

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Arnold Wesker – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Playwright, born 1932, on his recollections of working in the theatre.

EJ: My first question is: can you give me a general overview of your experience of theatre life in the fifties and sixties, were you influenced by particular plays of the time?

AW: I'm afraid the answer to that is very brief and simple. I didn't go to theatre. We couldn't afford theatre, cinema is what I went to. I went on a couple of occasions when I think my elder sister for my edification took me to see *Red Roses for Me* by Sean O'Casey. And I obviously didn't know what was happening so we left halfway through as I was very bored. So, no, I didn't go to theatre, but I was an amateur actor. I belonged to a very good group in the East End of London called the Query Players run by a woman, who, had she been operating many, many years later would have been a first-rate professional director, Pat Burke. So my experience of theatre was derived mainly through performing in this amateur company. Except that I listened to theatre on radio. Radio was my teacher for many things: music, discussions, lectures and so I listened to plays on radio. But apart from that, no. One of the earliest that I remember is going to see *A Sleep of Prisoners* by Christopher Fry, and I was taken to that by someone I'd made friends with in the RAF during national service. And that was done in a church, at the back of Regents Street, I forget the name of the church but that was a revelation to see a play performed in a church, and a very fine play it was, too.

EJ: Could you tell me if you saw a conflict between theatre in London and the regional theatres? I ask this of course because of your *Trilogy* was premiered at the Belgrade in Coventry. Were you aware of a conflict at the time?

AW: No. You know, there's something about the beginning of ones career where one is kind of not aware of anything except that you've written a play, someone wants to do it and you're really very excited that it's actually going to happen, so I was aware that when I got off at the station at Coventry, I saw posters advertising my play and that was an incredible thrill and then I arrived at the theatre, there in the workshop people were hammering out sets because of something I'd written in an LCC flat a few years previously, so that's what struck me. No, it didn't occur to me that there was something slightly patronising about the Royal Court Theatre saying 'No, we don't feel strongly about *Chicken Soup with Barley*, but we'll let the Belgrade Theatre do it, they're going to bring a play to the Royal Court Theatre as part of a celebration of repertory theatres and there were four theatres that were bringing their productions to the Royal Court. And what the Belgrade Coventry wanted to do, the Royal Court didn't approve of, so they said "Look, why don't you do this play by a new young writer?" and Brian Bailey, who ran Coventry, leapt at it and it was the beginning of the career of John Dexter, who directed it, and myself. So, I didn't think there was anything wrong with that, I thought it was the way things happened, I do know that later on, I insisted that

my contracts with any London theatre had to have in it, that the repertory theatres should be given the opportunity to perform the play and open it just a day after the opening in London, so they shouldn't be treated as second-class citizens. Which is what - early on in my career I realised that's what they were feeling, that they were treated as second-class citizens because they weren't allowed to do any of the plays until it had been fully-exploited in London. But I must say that having argued for that and got the agreement from the Royal Court that that clause could go in the contract, very few regional theatres had the courage to do a new play, an untried play. So they may have been complaining that they were being treated as second-class citizens but in fact they also didn't have the courage to do new plays.

EJ: Were you slightly reticent when the Royal Court approached to put on the Trilogy subsequently, after it had been performed at the Belgrade?

AW: No. Not at all, I was delighted, why should I be reticent? They didn't put it on for long, you know, it was only on for about three weeks, a week for each play, but a great fuss was made of it, I mean a great fuss beyond what they actually did commercially. *Roots* was the only one of the three that transferred subsequently to the West End. And hit the hottest summer on record so no-one was going to the theatre. And it had to come off after a few weeks, but no, I was thrilled that the Court did the Trilogy. They should be reviving it again.

EJ: In terms of visiting contemporary theatre, the contemporary theatre experience, what would you isolate as the biggest difference from the theatre in the fifties and sixties, and the theatre today?

