crowther left the Communist Party because of the "party line" on Hungary and feels cheated by having been too young to fight in Spain. The lack of revolutionary activity in Britain is one of Edgar's complaints, suggesting that the left lost a major opportunity by not taking matters further in the early seventies when the labor force became militant, for a time instating nationwide strikes and "indeed in 1974 a strike brought down the government, the only time that a western government has been brought down by industrial action since the war."¹ Edgar notices the changing vision of the agents of revolution. Phil's manifesto on terrorism begins:

One. Karl Marx was wrong. The working class has not become more immiserated and thus more conscious of itself. It has become richer and less conscious of itself. Two. What happened is that capitalism has mutated. Mass production has led to an increasing, stultifying, numbing universe of things. A stereo in every fridge. A family saloon in every tumble dryer.

¹Ibid.

Edgar said virtually the same thing to me in our July 1982 interview:

The key ideological perception of the late sixties was that the working class was no longer the primary agent of revolutionary change, or if that wasn't accepted, that they weren't the only agent, and that the Marxist prediction that the working class would become increasingly immiserated was actually not true. They were becoming increasingly well off.

In the same interview I asked him what he now means by socialism. He replied:

What is most self-defeating of all is the idea of a single organisation with a single correct line. So what I would now mean by socialism is implied by membership of the Labour Party, or membership of a whole myriad of organisations one of which is the Labour Party, which is an impulse towards radical change, which proceeds in an unorganised and anarchic way. Precisely because it's not organised, it's genuinely democratic.

Amanda, Brian, and Judy represent these feelings in the play, particularly Amanda with her quiet commitment to a myriad of causes. While never condemning James Grain's ardor in the play, Edgar demonstrates here that he represents the self-defeating hard-liner, as does Ron, a minor "angry young man" character who attacks Glass for his defection.

Reinforcing these themes of revolution, defection, and the nature of socialism are repeated phrases which become thematic and structural leitmotifs. In the opening scene, the young Crowther says,

It was the great V.I. Lenin who once said, revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and the exploited.

In the next scene Paloczi tells Lermontov,

A revolution is a festival. Lenin said that, I was surprised to learn. And the thing about a festival is that it's very tricky to control.

In the fifth scene James Grain tells a Socialist Vanguard meeting:

"The Revolution is the Festival of the Oppressed." That's very good indeed. But in fact, it's only half the story.

It's a quote from Lenin. Yes, I'm afraid so, Lenin. Let me read the whole of it to you. (He reads.) "Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and exploited.... At such times the people are capable of performing miracles. But we shall be traitors and betrayers of the revolution, if we do not use the festive energy of the masses to wage a ruthless and self-sacrificing struggle for the direct and decisive path..." What is that path? Where should we go? To coin a slogan: What Is To Be Done?

As such ideas are recapitulated by different characters in different parts of the world a sense of unity is created, only to be fractured again. Paul Allen's review well describes the effects of the device:

Edgar goes in for a system of using familiar phrases and ideas in the way well-organised music will occasionally drop in a phrase or chord sequence to pay off a development. Lenin's remark that "a revolution is a festival" is cleverly used first to exhilarate and then to depress; Trotsky's reference to "human dust" becomes more chilling each time it becomes more personal, and it gets harder to find anyone who has sustained a belief in individual freedom and rights; Kronstadt and Red Barcelona recall Communist atrocities and become emblems of disillusion regularly repeated.¹

The multiscenic structure is treated cinematically, and Edgar uses techniques familiar from Destiny and Nicholas Nickleby, such as superimposing or intercutting scenes. I have described the intercutting between the Soviet Union and the women's demonstration in the final scene. When Crowther meets Glass in the third scene, they are outside on the school parade ground in the pouring rain. Crowther invites him home, and then the stage directions read:

A transfer. MARTIN leaves with the bicycle, JEREMY comes downstage and starts to take off his waterproofs, as a table and three chairs--on one of which hangs MARTIN's sodden uniform--are set up behind him.

The scene continues, now located in Crowther's home. Similarly, the final scene of act 1 takes place in Amanda's house until the stage direction reads:

¹Paul Allen, New Statesman (London), 28 October 1983, p. 31.

Upstage a small prisoner detail enters on one side, an MVD OFFICIAL on the other. THE PRISONER is LERMONTOV. The banners and flags decorate a Moscow railway station. The smoke is the steam of the engines.

Between act two, scenes three and four, the stage directions read:

"MARTIN stays on stage as the set changes around him." These techniques are used increasingly as the play progresses, creating a flow and sense of quickening pace as the different threads of the plot converge. The Barbican Theatre has the technical capabilities to follow such directions; but they are important pointers to the rhythm of the play.

There are two stage directions that the Barbican Theatre amazingly fulfilled in production but that read almost like the agitprop play directions such as "Great Britain enters" in Not With A Bang But A Whimper.

The fourth scene takes place on California railroad tracks and the text reads:

MARTIN runs to join the PROTESTORS sitting on the track as the train enters from upstage centre. It judders to a halt a few feet from the PROTESTORS.

In the final scene "a wire fence falls," and later,

Sirens begin to wail. Dogs bark. Beyond the wire, searchlights and running men. Huge doors open, revealing headlamps. Engines rev.... The headlamps--of trucks and motorcycles--career downstage, up to the wire. The lights beam through the wire, dazzling the audience. The lights flash. Engines revving wildly.

These two moments excepted, Edgar goes for minimum stage effects, creating a play whose strength lies in its ideas, its arguments, its ideological conflicts. There are no real agitprop devices such as the direct audience address and the poems of Destiny, whose purpose was to compress necessary background information. In Maydays Edgar achieves the same end by giving long speeches to certain characters, but speeches that fall

into place naturally within scenes of dialogue. In scene 3 Crowther explains to the young Martin Glass why he left the Communist Party and discusses some of his political frustrations.

And so when we came of age, when it was all over, the thirties, and the war, we had this feeling we were fifteen years too young. And I tell you there's no stranger feeling than the feeling that instead of being past it, it's past you.

He continues, talking about the new opportunities for the working class after the war, particularly in education, and the results of that:

But you realise there's something missing. The working class is freer than it's ever been. But somewhere, in the no-man's-land between private affluence and public squalor, somewhere inside the Hoover Automatic or the Mini-Cooper, behind the television or underneath the gramophone, those wonderful possessions.... You hear a kind of scream. The scream of the possessed. And you realise there's all the difference in the world, between liberty and liberation.

Ted Wiener's long speech to his daughter's London friends works the same way, functioning on a private and personal level while, at the same time, providing a sociological minihistory of the American Jewish immigrant who became a stalwart of the American left of the thirties, continued as a liberal, but later began inching to the right. Korolenko's story to Lermontov of bureaucratic harassment when he complained about conditions in Soviet mines and his eventual internment in a labor camp functions in the same way, providing a picture of life in the Soviet Union for a dissident.

