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Arnold Wesker (1932-2016)

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One of the foremost playwrights of his generation, Arnold Wesker is considered something of an outsider in England, an assertion made by critics Ronald Bryden in 1966 and Michael Billington in 2000. Wesker is never where the audience, or the Establishment, expects him to be. He is not an agent provocateur, but a writer for whom words should be bridges, meant to prompt action. Acclaimed for his first five plays, his trademark experimentation with style has created some resistance from critics and public alike. He has written 44 plays to date, as well as short stories, film and television scripts, poetry and the essays collected in *Fears of Fragmentation*, which describe his vision of Centre 42, *Distinctions* and *Wesker on Theatre*. He is currently finishing his first novel. However, only two of his plays (*Caritas*, 1980, and *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, 1976) have been produced at the National Theatre. In addition, his chance at a Broadway opening foundered with the death of Zero Mostel, the star actor in *Shylock* (1976), his version of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Wesker refuses categorisation. He rejected the various tags that emerged in the late 1950s - Angry Young Man, kitchen-sink writer, naturalist dramatist, working-class author - since they would give a stagnant image of his work. He views himself as a free spirit and explains the versatile quality of his plays by the fact that he lets his "material […] dictate its own inherent style" ("What makes a work of literature last through time").

Arnold Wesker was born on 24 May 1932 in the Jewish working-class neighbourhood of Stepney, in the East End of London. His parents, Joseph and Leah, respectively of Russian and Hungarian origin, as well as his elder sister Della, were the acknowledged models for the Kahns, the central characters of his masterpiece, Trilogy (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, 1958; *Roots*, 1959; *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*, 1960). He was evacuated a number of times during the war and returned to London in 1943. He completed his education at a Central School in Hackney where he learnt book-keeping, typing and shorthand. At the age of thirteen, he organised a school concert for which he also wrote, directed and acted in his first play. In 1948, he was accepted by RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) but had to forsake his thespian aspirations when he had failed to secure a grant. Instead, he began an apprenticeship in furniture making, an experience that is related in *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*. Subsequently he spent his two years of National Service in the RAF, a predicament which inspired *Chips with Everything* (1961). In 1952, he turned to the restaurant trade and met his future wife, Doreen (Dusty) Bicker, in Norfolk, the setting for *Roots* and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*. He moved to Paris in 1956 to work as a pastry-chef, and this too found its way to the stage, in his first play, *The Kitchen* (1957), written for *The Observer* Play Competition. Upon his return to London in 1957, he entered the London School of Film Technique, where he met film director Lindsay Anderson. Anderson brought his second play, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, to the attention of George Devine, the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre. Premiered at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, as part of a celebration of repertory theatres, *Chicken Soup with Barley* was transferred to the Court where it proved a critical and commercial success. The production marked the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between Wesker and director John Dexter.

Despite his refusal to be pigeonholed as a proponent of the genre, Wesker was the champion of kitchen-sink drama: literally, his early plays are predominantly set in a kitchen - where, in *Roots*, Beatie Bryant cooks, cleans, teaches her mother about "high" culture, and takes a bath. In most of his plays, food is meticulously prepared and offered by characters to one another as a means of

communication. In *Men Die Women Survive* (1990), the tripartite sequencing of the women's evening together is structured by the three courses they prepare. In *When God Wanted a Son* (1986), words appear to be walls separating Joshua, a consumate rhetorician, and his ex-wife Martha. In an ultimate attempt to establish communication, Martha bakes a cake for him. By refusing to guess the ingredients she uses, he denies her voice as effectively as she, through her inability to pronounce the word "Jew", denies his identity. Wesker's lasting belief in the power of communication, whether to discover one's own voice (like Beatie in *Roots*) or to cement bonds (in *The Old Ones*, 1970), lends his writing a unifying quality that pervades such diverse works as the intimate monodrama *Four Portraits - of Mothers* (1982) or the community play *Beorhtel's Hill* (1988).