[LONG PAUSE]

AW: I don't know if I know enough about what's happening in the theatre today. The most deeply depressing thing that's happened in the theatre that I can think of is that an asinine musical like *Jerry Springer [The Opera]* has won the Best Musical of the Year at the London Evening Standard's Awards. So that's the only comparison I can make, but I've just had my old friend Mike Kustow here for lunch and he says there are lots of things he's seen that are really interesting, and there are things that I would like to see. But if you ask me do I even have a vague sense I would say it is I don't think today's theatres are as courageous as - they don't dare as much as theatre did before. But they may be absolutely untrue on closer inspection but I don't get sense that they're as - there's no excitement in the air about theatre as there was then.

EJ: You say in your autobiography that you and your contemporaries were not 'angry young men' but 'happy young men' due to their situation as successful playwrights. What was the political mood really like between writers in the fifties and sixties?...If I can generalise in that way?

AW: Well..they varied, I imagine...if you [LONG PAUSE] Osborne was very sceptical of groups. He was very English about political action. I mean, I don't think he ever went on an Aldermaston March. He gave his name to the Committee of A Hundred. But...I don't know if he ever marched. I may be wrong about that. But I don't have a memory of him being on a march. John Arden was very - wasn't that political to begin with but became so. When he became closer involved with Margaretta. And...I don't know. It's a very confused period and I know that academics are all the time trying to make it neat and put people in brackets but I...it was a very disparate group if you think about it...Wally Simpson with *One Way Pendulum*, his was really Theatre of the Absurd. I don't believe Harold Pinter is Theatre of the Absurd although he's been...I think he's a highly stylised Naturalist, and Ann Jellicoe was writing what was much more along with Wally Simpson, Theatre of the Absurd, but it wasn't really absurd, it was just kind of way out, it was

strangely structured and a strange language. But if you think about Osborne and myself, we were very conventional. Very conventional players. The structure of them, my first, my very first play was adventurous - The Kitchen - and the Court didn't do that until after the success of Roots. And then I think Their Very Own and Golden City and The Four Seasons went on to be inventive structurally. But apart from...aside from that we were very conventional. And I don't share the view that Look Back in Anger is a political play. I believe it's a love story, and that what...I mean not political in the broadest sense of the word, the crudest sense, it was a love story and his concerns were for the passing of old-fashioned values. Like friendship and loyalty and compassion, I mean his anger with what's her name. Jimmy Porter's anger with...the name of the wife...[LAUGHS] isn't that awful? Not Angeline, not Angelica...well anyway...his anger with his girlfriend was that she was cold towards the woman who had done so much for the two of them. The old woman who had the sweet stall. And that's what that play's about. Old-fashioned values. And he's looking back in anger because in looking back they was a sense of honourable values and he's angry that they're lost.

EJ: One thing I wanted to ask about politics...I don't want to simply focus on this but you say it was a very disparate group at the time. Did you feel part of something with them or did you feel an outsider as you've been described now as an outsider. Did you feel an outsider then?

AW: Er...no. I felt...I didn't...we.. there was this Writer's Group that George Devine was very keen we should all meet regularly and talk and it was really fun. It was very enjoyable and that created a sense of belonging to something. The Court itself gave a sense that this was our theatre, I mean even now when I walk into the Royal Court I feel very proprietorial about it. And...but...so no I didn't think...I certainly never wanted to be an outsider, it's only over the years that I realised that there was something very different about what I chose to write about and the way I wrote about it. So you know that after a play like Their Very Own And Golden City and after those early plays, I write a love story, The Four Seasons. And everybody is confused. But in a strange way...and I don't know if I've said this in the autobiography...in a strange way The Four Seasons could be said to be the play I really wanted to write from the beginning, but I had to get this autobiographical stuff off my chest.

EJ: Can I just ask you about the Writer's Group, because you mentioned this? You say in your autobiography that when it disbanded it had served its time, or words to that effect, do you feel it would be inappropriate now to set up such a group in today's climate or do you think that...what has changed?