The banquet scene offers the perfect climax to a play of ideas that has debated the reasons for the weakening of the left, the rise of the right, and the loss of idealism. Speeches are inherent in the occasion, and Edgar provides two splendid and contrasting orations. Wiener, in total command of himself and the language, condemns the left

with his award-presentation speech, calling on all

to affirm that agitation's agitation, even if it's published quarterly in learned periodicals, and that subversion is subversion, even if the subverters of our culture are distinguished film directors, poets, writers and musicians. And that treachery is treachery, even if the traitors to our country have no need of telephoto lenses, tape-machines and micro-film, but ply their trade as smart left lawyers, clever linguists, and conscious-stricken academics.

In contrast, Lermontov has speech cards, prepared by Paloczi, and when he speaks without them he has to search for the right words. He retrieves a speech card removed by Paloczi during Wiener's speech and reads it, bringing greetings

from the agitators and subversives, violators of the public order, slanderers and hooligans and parasites and traitors, of the Soviet Corrective Labour Colonies. (Pause.) Who up until their sentences were teachers, physicists, academicians and administrators. Writers and poets. Actors film directors and musicians. Workers and trade union officials. Linguists and lawyers. Publishers. Professors.

He then puts down the speech cards and continues in his own words. He tells his hosts that he sees that they are authoritarians, and that is what he sought to escape. He therefore declines the award and leaves.

In Maydays Edgar continues his social realist mode of writing. He creates a historically accurate social context by selecting specific events of significance to the left as markers. These events are either dramatized by showing characters participating at selected moments, such as the day in Hungary in 1956 or the student sit-in in 1969, or the events become the subjects of political speeches (for example, James Grain's on the invasion of Cambodia), or else they become the topics of private conversations (such as those between the different factions attending the 1968 socialist conference). Edgar includes vast amounts of information to clarify the audience's awareness of the sociopolitical

environment of his play.

Against this background he puts characters who actively participate in the creation of that sociopolitical environment, characters who choose political involvement. Such choice inheres in the social realist form, and in Maydays freedom of choice, liberty, and liberation are important themes. Perhaps here is an example of content and form in balance.

Edgar's characters typify different approaches to socialism. As a historical reality, terrorism was and still is a political choice for some, while social reality is represented--"typified"--by Phil. Similarly, James Grain is the hard-line Trotskyist whose belief in the rigors of his party line seem unshakeable. Amanda is the humanist whose personal commitments transcend party doctrines. Other characters similarly typify other aspects of social reality: Paloczi, the Eastern European lured by the Western right, and Trelawney, the upper-class English right-wing intellectual and aspiring Tory Prime Minister.

The danger of typification of characters is that they can become stereotypical, a danger that Edgar has avoided. One way he has avoided stereotyping is by balancing the public and private worlds of his characters--even James Grain has time for an affair with Amanda. In Lukacs's terms Edgar shows a "dialectic between man as individual and man as social being."¹ For example, Amanda's private role as a single mother conditions many of her political involvements, particularly in the feminist movement, and when she turns her home into a commune the statement is both a private and a public one. In Destiny Edgar showed only

¹Lukacs, Realism, p. 75.

aspects of his characters' private worlds that had a noticeable effect on their public behavior. In Maydays the worlds are inextricable, providing a wider vision and deeper analysis of political motivations. The more "public" technique worked well in Destiny as Edgar's focus was on public behavior, particularly in "meetings," and the dangers of manipulation of groups by such as Maxwell.

Edgar shows that Martin leaves Socialist Vanguard because of "individualist tendencies," or, as Ron tells him,

There are certain things that Martin can't or won't give up. Like his deep hostility to working in a group that isn't led. Or if it is, is led by everyone. There's something in him, just can't seem to cope with people who are on the surface less informed than him.

The feelings are personal, though the issue becomes public, and this is also the case in the three major scenes between Jeremy Crowther and Martin Glass. The topics of conversation are public and political, but the difficulties stem from personal backgrounds and feelings, as this brief section exemplifies:

MARTIN I think, in fact, you wish you'd been the class that went to Spain. I think the crucial thing is, that you wish you'd been a red at Trinity. To be quite frank. Sir.

JEREMY Yes. (Pause.) You know the only thing you've said that gives me any hope at all?

MARTIN What's that?

JEREMY That this bomber is your friend. Because that means that your love for the whole of humankind has not yet been strangled, quite, your capacity to love the people whom you actually know.

Edgar also includes scenes and moments where private issues dominate, yet these moments contribute important clues to public behavior. For example, Amanda misses some of the 1970 socialist conference because she is looking after her small baby and doing

the shopping for the household. Her male housemates seem oblivious to this and even remove a drying diaper from a line in order to dry a stencil of a political manifesto. Her later move to feminism was thus inevitable. Martin visits his mother at their country vicarage in a scene that contributes to an understanding of why he rebels against his background as well as to why he returns to it.

By exploring both the public and private worlds of his characters and creating a richly detailed factual sociopolitical background Edgar creates the recognizability of the social realist play. In addition he shows society exposed to constant changes forged by the actions of his characters. History plays a part as Edgar shows his characters reflecting on past events, seeking lessons and guidance for a better future. He unites the characters and gives cohesion to the play with their common desire for freedom. He separates the characters and creates conflict by their unlike interpretations of freedom. Paloczi says:

You know, it's very strange, to come here, from a country which has never had political or economic freedom, in the sense we understand it. It is very strange, initially, to discover that a country which has both of these good things seems to care so little about losing them. Unless you realise the paradox that unless it is built on the foundations of what one might call the ultimate realities, then all freedom actually consists of is the absence of restraint. An empty canvas on which anyone may scrawl whatever vile graffiti they desire.

Jeremy's vision by 1979 is that

permissiveness implies permission, and even license must be licensed, by somebody or another. But what has changed now is that it's the market sells the slop that's poisoning us all and commerce that's providing the long spoon. A video-machine in every Porsche. A magimix in every microwave. And, yes, a pick-up in every lavatory. A fix in every vein. The Prostitution Ethic. Mine. Mine. Mine. Well, I don't call

that liberalism, though some might, nor socialism, though it's socialism's mutant child. I'd call it nihilism, and unless it's understood that our disease is not too little freedom but too much, it will destroy us all.

And the play ends, as already discussed, with the women's fight for freedom from the perils of the arms race, and the continuing fight for freedom of expression in the Soviet Union.

By encompassing the different points of view, by showing a dynamic society, constantly changing, Edgar demonstrates the analytic powers of his social realism. Through analysis he criticizes society and some of the directions it has taken, while retaining a note of optimism for continued and positive change. In Maydays Edgar exemplifies the eclecticism of the social realist form. He charts the decline of the left in a historically accurate sociopolitical background, selecting specific events as markers and including elements remote from his own experience in the Soviet and Hungarian sections. In these respects Maydays may be seen as a history play. The setting forth and arguing of conflicting attitudes draws on the play of ideas. In other respects it is a Brechtian epic play without slogans or alienation effects. All combine in social realism.