Wesker's inspiration is very much grounded in his own life and personal interests as well as his social environment. His work is didactic in intention: communication, knowledge/education, a tension between hope and disillusionment, an idealised equation between socialism and caring, are familiar Weskerian concerns. Because of his constant reflection on these themes through different literary styles (naturalism, symbolism, Brechtian episodes, *théâtre trouvé*, etc), one cannot define clear aesthetic periods in his writing; yet, dividing lines may be considered in relation to key moments of his career (Centre 42 and *Shylock*).

He is still mostly known throughout the world as the author of the Trilogy, which has left the bulk of his work in the critical shade. Set between 1936 and 1959, these three plays present the social, cultural and political beliefs and disillusionments of the Kahns - a Jewish working-class family from the East End of London. Admittedly autobiographical in content, they are linked by the character of Ronald, the Wesker figure, though he is by no means the central character. *Chicken Soup with Barley* follows Sarah Kahn's family from the enthusiastic rebellion against the fascist Oswald Mosley's march in 1936, through the expectations created by the 1945 Labour victory, to the bleak aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Despite the apathy of her husband and the ideological and geographical desertion of her children, Sarah continues to uphold her faith in communism. In this play, food equates with communication for the first time, the eponymous chicken soup becoming a symbol for caring within a community: "When Ada had diphteria […] it was Mrs Bernstein who saved her. It was Mrs Bernstein's soup. Ada still has that taste in her mouth - chicken soup with barley. She says it is a friendly taste." As her political hopes turn into utopia, Sarah reasserts this fundamental image in Wesker's work, which will be described in *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*, that "if you don't care you'll die".

Roots remains the most popular of the Trilogy, possibly because it is the only one that concludes with optimism. Set in Norfolk, it deals with the self-discovery of Beatie, Ronald's fiancée. She returns to her rural background and expects to introduce him to her parents. As he has educated her in his intellectual London circle, she attempts to teach her family the values of "high" culture. When he ends the relationship, Beatie breaks down under her personal sorrow as well as her family's attack against her newly found precepts. Beatie reacts to both rejections by finding her own voice.

In *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*, Wesker presents the failure of the socialist experiment of Ada, Sarah's daughter, and her husband Ralph. Disillusioned by the absence of socialist brotherhood in London at the opening of the play, they then must acknowledge that industrialisation crushes individual craftsmanship even in rural communities. Isolated from their families, both geographically and psychologically, they have no choice but to return to London, their vision proving as utopian as Sarah's. Yet, Ronald/Arnold's ultimate plea resonates through Wesker's work: "Even if visions don't work then for God's sake, let's try and behave as though they do - or else nothing will work."

The two other plays that established Wesker as a prominent voice in British theatre form chronological parentheses to the Trilogy. Despite Devine's lukewarm appreciation for Wesker, his first five plays were staged at the Royal Court and were essential to the theatre's commercial success. *The Kitchen*, written in 1957, first exemplifies Wesker's writing technique of moulding personal

experience into a dramatic shape. Set in one day in the kitchen of a restaurant, *The Kitchen* is a metaphor for society: the numbing routine of the shifts, alliances and dislikes, workers of various nationalities, yearnings and conflicts. Hence, its premiere at the Royal Court Theatre, directed by John Dexter in 1959, emphasised both the naturalistic quality of the dialogue and the stylised symbolism of the working environment and characters' motions. A timeless vision of the human condition, *The Kitchen* remains Wesker's most successful play internationally as it continues to be performed every year somewhere around the globe.

In *Chips with Everything*, Wesker returns to a microcosmic vision, set in an alien and alienating army camp, for a study of the dichotomy between the ruled and their rulers. The action takes place over eight weeks and is structured in Brechtian episodes that allow for highlights into the life of the conscripts. For the critics who had seen Wesker as a social realist the stylisation of the piece was surprising but their rave reviews contributed to the lasting appeal of the play. In view of these first plays, Wesker is all too often described as limiting his scope to class conflict, either from a working-class perspective or a bourgeois one in his late career. That, however, is merely a shortcut to understanding his work.