[LONG PAUSE]

AW: The English aren't very good at belonging to groups, are they? I mean, it was, it was, I suppose it was always an uneasy group although...I think I may have enjoyed it more than anyone else, because I'd come from a very different milieu and it was taking place on the Moor, in a house on Hammersmith Moor. I'd never been in such a large Victorian house. No...it wasn't, it was Georgian, beautiful houses belonging to the Pipers and the Lusardas so...[PHONE RINGS] so...it was very new and attractive to me. But I don't know that...I don't think I can say whether it's right or wrong to put such a group together. A group happens because...because something beyond them is happening. You know, we were swept up by this interest in theatre, there's no doubt that Look Back in Anger really created a huge opening and nothing like that has happened, there's no play like Look Back in Anger that's really got people's feet tapping. I hugely admire that play, I think it's flawed, but which of our plays isn't?

EJ: Do you think, it took away, at the time, just following on from that, do you think it took away from the success of other plays, in some ways because it exploded onto the scene, that it compromised the other exciting drama at the time?

AW: Well I can't think of any that it might have inhibited, hampered, it certainly didn't hamper mine. Nor John Arden's [LONG PAUSE] No. But I don't know what else was being offered. There's a terrible cowardice in the theatre. [LAUGHS] It's a dreadful profession, I must tell you. It doesn't bring out the best in people. So people in theatre are always looking over their shoulder to see what was the last success and how did it happen and what were the ingredients. So it may well have been that people said "Oh well it's not quite like *Look Back in Anger*, is it?" But you know the English stage was not flooded at that time, it'd be very interesting to go back over the weeks and months and years and see what proportion of new plays were on in the West End and what proportion of musicals and revivals and I did this once...in...I can't remember which year, in the 70s, and there wasn't much difference. It was the same proportion of murders and mysteries and musicals to serious plays.

EJ: What were the setbacks that you encountered in your writing? What held you back when you were writing in the fifties and sixties?

AW: Nothing.

EJ: Nothing?

AW: No, nothing I can remember. There were plays I wanted to write and they came flooding.

EJ: Could I maybe ask you about setting up Centre Fortytwo and, it was a struggle, as I understand from your autobiography. What made you carry on in the face of this adversity, what drove you on?

AW: To carry on with Centre Fortytwo?

EJ: To secure the funding for it? Did you feel like giving up?

AW: [LONG PAUSE] Well. When you're young and you're being successful at something you feel as though you are capable of changing the world, doing anything so...I was very good at persuading people and people were very flattered that a famous playwright was approaching them for this that and the other. And they wanted to be part of something that was new. The history of Centre Fortytwo is yet to be written. And really needs to be written. I mean this would make a much more interesting project to see the impact of Centre Fortytwo, because I believe the whole of the artistic scene changed after Centre Fortytwo, it gave courage to all sorts of people and Arts Centres began built and...it was really...it hasn't had its due, as yet, Fortytwo as a movement. Which doesn't answer your question...what drove me...well just the energy of youth and the terrible belief that I could do it, but round about 1970 I realised I couldn't. It wasn't in me to make Centre Fortytwo happen. What's happening to the Roundhouse now is virtually what we wanted to do at Centre Fortytwo. The man who's...I don't know if you know what's happening to The Roundhouse at the moment? Well, it's had all sorts of lives. It was run by Thelma Holt at one point and she did productions...she brought in Japanese productions and she brought in a Russian production from Georgia and she made the place hum. And then it was given to the black community and some gangster was put in charge who ended up absconding with the funds. And then it was bought by a man called Torqueville Norman who was a millionaire toy manufacturer, who is a millionaire toy manufacturer and who wants to give back to young people something that he's got from them. So he's said about raising 20 million. He put in, I think, six million of his own and has raised the money and the place is now closed and

is undergoing these incredible renovations. And they're going to do what Centre Fortytwo wanted to do, which is to have a performing centre, have a relationship with the young people in the area, with the schools, open it to young people as well as to the adult population, it looks as though it's going to hum. You never know what's going to work until it has worked but certainly a lot of money's gone into it. But there. That's what drove me. A mixture of energy and belief that there was a popular audience for art. Not an audience for popular art - big difference - but a popular audience for the arts and if only we could get Centre Fortytwo at the Roundhouse working, then it would pup, it would be emulated and I had this dream of a network of Centre Fortytwos all over the country.