I have quoted from some reviews of the play's premiere production, and some further quotations will give some idea of the play's effect.

Michael Billington summarizes the play:

It started in England in 1945 with the Young Communist League singing the Internationale: it ends in 1981 with the hard Right resurgent but with a reminder that people are moved to protest against the insanity of the nuclear deterrent, and that, behind the Iron Curtain, dissident gestures survive. What Edgar does between times is to show how in the Britain of the Sixties and Seventies people fell into easy revolutionary

postures, suffered almost inevitable disillusion and, in many cases, changed sides politically.¹

Andrew Hislop feels that Edgar has ignored "what is of direct political concern to the majority of his audience--parliamentary democracy," and undermines his analysis by concern with the extreme elements of the right and the left, but comments,

That the stories of these defections are told with much humour is a reflection, however, not of a frivolous cynicism but of the very seriousness of Edgar's commitment, as a left-wing writer, to the use of theatre as a form of political expression--analysis made flesh. Drama for him offers the opportunity of producing a political "essay" which is able to explore "the subjective responses" of individuals--a factor which, he thinks, radical socialism has ignored for too long.²

Michael Covenay's review in The Financial Times reports:

More successful than any other recent British play, Maydays wrestles with the undeniable fact that liberty to say what you like is not quite the same thing as political liberation. It does so in no fatuous or pea-brained manner, but by charting how exactly comrades talk to each other, how the splinter groups of the left sink in a comic quagmire of rival newspaper vending and how Martin Glass travels through the 1970s to become a welly-booted right-wing propagandist ready to expel the Greenham Common women from his patch by the U.S. Air Force base.

Anyone of my post-war generation will immediately recognise and enjoy the glancing tics of speech, references, above all, perhaps, the easy manipulation of political texts in mundane social intercourse. A row over the purpose of the Socialist Vanguard movement is punctured by an Islington communard flying in a rage at those who have appropriated her half a grapefruit. Martin, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, literally dries up in mid-clicheic flow. His best friend, after a classic "situationist" oration is carted off by the police in a flurry of searchlights and revealed as a foolish Angry Brigade bomber.³

¹Billington, The Guardian, 21 October 1983, p. 11.

²Hislop, Times Literary Supplement, 28 October 1983, p. 1187.

³Michael Covenay, The Financial Times (London), 27 October 1983, p. 21.

Time Out comments that Edgar

has produced an outstanding play for our times, almost audacious in its scope and intellectual richness and one which manages to combine the sweep and analysis of social history with the probing humanitarianism of art.¹

City Limits was equally enthusiastic:

A looking-glass to our time, this is surely one of the most important plays of the decade, certainly one of the most courageous and stimulating.²

Peter Jenkins, political correspondent of The Guardian, devoted half a page to a discussion of the play and, unlike the paper's theater critic, Michael Billington, found little to praise, asking "what is Maydays doing on the stage of the RSC masquerading as a political play about our times?" He complains:

The politics of the play are ... a politics of fantasy bearing scant relation to what was actually happening in the world and in Britain during that time, and to the aspirations and pre-occupations of real people.³

This opinion proved to be a minority one. Jenkins is not sympathetic to the theater as a political forum, but his decisions to write about plays of political content when they appear show at the least that he is challenged by the idea; and a half-page article in a major newspaper enlarges Edgar's play into a wider topic for public debate, which is precisely the intention of political playwriting.

¹Steve Grant, Time Out (London), 27 October 1983.

²Lyn Gardner, City Limits (London), 27 October 1983.

³Peter Jenkins, The Guardian (London), 26 October 1983.

Chapter XI

CONCLUSION

The substance of David Edgar's plays provides a minihistory of Britain's economic and political climate since World War II, making him, in Michael Billington's words, "a secretary for our times." He presents a record and analysis of Britain's weakening left and of the growth of right extremism. He shows the social impact of specific pieces of legislation and gives details of some representative case histories, such as those of the Meriden motorcycle cooperative and the aerospace industry. While his own socialism both informs and colors his plays, his particular strength is his social analysis of the impulses he ultimately condemns and his hopeful reliance on free will as opposed to determinism.

A reading of Edgar's plays also provides a minihistory of the political theater movement that took shape in Britain after 1968, whose unifying features according to Edgar are

a belief in collaborative production processes, an aspiration to an audience wider than the usual metropolitan coterie, an open attitude to form, a commitment to radical social change, and a concern with the public world and its relation to the private world, and the present seen as history, with plays that stretch over time and seek to explain our own.¹

Edgar's move from writing agitprop for small touring companies to big spectacular plays for large spaces, and all the stages in between, describes the course taken by fellow political playwrights such as David Hare and Howard Brenton. The plays' structures reflect the

¹Edgar, "Political Studies," p. 3.

changing playing spaces and audiences. Edgar's plays stand as evidence that there is almost no topic of public import that is unsuitable subject matter for a play, although it is probable that much of his subject matter, language, and stage direction would have been censored prior to 1968. His many and varied writing styles demonstrate the different means of theater, the search for new audiences, and for effective ways of influencing those audiences. Edgar comments:

It was the case in the mid-seventies that the National and RSC audiences saw the witness of their own expropriation as a splendid way to spend an evening.¹

Edgar feels that by the end of the seventies these dominantly middle-class audiences were less amused by attacks on their lifestyles and values, and polemical tactics gave way, certainly in his case, to the subtler techniques of social realism.

Clearly the politics must be taken into account since they motivate the writing and subject matter and shape the theatrical dimensions. David Edgar began writing plays while Edward Heath's Conservative government was in power. Heath's policies--such as the Housing Act, the Concorde project, and entry into the Common Market--offered easy and specific targets for a young socialist writer. Agitprop, documentary, and combinations of the two worked well under such conditions, informing and agitating a limited, but interested audience.

In the early seventies, the solidarity of the British working class, reflected in the militant strike actions which eventually toppled the Heath government, contributed to the climate in which socialist

¹Ibid., p. 7.

theater could take root. With the General Will, Edgar took plays directly to working-class venues such as workers' clubs and pub rooms. They aimed to consolidate their audience or, in Ellul's words, "to bring citizens to the proper point of radical awareness so they can afterwards be moved to voluntary action."¹ Edgar used many of the techniques of Soviet agitprop: the tribunal, the living newspaper, "agitational plays proper" (short skits on a particular topic, using character "types"), and "dialectical plays" (fast-paced, episodic, nonpsychological plays, with striking juxtaposition of scenes, exposing conflicts in life and work). As did the Soviets, Edgar also drew on old forms, such as the cabaret, the satirical revue, music-hall, and melodrama. Humor, music, and song were integral to the plays. He frequently caricatured identifiable figures from public life, and, like the Soviets, his aim was to demystify social, political, or historical situations. In the documentary plays he used the same techniques, giving greater emphasis to sections of straight reportage, a feature of both forms.