In the 1960s, Wesker sprang into political action to oppose the cultural apathy of the Conservative government with the foundation of Centre 42. The aim was to create a cultural hub, an arts centre where the best in the arts was available for a working-class audience. Wesker envisaged socialism as "a way of living": he suggested artistic projects and the active involvement of local trade unions through an inquiry into the state of the arts. The idea that the arts should be recognised in community life was framed as a resolution - number 42 on the agenda. Adopted by the Trades Union Congress in 1960, it became the starting point for the artists Wesker had gathered (among whom Doris Lessing, Shelagh Delaney and John McGrath, whose 7:84 theatre company was inspired by Centre 42). Centre 42, directed by Wesker, devised one festival in 1961 and six the following year, at the invitation of trade union councils. He refused to tour further festivals in 1963 and 1964 because of financial difficulties. He wanted Centre 42 to have a base, at the Roundhouse in North London. Though he expected the support of Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and of the first Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee, the conversion and running of the Roundhouse was not financially viable and demanded, from Wesker's perspective, too many compromises. In 1970, Wesker resigned and dissolved Centre 42. Wilson's acknowledgement of Wesker's role was to offer him a CBE, which Wesker turned down, asking for practical support instead.

The experiment and ultimate demise of Centre 42 not only reverberates through Wesker's plays but also fed his ambivalent attitude towards socialism. During the ten years he devoted to the task, Wesker wrote only two plays (notwithstanding *The Nottingham Captain*): *The Four Seasons* (1965) and *Their Very Own and Golden City* (1966). Both bear directly on Centre 42, respectively from a private and a public/political viewpoint, while they allowed Wesker to explore different styles. In four parts, from winter to autumn, *The Four Seasons* describes the birth and death of the relationship between Adam and Beatrice in an isolated cottage. Stylised in structure, "pseudo-romantic" in language, and displaying no action other than the baking of a cake, this story of repeated emotional failures met with hostile reviews. Its companion piece, *Their Very Own and Golden City*, directed by Gaskill in 1966 at the Royal Court, received poor notices. The allegory of the six cities that Andy wants to build with the support of trade unions remains, like Centre 42, a utopia, a vision that was born in the character of young Andy in the soaring architecture of the Durham cathedral.

After his alienation from the Labour Party in the late 1960s, Wesker's theatre seemed to favour individual lives to the class struggle he had already so vividly portrayed. Wesker's socialism, as John McGrath and Kenneth Tynan suggested, is more emotional than intellectual. *Their Very Own and Golden City* (1966) and *The Friends* (1970) illustrate his political disillusionment as a personal failure. To the critics who reproached him for developing a bourgeois stance, notably in *The*

Friends and *Denial* (2000), he explained in his autobiography that he still believed the socialist principles were workable but "felt those principles had been betrayed, never allowed to show if they could work". The idea of utopia, whether social or personal, permeates his work. His later plays convey a diminished sense of his quest, an acknowledgement that dreams and reality cannot coexist. Therefore, the resilient ability of his characters to survive in hostile circumstances accounts for the more optimistic tone of later plays, such as *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon* (1986). Wesker evaded the contradiction of being committed to both socialism and humanism by exploring relationships where the two concepts could complement each other.

With characteristic tongue-in-cheek humour, he wrote on the occasion of his fortieth birthday a fake interview in an attempt to put right what interviewers had got wrong. The list of the themes he had explored – "time passing, engaging of energies to some purpose, procession of mistakes weakening those energies and confusing that purpose, fear of unreason, need for a reverence of knowledge" - provides two keys to his work. On the one hand, it points unjustly to the notion of a theatre of despair: the narrative of *The Friends*, for instance, is woven around the death of a character and bears the mark of Centre 42 in the fact that the friends' six shops have failed to appeal to the working class. On the other hand, it conveys an insight into the Jewish quality of his writing. A typically Jewish trait, belief "in the power of reason", is qualified as both a strength and a downfall. His reverence of knowledge is also an expression of his regret for not having a university education. It is shown by the large number of teachers in his plays. *Shylock* is both the most admired and the most representative of this fear of ignorance. The "cesspit breeding inferiority complexes out of which creeps hatred of what is unknown, mob violence against what is different" is translated in *The Old Ones* through the tension between optimism and pessimism.