EJ: Do you think it would be easier or harder if you were starting from scratch to set something like that up today?

AW: Well, you mean if I was young again?

EJ: Well, I mean if you wanted -

AW: You mean not given my age?

EJ: Not given your age, just for one person to set that up, in today's climate, would it be easier or harder?

AW: I don't know that I know. At one level I think it would be harder because it's just more difficult to get people to put money into the Arts, on the other hand there's the Lottery which has put extraordinary amounts all over the place, I mean, I don't think we've quite woken up to what it is the Lottery has done. It still hasn't made great playwrights or great musicians but money can't do that. But...so it might be easier. Young people are doing things and getting money from the Lottery Fund, aren't they? All over? Are you getting any money from the lottery fund? For this project?

EJ: No.

AW: Where's your money coming from then?

EJ: The Arts and Humanities Research Board.

AW: The Arts and?

EJ: Humanities Research Board.

AW: What's that?

EJ: It funds projects in the Arts and Humanities. It was a grant from them.

AW: Well, where do they get their money from?

EJ: I'm not entirely sure.

AW: Well, they may get it from the Lottery.

EJ: Perhaps...I apologize for repeating myself here, I know we talked about this prior to the interview but what was your experience with censorship in the fifties and sixties, did you feel impeded in any way by the Lord Chamberlain?

AW: No, I just felt irritated. I know my colleagues were outraged but I couldn't share their outrage, I couldn't get really excited...deeply distressed because the Lord Chamberlain had asked me to change 'God Almighty'...'Jesus Christ' to 'God Almighty'. It was irritating. On the contrary, on reflection I realised that my play Chicken Soup With Barley which was about Communists, sympathetically drawn, could happen. There was no censorship of that, at a time when Communists were demonised. That that could happen was far more important to me than I had to change some silly words.

EJ: So you didn't feel any creative rush of freedom when it was taken away?

AW: No. No. Not at all.

EJ: OK, Something I was reading in the autobiography, John Osborne played the pastry chef in a production of the first act of *The Kitchen* with Laurence Olivier.

AW: Yeah, the fundraising-

EJ: Yes, what was your relationship with Osborne like?

AW: Curious. I always had an affectionate, soft spot for him. Because I felt that he'd opened the way, and it was *Look Back in Anger* that I saw that made me write *Chicken Soup With Barley*. So, I always felt this for him. And we would correspond intermittently. I have a collection of his postcards. His famous postcards in which he says crazy outrageous things. He always wanted me to come and visit him in Clun, in Shropshire, where he died, I think it was Shropshire. And I never did. And I slightly regret not having done so but...there was a part of me that felt that he was sort of...he was much more theatrical than me. I mean, he and Pinter were really theatre people, they enjoyed theatre company and I'm not very comfortable in theatre company and...therefore bitchy. He would speak bitchily about people. And I'm really not comfortable listening to people bitch about others and therefore that whole theatrical green room scene was...I didn't feel at ease with it. So I stayed away. But he used to have these enormous summer parties when he lived in Surrey, he had a house in Surrey. And the world came. Everybody came. It was very lavish. Champagne and food and things for the kids, 'Bring the kids!' he'd say and, and dogs. So it was difficult not to have an affection for him. I was...I felt critical about the plays as they came out one by one, but still he had a quality of passion that I think is missing from contemporary drama. It was a...it was a...what he's on record as saying is that 'I want people to feel, in the theatre, I want my plays to make people feel' and I understand that, but I don't think it's enough. They have to think as well. But I've always believed, and I don't know if I wrote this in my autobiography, but the reason why he had to feel is because he had a mother who had no feelings, and so feelings were very important to him. I mean, he looked after her, this mother, he was a very good son in the end and in his autobiographies, I don't know if you've read them, they're beautiful, elegant and moving, the critics said how awful he was about his mum but I don't think he was. I think that given the kind of feelingless woman that she was he was very good with her, understanding, he made explanations to excuse her behaviour but he never really forgave her because she didn't give him the love and emotion he wanted. So that's why I think he felt that. There was an occasion when I was very angry with him, when he came to see a play of mine, *The Old Ones*, he was married to Bennett at the time, Jill Bennett, and they were sitting behind us, and they left after the interval. And he should've known that this would distress me. He had every right not to like the play but there was something...I would never have done that to him.