The audience for these plays was usually working class, socialist, or both. The ultimate aim, therefore, as it had been for Piscator and Brecht in their agitprop work, was affirmation of their political thinking in readiness for revolutionary action against the prevailing right wing government. The Soviet agitprop plays had a totally different purpose: to integrate the new socialist society, thereby strengthening the new regime.

In the "interludes," Edgar's subject matter was less related to politics and Tory legislations, and they aimed to prompt social awareness

¹Szanto, Theatre and Propaganda, p. 9, citing Ellul, Propaganda.

rather than political action. The comic vein of the agitprop sketches continued, but the humor, overall, was more subtle, an appropriate change for the more complex dilemmas of social conscience. To a socialist, the mistakes of Heath's Tory policies were reasonably clear-cut, lending themselves easily to the agitprop form.

The plays collected under the description "playing with theatre," with the exception of Rent, deal with political topics of wide relevance: the Common Market, the situation in Ireland, Watergate, the arms race, and terrorism. Edgar "upends" familiar dramatic forms and parodies known plays in order to disturb and disorient his audience. He considers it a neo-Brechtian device which aims at an intellectual response. Again with the exception of Rent, which posits direct action against the Tory Housing Act, Edgar drops the polemical tone of the agitprop plays. His tendency is to be polemical in inverse proportion to the complexity of his topic. One of his "playing with theatre" plays, Operation Iskra, in addition to upending the thriller form, bridges Edgar's move to social realism, a form with which he had experimented in some earlier plays, notably Baby Love, and which informs all of the adaptations. The move was prompted by new political circumstances.

Harold Wilson's second Labour government (1974-76) was a let-down for the left, as his earlier term as Prime Minister had also been. Political writers reflected those feelings and reevaluated their methods, as British critic C.W.E. Bigsby explains:

This situation raised questions about the adequacy of their stance, their effectiveness in locating an audience, the style which they employed and the authority of their plays. ... These playwrights changed direction in order to examine the alienation which they felt increasingly to lie behind

problems that surfaced in the form of a political reaction or collapse of moral sensibility, but which originated at a level not susceptible of simplistic analysis.¹

The eventual failure of the Callaghan Labour government (1976-79), after labor disputes and the "winter of discontent," resulted in the election of a government perceived by the left as reactionary. Socialist writers accelerated their search for ways to reach and persuade more people and for some, including Edgar, the answer lay in a firmer commitment to social realism and larger theaters. Statistics and facts were the tools of agitprop and documentary, but more complex analyses of society became the new tools. Characterization, of minimal concern in the early years, became important, resulting in portrayals of individuals whose experience was shared or recognized by the audience. Bigsby comments:

Edgar recognizes a truth frequently resisted by left wing writers--namely that, whatever the causes, we suffer individually. It may be as a class or a race that we are persecuted, but it is as an individual that we feel the immediate effect of that persecution.²

The effect was that the plays became increasingly mimetic. Moreover, Edgar also attributes his now less polemical writing to the fact that "in the early seventies, the plays were my politics."³ Now he is involved with socialist politics as an activist, speaker, and journalist. While subsidy had provided a measure of support for his early work, the real need to earn a living is part of the move to writing for larger spaces.

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, "Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England," Modern Drama 4 (December 1981): 397.

²Ibid., p. 402.

³Edgar, interview with the author, September 1981.

I initially suggested that there was no single line of development in Edgar's writing. In fact there are several that have developed separately in his different styles of playwriting, any number of which he might employ during one year. Then they mingled and reinforced each other, eventually becoming refined into his current eclectic brand of social realism. The agitprop and documentary plays establish his ability for assiduous research that evolves into the more realistic sociopolitical backgrounds of his later works. In the "interludes," Edgar mainly steers away from specific political topics in favor of more general social attitudes, usually presented humorously. These social commentaries become a part of his social realism. Baby Love marks his first experiment with social realism, features of which recur in several "interludes," particularly in The National Theatre, and are apparent in all of the adaptations. The plays collected under the heading "playing with theatre" demonstrate, as well as his comedic talents, an ease with a variety of theatrical forms which led him toward a brand of social realism that may draw on other forms when appropriate. Collaboration of different sorts has been a recurrent mode of writing beginning with his work with the General Will, through to his plays with the Monstrous Regiment and 7:84, and culminating with Nicholas Nickleby. Drawing on all his former techniques, Nickleby may be seen as a synthesis of Edgar's writing on social issues, a play in which he transposes the social realism of Dickens into a modern theatrical form.

Similarly, Maydays may be viewed as the high point to date of Edgar's writing on specific political topics, and the flowering of his social realist style. Edgar's social realism exemplifies the form

whose features I will now describe. The topics are serious public issues. Characters tend to be defined by their public roles at their work, in their politics, or their class. Private involvements are usually secondary, or become so, to the public roles and issues, as in Destiny. Alternatively, when Edgar chooses more of a balance between the public and private, he shows a conflict between these two spheres and an inextricable relationship, as he does in Teendreams and Maydays. In Destiny, the emphasis on the public reflects his disquiet over the growth of fascism. By giving more space to the private sphere in Maydays Edgar suggests that discrepancies and conflicts between private impulses and public commitment are weaknesses of the left. In both cases, content determines form.

In social realism characters are typical in that they represent, or are products of, identifiable social forces. The plot is episodic to permit a free use of time and place; it is complex and reaches out to embrace as many elements as are needed to substantiate the main thesis; it is likely to span a long period of time in order to include historical interpretations of causality. The background events are recognizable because they are faction--i.e., transpositions in time, place, and/or character of actual events, or the placing of fictitious characters and events against a factual sociopolitical background of occurrences and conditions. The language varies from tape-recorded naturalism to stylized verse. Some scenes observe fourth-wall conventions but may be broken by direct audience address at any time, or by a sudden "close-up" of another character in another location. These devices derive from agitprop, and Edgar calls upon them, in modified

form, whenever helpful. He uses almost no agitprop techniques in Maydays--for the first time--but he has not necessarily abandoned such devices. They were simply not useful to him in this play.

The philosophical underpinnings of social realism are free will and choice. The plays support the preservation of these rights. Choices are made, alternatives seen, particularly in Destiny and Maydays, and the results of choices are revealed. Where Edgar sees the political system and its legislative measures eroding or diminishing the free will of the people, he shows the result as the production of chaos, deviancy (as in Wreckers, Baby Love, and Teendreams), or other behavior destructive to the well-being of society. The patriotic league meeting in Destiny is a vivid and frightening example of the erosion of choice when Maxwell manipulates the vote to join Nation Forward in his clever and deceptive summation speech. The meeting is typical of many, nationwide, holding for the audience the warning that such a gathering is a microcosm of a potentially larger one, where such attitudes could gain even more fervor.