In *The Journalists*, Wesker explores the scenic possibilities allowed within a structural form of episodes and tableaux. The play, initially commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, was never staged because its actors refused to perform. The dispute escalated into an eight-year lawsuit, which was settled out of court. Following this trauma, Wesker rekindled his interest in narrative theatre in a depiction of utopian relationships between employer and employees. In 1977, the provincial opening of his comedy *The Wedding Feast* (written in 1974) was acclaimed by the critics but the play's transfer to the London stage was cut short for managerial reasons.

Unlike Osborne, who had inspired Wesker to write his first play, Wesker's plays since the 1970s are testimonies of an actively creative writing force. Though he might have been disregarded by the critics, his work bears evidence of his experiments with styles and themes, be it in problem plays like *Shylock* and *Badenheim 1939* (1987) or works that borrow a fragmentary Brechtian structure like *The Journalists* and *Beorhtel's Hill* (1988). Wesker's eclectic writing is no doubt responsible for his lack of commercial and critical success. However, through his six one-woman plays he completed a coherent exploration of womanhood between 1982 and 1990. Realistic in content (though the style varies from Absurd to naturalistic), they deal with women's quest for identity - especially during the Thatcher premiership - their strength, moral issues (or lack of) and sense of humour in adverse circumstances. Despite their apparent monological form, the plays are dialogues with Wesker's unfaithful audience and scathing critics. The feminine voice of Betty Lemon, voted Handicapped Woman of the Year at the opening of *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon*, is ferociously defiant as to her own crippled state and political beliefs. Annabella, the novelist in *Annie Wobbler* (1982), portrays the three voices - humble, boastful, truthful - of Wesker as a writer, dreading each response to his new work. Most of these plays were performed on London stages and welcomed by the critics. To this series, Wesker added in 2003 *Letter to Myself*, a companion piece to *Letter to a Daughter* (1990).

In *Groupie*, written in 2001 and broadcast in 2004, Wesker's talent reaches its epitome as it blends recurrent themes into a chaste love story between two misfits. The play links his concern with words and their reception through an epistolary opening between the two characters, Mattie - a 61-year old

energetic woman - and Mark Gorman - Wesker's self-portrait as a once famous, now reclusive painter. The initial pretext for their relationship is that they grew up in the same London neighbourhood. Their very different personalities soon clash but eventually mingle through a series of conflicts and reconciliations: she giving him hope and inspiration to work again; he introducing her to art and her own femininity. In this moving vision of loneliness, ageing, and disappointed prospects, Wesker relinquished a utopian quest for the more urgent and intimate need to create human connections.

Longitude (2002) – his commissioned adaptation of Dava Sobel's best-seller – premiered in Greenwich in 2005. In this epic play and a 'Hogarthian' setting, carpenter John Harrison completes the first sea clock but is never awarded the prize promised by Parliament. Wesker returns not only to a more ample cast and Brechtian techniques, but also to the familiar and here lifelong conflict of the individual against the Establishment.

His final work *Joy and Tyranny* (2010) feels like a testament play, ending as it does with the words, 'Talk. Always *say* it. Something is remembered'. In addition it is a play that revisits familiar themes – predominantly violence – and brings together characters and fragmented narratives from previous plays (Betty Lemon, *The Journalists*, *When God Wanted a Son*, *Men Die Women Survive*). In this ensemble Wesker introduces the film medium as in scene 1, the gesture of the bully punching his schoolmate is morphed into 'the plane crashing into the Twin Towers'. While many of his plays contained a detailed musical score, *Joy and Tyranny* is defined as a musical piece itself, 'arias and variations on the theme of violence'. In this play which opens and closes on a different explosion, Wesker brings together motifs and voices for us to remember his words.