EJ: Did you confront him about it?

AW: No, no.

EJ: So you don't know why he left?

AW: No...it was a very Jewish play, and John was very English. And I suspect that it was Jill. She wasn't a very pleasant lady. And I suspect she must have said something about "I don't want to see these dreadful foreign people on stage". And took her out. I don't know. That's just a hunch. But again, I forgave him for that.

EJ: What was he like to work with?

AW: I don't know. I've never worked with him.

EJ: So you had no input into this first act of *The Kitchen* ?

AW: No. Do you understand what it was? It was a fundraising thing. *The Kitchen* had already been performed on stage. George Devine had died and there was an attempt to raise money for the George Devine Award. And the way in which they decided to raise money was to take over the Old Vic and to have a first half full of excerpts of plays of the Court, and the whole of the second half would be a star-studded production of the first act. So it was not only John Osborne and Laurence Olivier, it was the old actress Sybil Thorndike, Vanessa Redgrave, I think it was even Glenda Jackson, and then there was Noel Coward. So it had nothing to do with - I wasn't there.

EJ: You say that 'the idea that conflict in life is rooted in a failure to communicate is one of the most fatuous notions to grow out of the sixties'. Could expand on this a bit, and do you think the theatre of the sixties propagated this view?

AW: Well, look, again, I'm not a scholar, I'm not an academic, I haven't investigated this in depth. I'm talking as an observer of the scene. And people talked a lot about the failure, people failing to communicate, and that's what Harold Pinter's plays are about, the failure of communication. And I just thought, well actually the reverse happens. I think people fight each other because they communicate their dislike and hatred of each other only too well. People have a...they smell each other out. They just have an instinct about other people that...people do communicate. They may not say the words but they communicate something. And you know whether you want to spend time with someone or whether you don't want to spend time with them. So, I...I just think people make easy and facile statements. To explain things, and I didn't think that carried weight. It didn't seem to carry the weight people attributed to it.

EJ: Do you find that people find that people make the same generalisations about your work - does that irritate you?

AW: Oh yes, I mean, incredibly silly things are said. Just off the top of my head, I mean, I won't mention names but I had someone send me what she had written as her contribution of me to a collection of mini-portraits of Jewish writers. And she said very nice things about me, got facts wrong, but you know people always do, she said that *Roots* had difficulty being performed abroad because its main impact was the use of Norfolk dialect. Which is incredible nonsense, because factually *Roots*, apart from *The Kitchen*, which, curiously, is my most performed play abroad, *Roots* is the next, I mean there are productions of *Roots* all over the world. And she should have checked that, so things like that are said and people are going to read it and students are going to read it and they're going to put it in their essays and...I mean, I once...there was an actress in one of my plays a few years ago and she went on to do another play up in the north a play by Sheena McDonald, a young woman writer who went on to have success at the Royal Court, when this writer heard that this actress had been in one of my plays she said "Oh! So do you know Arnold Wesker?" and the actress said "Yes, yes"..."Is it true that he once took a gun out to a director?" And I thought, where on earth does a story like that begin? I mean I don't think I've ever even handled, except in the RAF - a rifle, I don't think I've ever handled a gun in my life. So all sorts of strange things are said both about the personalities and about the plays.

EJ: Perhaps it was the story of you being arrested on the train...I thought it was very amusing.

AW: Oh. God knows! Yes! Chinese Whispers!