The main purpose of social realism is social analysis and demystification. The form suits a political theater that aims to reach the unconverted as well as the already loyal disciples of a playwright's political philosophy. Because it is analytical rather than polemical, its didactic function is strengthened, as is the possibility of influencing political change, particularly since it shows the continuing and historical process of a society in a state of change, demonstrating how social and political actions create social environment and political climate.

By analyzing, or "getting inside," familiar events and characters, Edgar reaches his audience intellectually and emotionally: there is an emotional recognition and intellectual questioning by the audience of its own behavior and attitudes. Social realism is not constricted by slavish adherence to precepts of naturalism; it leaves the writer free to shape his material dramatically. In Edgar's case, he uses this freedom to inject humor, usually ironic, and so adds to his appeal to a wider audience. In Maydays, for example, Edgar provides an amusing seventies party scene, full of political humor. Another scene, in which vendors of left-wing newspapers vie to sell their versions of the truth, is pointedly amusing.

Maydays was commissioned by the RSC, and though it is not a collaborative work, Edgar wrote it for a company that he knew and for the director who had staged Destiny. Edgar was an important presence at rehearsals. These are conditions that a political writer in the United States seldom finds. Large not-for-profit theaters that seek to include political plays in their repertoire are rare. Of course there is some political writing. Companies such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, The Caravan, the Labor Theatre, and Iron Clad Agreement devote themselves primarily to political theater. Edgar theorizes about the absence of a "community" of playwrights in America who support each other and write together:

They are so isolated from each other as well as from the processes of theatre making, that they are forced constantly to work within a structure and an aesthetic that has been created by and for others--commercial producers and their stars--not for their work but against it. Practically this means that American playwrights are not supported, in the main, by directors and actors who have grown up with their work and understand how to perform it; still less have they

been able to work with companies created to serve their work and new work in general.... as a consequence there is no sense of common endeavor, no sense that the problems and challenges raised by one writer's play are answered by another's.¹

It is also worth remarking that getting the "big" American critics to small theaters is far from easy, but is a critical factor in establishing a playwright's work. When David Edgar's Mary Barnes was presented Off Off Broadway by the New York Theatre Studio, an established company, not one critic from a daily paper saw the show, despite the reputation of the playwright and several well-known actors. Such a situation for a new playwright could be worse than discouraging. On a more hopeful note, however, Adam Leipzig concludes a 1983 article on political theater in America by saying:

Yes, there are places where it can be found, albeit not the obvious places. In spite of a climate that may be less than ideal, in spite of economic and ideological obstacles, individual artists and theatre companies are making theatre that matters--plays that concern "something we're not thinking yet." Assisted and inspired by works from other cultures--which we are beginning to take into the heart of our own repertoire--American playwrights and companies are discovering an indigenous theatre of and for our time--and the union between political and regional theatre is growing stronger.²

There is clearly material here for a larger study of American developments in political theater.

For me one final question remains. Does political theater really influence people's thinking? The Russian director Tairov thought so and gives an example:

¹Edgar, "Political Studies," pp. 2-3.

²Adam Leipzig, "Something New," Theatre Communications 5/2 (February 1983): 4.

In 1830, at the Theatre Monnaie in Brussels, the play La Muette was being performed. In the middle of the performance, when the words "Love for the Fatherland is holy" rang out on the stage, the revolutionary enthusiasm... was communicated to the auditorium. The whole theatre was united in such powerful transport that all the spectators and actors left their places, grabbing chairs, benches--everything that came to hand--and, bursting from the theatre, rushed into the streets of Brussels. Thus began the Belgian revolution.¹

I will not add other hyperbolic examples, but there is some evidence in Britain to demonstrate that political theatre provokes discussion that may at the very least contribute to shaping attitudes. The political writers are often asked to give lectures--Edgar, Hare, and McGrath, for example, have all spoken at Cambridge University. As a result of Destiny's success Edgar was asked to contribute articles on neofascism to political journals and since then has become a frequent speaker and writer on political issues as well as on theater. Political theater causes debate on the political pages of newspapers as well as on the theater pages. Peter Jenkins, in his political column in The Guardian, attempted to decry the value of political plays. Writing about Maydays he recalled Destiny and its predictions about the rise of neofascists and scornfully asked, "and what became of that?"² However, the New York Times, some three months later on February 1, 1984, reported on a BBC-TV news program, Panorama, in which fascist connections in the Conservative Party were exposed. Members of Parliament were named, and "two of them were seen goose-stepping outside a hotel in West

¹Alexander Tairov, Notes of a Director, quoted by Kirby, "On Political Theatre," p. 132.

²Peter Jenkins, "How to Play around with the Politics of Fantasy," The Guardian, 26 October 1983.

Berlin on a recent visit."¹ It seems that Edgar's warnings had validity.

Although Destiny could not kill fascism, five years after its first production it still provokes reaction in the national press. Maydays, similarly, is provoking discussion far beyond the theater pages. If nothing else, such plays serve the valuable function of recording the political and social climate of a given time.

John Calder, writing in 1978, summarizes the British situation:

The strength of the current school of political drama is that it is sophisticated enough to know that both systems are bad, and that no-one has the answer, and honest enough to expose the weaknesses of even the best intended paths to an honest society.

The strength of our political theatre lies in its negative attitude. It does not posit any ideal or even reasonable society, but criticizes the society we have, exposing its weaknesses, dangers and inhumanities. Piecemeal improvement is the best we can hope for, not grandiose visions, and as such, valid political dialogue can take place in the theatre.²

He concludes:

The role of the theatre seems to me to be nicely calculated to disturb its audience out of its political apathy in what is once again a highly voluble political age.³

Edgar has continuously experimented with dramatic form and political content in order to disturb his many audiences out of their apathy and expose the weaknesses of society. At first one play would cover a multitude of political issues. The recent plays deal in detail with one main issue and its many complexities. Initially Edgar rejected realistic forms, feeling that theater could not challenge television and film in

¹Jon Nordheimer, "Battle Flares on Tories and Neo-Fascists," New York Times, 1 February 1984, p. A3.

²Calder, "Political Theatre," p. 11.

³Ibid.

that area. Later he developed a form of realism, influenced by cinematic techniques, that was free enough to call on any theatrical technique that would serve. At first Edgar presented cartooned or stereotyped characters. Occasionally he ventured into characterization, minimally in Acid, somewhat more in The National Interest, and Eileen in Baby Love is his first fully rounded character. In the social realist plays and the adaptations he commits himself to more complex characterization, exemplified in Maydays and its portrayals of the pulls of private needs and public commitments.

Edgar has consistently demonstrated an amazing ability with language. He can invent a strange form (Blood Sports); he can write in iambic pentameter (Dick Deterred) or other verse forms (Destiny); in the agitprop and documentary plays he wrote lyrics for the many songs; he can write comedy routines; in addition he is adept at realistic character-rooted dialogue, including dialect.

The litanies of facts, which perhaps limited his audience in the early plays, gave way to complex critical analyses of society, broadened and made more accessible by his increased emphasis on characterization. At the same time, though always guided by factual knowledge, the exchanges seemed to free his own original dramatic imagination, exemplified in Destiny and Maydays.