EJ: Obviously, you say you didn't visit the theatre in the early days at all, if you are to go to the theatre now, what motivates you to see a particular piece?

AW: All sorts of different reasons, because it's been well-reviewed, or an interesting review, or because a friend has seen it, or because I'm interested in the work of...I mean I'm very interested in seeing Stephen Poliakoff's play... Sweet Panic in the West End. I'm a great admirer of Stephen Poliakoff. I'm not a great admirer of David Hare but I want to see his new play. Because he's at least always interesting. So the writer, a review, word of mouth, subject matter.

EJ: How do you see, and this is my final question, how do you see the future of British theatre?

AW: I have no idea. Absolutely no idea.

EJ: Do you think we're in need of a shake-up, like Look Back in Anger?

AW: [LONG SILENCE] I mean, there's a difference between how I would like to see it and how I think it's going to be. I'd like to see writers who have a track record being given more say. In repertory. In the repertoire of a theatre. I recently wrote a piece about the National Theatre which was printed in The Independent. In which I argue that Nick Hytner has had to pay attention to all sorts of demands for what happens in the National Theatre, what new plays are there, what modern plays are there that need revival, what foreign plays, new foreign plays, what old foreign plays need revival, what do his team of directors want to do. Are there actors he would like in the company? Is there a role that they would like to play? The Arts Council makes demands that they must have a return, I don't know what - 70% return on box office, 80%...So the head of the National Theatre has to pay attention to all these things. The one person that it seems to me that they don't ever go to is the author. And I think there should be a space in the season that says "This is the author's choice. We're going to ask John Arden, John Osborne...John Osborne's wife...widow, which plays of theirs they feel are neglected, need to be seen again." And that's an input no one ever considers. No one ever considers going to a writer and saying "Here's a niche for the writers. What would you like?" That's a direction I'd like to see. Something I'd like to see happen. I'd also like to see writers turned out as directors. Though not every writer has the temperament to be a director. Handling actors is very special. A very special skill. But where it's possible, as with someone like Stephen Poliakoff, who's brilliant. I don't know if you know he's television work?

EJ: I saw Shooting the Past.

AW: Yes, well he handles actors beautifully I think. So. That's the only direction...those are the two directions I would wish for. Ask the author. Train the playwright.

EJ: That's very interesting. I think I'll stop there, thank you very much.

AW: Before you stop, there's one thing you might consider. You asked me what plays influenced me and I said I didn't go to theatre...but I did go to cinema. And you might consider the extent to which cinema affected the writing in the theatre. I can't see...I maybe doing a disservice to myself here....I can't see myself having written Chicken Soup without the existence of the Arthur Miller play...er...famous one.

EJ: The Crucible?

AW: No, the early one...not All My Sons ...

EJ: Death -

AW: Death of a Salesman. And I didn't see that on stage. I saw that in the cinema. I didn't see Odets on stage, the early descriptions of me are made in comparison with Odets, but I did see him in the cinema. And daring to write a play that begins in 1936 to 1956 spanning twenty years, there's something cinematic about that, there's also, and this is another influence, and I don't know the extent to which writers, playwrights are influenced by novels, but the novels of the 40s have been completely forgotten now, it'd be very interesting to see how they'd be received if they were reprinted, the novels of Howard Spring and A.J. Kronin. Fame is the Spur . These are the novels that really span lengths of time, and I developed as sense of the way things begin and change from these novels, and so this arc of the idealism of the first act of Chicken Soup With Barley gradually, gradually disintegrating in the end in 1956. I had a sense of this from novels. Their Very Own and Golden City spanned an even longer period of time. The arc of that I would think also comes from a sense of evolving and development that was there in those novels.

EJ: It's certainly something I hadn't considered, and I think it would be worth asking the other people I interview about this.

AW: Oh yes.

EJ: I think it's been forgotten hasn't it -

AW: Very much so, I was a cinema kid two or three times a week! And I think on I balance I'd still prefer to go to the cinema than the theatre [LAUGHS] And I think you'd find most theatre people would say that.

EJ: Thank you very much.