Initially Edgar avoided the emotional engagement of his audience, especially with the polemical qualities of the agitprop and documentary plays. In the social realist and more mimetic plays, he begins to call for growing levels of emotional engagement along with the consistent intellectual demands. The first example is Baby Love. Saigon Rose

demands some such engagement and Teendreams considerably more. All of his adaptations enlist high levels of emotional involvement. In Maydays Edgar has trusted this involvement not to diminish the power of his highly political play, allowing us to understand his characters emotionally as well as intellectually, adding substance to his analysis of their political choices. The first experiment with combining realism with hard-line politics had been in Operation Iskra (1973).

As Edgar has called for levels of emotional engagement from the audience, a more mimetic quality has gone hand in hand with the less polemical tones. He seems to have developed a greater objectivity and a broader perspective on his characters and events, as is exemplified in the international dimensions of Maydays. The mimetic quality and broader perspective are part of an increasing harmony between his political theses and his dramatic methods, with the resultant appeal to a wider audience.

With total assurance one can say that Edgar never has written, and probably never will write, escapist drama. He has never wavered from his early statement that the modern theater "must take our times by the throat."¹ He has written about ecology, feminism, the arms race, industrial problems, racism, fascism, socialism, and many pieces of specific legislation, attempting, in Irving Wardle's words, "to penetrate the befogged workings of our society, enlisting the audience's assent through fact and open debate."² He has mastered the art of scrutinizing the adversary and its motives, engaging his audience's attention, an audience that may not go out and start a revolution,

¹Vinson, Contemporary Dramatists, p. 236, quoting Edgar.

²Wardle, "Gulag Lobby," p. 8.

but one that will leave the theater with something to worry about.

I have tried to evoke the effect of Edgar's plays and his evolving dramaturgical methods. In the end what is most vital about Edgar's work is his unquestioning commitment to the lot of humanity, with its mistakes and its possibilities, and the belief that theater is a living forum in which to express that commitment.

Appendix I

DAVID EDGAR'S STAGE PLAYS (in chronology of writing, with dates and companies of first production)

- Two Kings of Angel, Bradford University, July 1970.
- A Truer Shade of Blue, Bradford University, August 1970.
- Bloody Rosa, Manchester University at the Edinburgh Festival, August 1971.
- Acid, Bradford University, July 1971, and the Edinburgh Festival, August 1971.
- Still Life: Man in Bed, Pool Theatre, Edinburgh, May 1971.
- The National Interest, General Will on tour, August 1971.
- Conversation in Paradise, Edinburgh University, October 1971.
- Tedderella, Pool Theatre, Edinburgh, December 1971.
- The Rupert Show, General Will on tour, January 1972.
- The End, Bradford University, March 1972.
- Excuses Excuses, Belgrade Theatre Studio, Coventry, May 1972.
- Rent or Caught in the Act, General Will on tour, May 1972.
- Not With A Bang But A Whimper, Leeds Polytechnic, November 1972
(based on Survivors, written for the Traverse Theatre Workshop).
- Gangsters, Soho Poly, February 1973.
- Road To Hanoi (ten-minute play) as part of Point 101, Paradise Foundry, October 1972.
- State of Emergency, General Will on tour, and Edinburgh Festival August 1972.
- Death Story, Birmingham Repertory Theatre Studio, November 1972.
- Baby Love, Leeds Playhouse, March 1973.
- The Case of the Workers' Plane, Bristol New Vic, June 1973.
- Concorde Cabaret (a shortened version of The Case of the Workers' Plane), Avon Touring Company, January 1975.
- Liberated Zone, Bingley College of Education, June 1973.
- Operation Iskra, Paradise Foundry on tour and at the King's Head Theatre, London, September 1973.

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Dick Deterred, Bush Theatre, London, February 1974.

Man Only Dines, Leeds Polytechnic, June 1974.

The Dunkirk Spirit, General Will on tour, January 1974.

The All-Singing All-Talking Golden Oldie Rock Revival Ho Chi Minh Peace Love And Revolution Show, Bingley College of Education, March 1974.

O Fair Jerusalem, Birmingham Repertory Theatre Society, May 1975.

Destiny, Royal Shakespeare Company at the Other Place, Stratford-on-Avon, September 1976; The Aldwych Theatre, London, May 1977.

Blood Sports, Birmingham Arts Lab (as Summer Sports), July 1975; Bush Theatre, London (as Blood Sports), July 1976; Royal Shakespeare Company at Newcastle (Ball Boys), April 1977.

Events Following the Closure of a Motorcycle Factory, Birmingham Repertory Theatre Studio, February 1976, and a local tour.

Saigon Rose, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, July 1976.

The Perils of Bardfrod (revue written with Richard Crane), Theatre in the Mill, Bradford University, November 1976.

Wreckers, 7:84 Company England, on tour, February 1977.

Mary Barnes, Birmingham Repertory Theatre Studio, August 1978.

Our Own People, Pirate Jenny on tour, and at the Half Moon Theatre, London, November 1977.

The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs, Royal Shakespeare Company at the Warehouse, London, June 1978.

Teendreams, Monstrous Regiment, January 1979.

Nicholas Nickleby, Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre, London, June 1980.

Maydays, Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican, October 1983.

COLLABORATIONS:

England's Ireland, with Tony Bicat, Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, Francis Fuchs, David Hare, and Snoo Wilson. Shoot, an offshoot of Portable Theatre, September 1972.

A Fart For Europe, with Howard Brenton. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, January 1973.

Up Spaghetti Junction (Edgar contributed a sketch on the Chamberlain family). Birmingham Repertory Theatre, February 1973.

Appendix II
INTERVIEW WITH DAVID EDGAR[†]

ES: Trevor Nunn asked you to adapt Nicholas Nickleby. How long was there between the invitation and the start of work?

DE: Two weeks. I was over here [Mary Barnes was in production at the Long Wharf Theatre]. In one of those decisions which one is fairly glad one made, I said, "All right." I was excited at working with a company and I was very excited about working with Trevor. It was, to that extent, an offer I couldn't refuse. A lot of my political friends said, "Why are you doing this?" I rather resented that question. It would seem to me that if there were certain subjects which one couldn't deal with because they were ideologically irrelevant then there was something fundamentally wrong with the ideology. It didn't worry me to enter into a project in which I had no very clear idea of what my personal role would be. I knew it was going to be collaborative, which I like; a thing involving actors. I knew that Trevor's concern was with the social aspects of the novel, but that's what everybody always says, or would always say to me.

ES: Did you find it ideologically relevant when you got down to it?

[†]An edited and condensed version of my first interview with David Edgar, held in New York in September 1981, during previews of Nicholas Nickleby.

DE: That's the story of the next six months. I think, yes, I did. The novel is about a time of great technological change which was exciting but frightening. It's about a time in which industrialisation is breaking down old hierarchies and barriers but is leaving people rather open and naked and uncertain about how they relate one to another. It is very similar to our own time in that respect. It was also the first decade of the sense of infinite possibility through technology. In many ways my adaptation is about Charles Dickens at the age of twenty-six. The obvious example at the very end where I'm saying that the vision which Dickens presents in the last chapter is not the vision he presents in the rest of the novel, a world in which everything can be solved by £12,000 and a nice little house with ivy on it in the country. To a certain extent that idea is in the novel. The very last line speaks about Nicholas' and Kate's children playing in the graveyard and speaking softly when they thought of their dead cousin. That's a lot softer than what we're doing. In a way it was a process of discovery.

ES: Did you go into rehearsal the same day as the actors?

DE: Yes.

ES: Did you know how long the play was going to be at that point?

DE: No. It must have been not much before Christmas that we decided it had to be more than one part. [After about a month of rehearsal.]

ES: Was there ever any question about doing the whole novel?

DE: No. The whole idea was to have that number of characters. As soon as you start seriously cutting the plot you lose the reason for

doing the show.

ES: Did you see the film adaptation?

DE: Coincidentally, it was shown last Christmas, after we'd done it. We saw some other films: Lean's Oliver Twist, the David Copperfield. It was helpful for the company in the sense that you could see all the mistakes, but fundamentally it was a group treat.

ES: Did you read any old stage adaptations?

DE: We found a couple of the ones that were written before Dickens had finished writing; one in which Smike inherits a fortune and suddenly gets a great deal better; another which ends with Smike's death and doesn't finish off Ralph; all sorts of complicated ones--one where Newman Noggs releases him from the Snawleys. Miss La Creevy doesn't appear in any of them. There's one little play which is written just about the "gentleman in small clothes"--a curtain-raiser.

ES: Could you describe the work process from your points of view?

DE: I sat around for about four or five weeks, watching and contributing to what was going on. Then I wrote three scenes: the Mulberry Hawk dinner party and the first two Dotheboys Hall scenes.

ES: You were not dealing with the novel in sequence?

DE: No. We thought it would be interesting to work out how to work from the text. The fourth one was the first Crummles scene. We took those scenes and started playing with them. We swapped around and each of us (Nunn, Caird, Rubin, and Edgar) directed another scene with different people. Then I wrote some more scenes. Gradually we slid into the situation where you make the kinds of discoveries you make in rehearsal. Then it was cast.

ES: Were you in on the decisions?

DE: To a certain extent. I was present when those decisions were made. Then we had a six-week break. I wrote in England for a week and then came over here because Mary Barnes was at the Long Wharf. I continued to write in the Howard Johnson's in New Haven. I went back, did a bit more, and then we reassembled in Newcastle with, in effect, Part One written. Good God! I had written a version of every scene.

ES: When did you decide to include narrative passages?

DE: That came very early. We worked on the passage when Nicholas wanders around London at dawn and is depressed by the amount of misery around him. One of the functions of the first draft was to experiment with the incident in the first Dotheboys Hall scene when Nicholas turns out front and says, "the boy put his hands to his head and shrinking from his master turned and broke into a kind of smile." That one line provoked an hour's collective discussion on why can't the actor show it? I should add that before I left in January to do the writing I'd drawn up two things: an outline of what I felt the play was about, what I thought the two parts would be about, and a plan of what order the scenes would go in. The order was based on the principle of putting the whole of the Mantalini plot in Part One, though it goes on in the novel, and the other was putting the Mulberry Hawk plot in Part Two. We did change that and put the first scene and the dinner party with Kate at the end of the first part. The break decision was Trevor's. He said we must end the first part on a high Crummlesian moment. The other structural decision, and you could say it was mine, was to connect a financial plot. We were very worried about the £10,000 which Ralph suddenly loses in a great

crash, but it is never explained. I wanted to have a running £10,000 which would start with the muffin company, be lent to Lord Verisopht, and then be lost by Ralph because Lord Verisopht is shot. This isn't in the book.

ES: You have also combined Dickens's characters of Gregsbury and Pupker.

DE: It seemed silly to have two pompous M.P.s.

ES: Did you plan to use a lot of music from the start?

DE: Yes. The form of the music took some time to develop, and I think that Stephen Oliver [the composer] and I both now feel that we could have used music in a more exciting way. For example, the little sequence "a broad fine honest son" on the road to Portsmouth: the company breaks into song with a Dickensian lyric backing up what's happening. That was a very exciting and more radical use than the rest, which is essentially wonderful incidental music, plus a few set-piece songs.

ES: Did you have a concept of the set in mind?

DE: No. In fact the set was exactly not what I had in mind. I had been thinking of something much more conventional. There were no doors, and the novel was full of doors.

ES: Are you happy with the result?

DE: Delighted. I was also very slow to cotton on to the idea of people being on all the time and the kind of collective spirit, as opposed to collective narrative.

ES: How did that evolve?

DE: Trevor had the idea, I think, or Trevor and John had the idea. One of the problems I had was that neither of them work with

living writers very often. Trevor, I think not for twenty years. Quite often they would have a very fine concept which they wouldn't get around to telling people. In a sense I was writing a lot of the script for a different kind of show than subsequently happened.

ES: What about the physical scenes--the coach, Smike running away from London--did you have any vision of that?

DE: By that stage, particularly the stuff in the second half, I realised it was foolish and inappropriate to think about the narrative, apart from writing it.

ES: As a socialist writer, how do you feel about the \$100 ticket?

DE: I think there are huge dangers to a seat price that automatically excludes a young and enthusiastic audience, or elements of an enthusiastic audience. It can only be regarded as a regrettable necessity in order to allow the show to come here at all.

ES: You have said that "theatre must be ideological and be proud of it" and "theatre must take our times by the throat." How would you apply these statements to Nicholas Nickleby?

DE: I think the achievement of Nicholas Nickleby, if you like, in ideological terms is threefold. First of all, it looks at adaptations in a new way. It says that a group of people with a strong view about the world, can take a work of art and frame it and transform it in a way that makes the adaptation one not of the original work of art, but about the original work of art. Point two is that it has proved to be a genuine piece of popular theatre. It's accessible; it's not obscure. It's art, it's highbrow stuff, and it's culture, but the response we've had has

been a wonderful popular response. The third point is that it was the only show, with the possible exception of Accidental Death of an Anarchist, on in a large London theatre, which was on the side of the underdog for the entirety of its not inconsiderable length. It's a show which is highly ambivalent about riches, highly antagonistic towards moneymaking, in favor of schoolboys against schoolmasters, in favor of employees against employers, in many respects, in favor of actors against directors, in favor of women against men, and servants against masters.

ES: You have made the women spunkier than they are in the novel.

DE: The problem was twofold. The young women in the book are unplayable, I think. For example, Madeline Bray, in the scene of her greatest crisis, where she's about to be married to Arthur Gride, spends the entire scene upstairs in a dead faint. The only time she appears in the centre of the stage in the novel is when she's carried out. However, what those girls do is really spunky, and is considerably spunkier than the dialogue Dickens gives them. He often puts Kate's more militant remarks, particularly against her mother, in reported speech. In fact it's very easy to put those remarks in the mouth of Kate in a way that would be quite suitable. The second problem was with the "grotesques," particularly Fanny. I think that Fanny's a tragic figure and tried to indicate that in the writing. The same thing with Miss Knag and some of the other "grotesque" women. I wanted to try to understand them, to find a way of explaining to a modern audience how somebody could have got like that. I don't think I was very successful with Miss Knag. But I think with Fanny I was reasonably successful.

ES: Were there special problems to adapting a novel that contains so much dialogue?

DE: The huge problem was not to enter every scene with "what in the novel can I combine with this, and how can I make it shorter?" What happened when I'd written the first draft was that everyone rushed up with their copies of the book saying, "I know we've got to be very careful about length, but there's this wonderful passage you've left out." And indeed, to a certain extent, the directors did as well. It was as though I started with one huge block of marble and then chipped it down to a slightly more manageable block of marble. Had we presented the first draft of both parts it would have been fourteen hours long.

ES: You have been quoted as saying that you "wanted to use our own theatre language to get the novel on the stage." Could you expand on this?

DE: The most glaring example is the third scene from the end of Part One, where Nicholas is rehearsing Smike as the apothecary. Nicholas says, "Ah, wretched night, etc." Kate is being bundled off to her uncle, and we hear the line, "My poverty but not my will consents," from Smike. Then, "Here is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls than you give me," is said either side of Mulberry Hawk. That use, filmic really, a theatrical form of a film cut, is one. Another is the double scene where the Madeline Bray plot is outlined. The cutting between those scenes is a fairly modern device, again largely drawn from film. At the very end is another--the ironic use of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." And the fluidity between dialogue and narration--literally hundreds, if not thousands of dramatic effects, in which one has taken what Dickens

wrote and represented it in a form that is within theatrical conventions that modern audiences understand. The way that the audience at the public meeting of the muffin company is in part the audience of the show. The double meaning when Sir Mulberry Hawk turns round from being about to shoot Nicholas in the wedding scene and says to Madeline Bray, "I'm sorry to have frightened you," and she says, "He's dead," and Mulberry Hawk says, "Yes, he's dead indeed," referring to somebody else. It's just modern playwriting. There is not a page in the script that is verbatim Dickens, nor should there be, nor, I suspect, would Dickens want there to be.

ES: Did you feel an affinity between Dickens's social purpose and your own social purpose?

DE: We all read the George Orwell essay. What Dickens is basically saying is that he is not a piecemeal reformer. He didn't believe that the solution to life's problems was a better Parliament. That has a good and a bad side. There is a phrase of Orwell's that all of us use--that Dickens was "generously angry." That's very attractive, and I also think it's very limited. I think Dickens's view avoids all kinds of issues, collapses very easily into sentiment. I think his "if in doubt how to end it, pack them off to the country" is a copout. I think the country is a kind of utopia, the kind of utopia that can only be painted by someone who has never lived in it. Thomas Hardy's country is very different. It is bloody and nasty, where people lose their teeth at the age of twenty-five. Dickens's is full of quaint old houses covered in ivy and happy children playing in churchyards. I think affinity would be wrong. I have a very strong sympathy. Dickens did

have an immense capacity for demonstrating clearly that he was presenting what should be rather than what is. I think the characters of Smike and the Cheerybles, in different ways, are what should be. If you view them that way, then they're real. If you view them as accurate portraits of real life ...

ES: Did Dickens mean that?

DE: No, I don't think he did. There is something in the last chapters about the way everything goes right for the good and goes wrong for the bad--Arthur Gride getting out of his comeuppance by getting a clever lawyer and then getting murdered in his bed. There is something in the writing which says he wouldn't have been murdered; he would have gone on to be Lord Chief Justice. I may be fanciful, but I have a feeling that Dickens knows when he's creating a fantasy and when he's not, especially when you think of the people who die. The whole discussion hasn't been approached with such brutal directness. I mean, I did develop a very strange relationship with him. There's no question that I felt I was defending him against the philistines, and I also felt that I understood what he was doing and the mistakes he was making. One did develop a relationship with him. That's my fourth copy of the book. The rest are in rapidly collapsing bits all over Newcastle, London, and Stratford. I know that book really very well. I therefore know its writer very well. We were born the same month. Even more freakily, I was conceived two doors further up Doughty Street, where he wrote it--and that is freaky. This is the stuff of dark nights. This is the stuff of one o'clock on a Sunday morning, half-way through the third scene of the Madeline Bray plot, and the end looked eight million miles away.

A black fantasy. This is what happens to people who work on their own a lot.

ES: Dickens was expressing what enraged him in the world. Is that what you do?

DE: Yes. The best review I've ever had was when Michael Billington said that, like Balzac, David Edgar seems to be a secretary for our times. And that defined, rather more precisely than I'd ever defined before, what I'd like to be. I'd like to be a secretary for the times through which I'm living. I'm an unreconstructed social realist, nineteenth-century social realist--or becoming one. In Bleak House Dickens is wonderfully and completely outraged by the law, and he writes a nine-hundred-and-sixty page novel to show that outrage. In Dombey and Son he's outraged not by patriarchy but by primogeniture ...

ES: As you are outraged by ... ?

DE: The rise of the National Front, if you like. I think he starts from this subject. He doesn't start from his stories.

ES: Do you do that, too?

DE: Certainly. Apart from the adaptations.

ES: You always research very thoroughly.

DE: And then I build a story to illustrate it. I can't think of a Dickens novel--Great Expectations, possibly--where he clearly started with a plot. Before Nickleby I wasn't a Dickens fan. It's actually been a voyage of discovery.

ES: How do you view the result?

DE: The project was to fill a London theatre with a thousand sophisticated, cosmopolitan, cynical, laid-back, late-seventies, trendy

people and make them cry, laugh, hiss, and boo. The key thing was to see that they burst into tears three times; that they were genuinely horrified, saddened, and catharsised by the death of Ralph, Ralph Nickleby, the stage villain-uncle to end all stage villain-uncles. The most important thing to get right was the death of Smike. There's no question that one of the most satisfying moments on the first Saturday that we put the whole show together was to look behind you up into the dress circle and see little white flags of kleenex waving at you in surrender. By bringing this show to New York the very least we are doing is, as it were, putting on the agenda of New York theatre the possibility that you can be popular and serious and social at the same time. We have also brought into New York the idea that forty people can get together and collectively create an experience that is collectively presented and collectively enjoyed. We've also got across the idea that there is no limit to the size of subjects that can be dealt with on the stage. It would be lovely to be able to do it for five dollars, but we have been informed that arithmetic doesn't work that way.



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